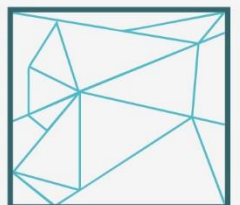


Journalists in Northeast Syria: "Hostages" of Political Dispute



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On 10 June 2024, security agencies believed to be affiliated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) detained a Syrian Kurdish media worker and transferred her to an unknown location. Local activists called the arrest and subsequent detention "an unprecedented violation."

The detainee, Berivan Ismail, is a media worker at the local council of Amuda city, which is located north of al-Hasakah governorate and affiliated with the Kurdish National Council-Syria (KNC).¹ She was arrested after an unidentified security group raided her home in Amuda and confiscated her phone. Several Syrian opposition media outlets and local sources [reported](#) the arrest as having been carried out by an entity linked to the Democratic Union Party (commonly abbreviated as PYD),² which is considered to be the "main pillar" of the AANES.

In a [statement](#) issued on 11 June 2024, the KNC—politically affiliated with the Syrian Opposition Coalition and headquartered in Türkiye—denounced the detention of Berivan Ismail and Fawaz Salih Bengo, a member of the KNC and the leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Unity Party-Syria (commonly abbreviated as PDK-S),³ who was transported to an unknown location after a security force raided his home in Amuda on June 10 as well.

The KNC described the two arrest cases as "**systematic violations**," especially with the detention of a woman, calling it a "**dangerous escalatory precedent**." The KNC also held the PYD and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) responsible for the consequences of the detentions. Furthermore, it noted that the arrests were carried out "under the threat of weapons, horrifying the detainees' relatives and neighborhood residents."

Berivan's arrest was not the only incident recorded during the past six months, as Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented the arrest and detention of three other journalists and media workers in the region, who have direct ties to the KNC or are members of one of the parties it includes. The arrested are journalist Rakan Ahmed, as well as media workers Ahmed Sofi and Marwan Muhammad (known as Marwan Liyani).

The four incidents shared similar circumstances, with armed and masked groups carrying out the arrests without presenting legal arrest warrants or disclosing the charges against the journalists. They also transported the four journalists to unknown destinations. The journalists' families blame the arrests on a variety of AANES-linked entities.

These arrests constitute a violation of Article 10(2) of the Executive Regulations of [Media Law No. \(3\)](#), which was ratified on 18 May 2021 by the AANES's General Council. The article stipulates that "**the freedom of the journalist is protected by law, and the information or opinion he publishes may not be a cause for his arrest or infringement of his freedom.**"

These arrests reflect the deterioration of freedoms in northeast Syria, including freedom of the press, opinion, and expression, as well as political and partisan affiliation, amid mounting criticism of the AANES's performance in various sectors, especially those with a direct impact on the living conditions of the local community. Recently, popular protests swept the governorates of al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa due to the "[wheat pricing crisis](#)," which coincided with systematic Turkish [targeting](#) of infrastructure vital for the survival of the civilian population.

¹ Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê (ENKS) in Kurdish

² Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat in Kurdish

³ Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê in Kurdish

While an indicator of a shrinking civic space, these arbitrary arrests also show how journalists and media workers in northeast Syria are at the risk of becoming victims of local partisan tensions prevailing between the AANES and the KNC, or even "hostages" of their political rifts, the ramifications of which often cross the border to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

According to the statements of local sources cited in this report, at least two of the detained journalists are being held as "hostages" pending the release of the AANES-affiliated journalist Suleiman Ahmed, who is detained by the KRI government, which funds and supports the KNC in Syria.

In this brief report, STJ reveals details of the arrest of the three journalists, and that of Hassam Hassam (known as Hassam Dorsin), a member of a KNC-affiliated party, and the relation between his arrest and that of journalist Suleiman Ahmed—who is currently on trial by the KRI authorities, accused of working for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (commonly known as the PKK).

The report is based on online interviews conducted by STJ with five local sources, including relatives or friends of the journalists and media workers detained in northeast Syria, as well as a source close to the family of journalist Suleiman Ahmed.

The five interviews were conducted in Kurdish, from outside Syria via secure communication applications. While obtaining their informed consent, the sources were informed of the voluntary nature of the interview and the ways in which the information they shared would be used, including publishing this report. They requested that their identities or any identifying details not be revealed, out of fear of potential retaliation against them or their families by the authorities in northeast Syria. As such, STJ used pseudonyms to refer to all five.

Four Journalists Forcibly Disappeared

The fate of journalist Ahmed Sofi, like Berivan Ismail's, remains unknown. On 2 April 2024, Ahmed, a former reporter for the Kurdish channel ARK, was detained on the road to Ein Diwar and transported to an unknown destination. He was traveling to al-Malikiya/Dêrik city to attend a funeral ceremony with family members and friends. The mentioned road is located midway between the city and Ain al-Khadra/Banh Qasr village, where Ahmed lives.

Renas Muhammad,⁴ one of Ahmed's friends who accompanied him to the funeral, recounted the details of the arrest, which happened after the group left the village in two cars and passed a checkpoint of the AANES-affiliated Internal Security Service (Asayish), which is located nearly 1.5 kilometers from al-Malikiya/Dêrik city:

"A white van was parked less than 100 meters from the checkpoint ... The [individuals in the van] were not stopping any vehicles until Ahmed Sofi's car approached. [Around four people] emerged and intercepted [his car] in the middle of the road."

Renas added that they asked the passengers to show their identity documents and ordered Ahmed to get out after examining his:

"We approached them at that point. I asked them, 'Why are you arresting him?' One of the masked individuals replied, 'We need him for some matters.' I retorted that this was not the first time they had arrested him. He responded harshly, 'This is our job! And if you go another step, you will regret it. Please let us do our job.' He spoke to us in Kurdish."

⁴ A pseudonym was used at the source's request during an online interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 3 June 2024.

They wore [military] clothes. They took him to the van, but there was no violence during the arrest."

Renas said they followed the van that took Ahmed until it disappeared down one of the side streets. He also noted that the personnel at the Asayish checkpoint did not intervene to stop the arrest, adding that Ahmed's family still does not know the exact identity of the group that carried out the arrest or Ahmed's current whereabouts.

However, the family **strongly suspects** the responsible party is affiliated with the PYD, especially as this was [not the first](#) time Ahmed has been arrested—it was the seventh. According to Renas, Ahmed was detained once for six months and another time for four months, and nearly three months before the most recent time, which he spent in a solitary cell measuring one square meter.

On the day of the incident, the KNC condemned the arrest in a [statement](#), considering it **"a continuation of a series of violations committed by the PYD's armed groups against freedoms of the press and politics in the areas under its control, in an attempt to silence any voices criticizing its practices against residents and its political and administrative failure."**

The Syrian Kurdish Journalists Network also condemned Ahmed's arrest in a [statement](#), stressing "the need to provide a suitable environment for journalistic work and for the Autonomous Administration and its security agencies to take measures that contribute to strengthening the right to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of the press and other rights of journalists and media workers."

On the morning of 1 April 2024, Marwan Muhammad (known as Marwan Liyani), an independent journalist with the KNC's local council in the town of Maabdeh/Girkê legê, was arrested. The arrest took place as Marwan headed to his job—he owns a men's clothing store near his home in the same town.

Shiyar Hasan,⁵ one of the family's relatives, recounted details of the arrest by masked individuals who had waited for Marwan in a white van up the street where his home is located:

"Marwan's father was informed by neighbors that the van had been parked around an hour before Marwan's arrest. The militants [around five] were masked and wearing military uniforms, riding in a white van. Marwan resisted getting into the van with them, but they forced him onboard after tying his hands."

The family learned that Marwan was initially transferred to Rumeilan city, but they were unable to obtain any additional information about his current place of detention.

The KNC accused "an armed group affiliated with the PYD" in a [statement](#) condemning the arrest, describing it as **"a continuation of acts of intimidation against supporters and advocates of the Kurdish National Council, and in pursuit of a policy of silencing and suppressing the opinions of others."**

It is worth noting that AANES-affiliated security agencies had previously repeatedly [detained](#) Marwan's brother, journalist Berzan Liyani, who currently resides in Iraqi Kurdistan, due to his media and political activities as a member of the PDK-S's local council.

⁵ A pseudonym was used at the source's request during an online interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 10 June 2024.

On 29 March 2024, in Ramadan, an armed group consisting of 15 masked individuals raided journalist Rakan Ahmed's home, arrested, and took him to an unknown location. Rakan is a reporter with Nûdem Rojava News Agency in Maabdeh/Girkê legê town in al-Hasakah governorate. According to Mansour Hussein,⁶ one of the journalist's relatives, who conveyed details of the arrest from Rakan's family.

Mansour said the arrest occurred five minutes before *iftar* (the meal eaten after sunset during Ramadan), and the gunmen did not allow Rakan to eat or drink water despite the family's attempts to persuade them:

"They came in violently and confiscated [seven] mobile phones they found in the house and [Rakan's] personal computer. They [handcuffed] Rakan ... and searched the house, rummaging through all the blankets and covers. They also searched under rugs and inside closets, leaving no place untouched. They left nearly ten minutes after *iftar*. We do not know where Rakan is now."

The arrest terrified Rakan's five children. His youngest son continued crying until dawn, while they all "began fearing opening the door when the bell rang," according to Mansour. He said the gunmen's behavior "was extremely terrible":

"When Rakan's son, around 15 years old, opened the door for them, one of them violently gripped his neck and asked, 'Where is your father?'"

According to Mansour, the gunmen spoke Kurdish, wore black clothes, and carried cameras. They refused to identify themselves when asked by the family and pointed their guns at some neighbors who had come out to see what was happening, ordering them back into their homes.

Later, the family received information that the group responsible for the arrest was affiliated with the AANES and may have been dispatched by security intelligence or the National Security Bureau. In addition to his work as a reporter, Rakan is a member of the branch committee of the PDK-S, one of the KNC-affiliated parties.

The Syrian Kurdish Journalists Network issued a [statement](#) condemning Rakan's arrest, describing it "as a violation of his human and journalistic rights, especially since he works with a licensed agency known to local authorities and media departments."

Journalists are "Hostages" of Political Disputes?

Various local Facebook accounts, including [Social Media Activists](#), shared a post stating that three KNC members in al-Malikiya/Dêrîk city are being detained by unknown entities. It adds that "reportedly, they will be released if journalist Suleiman Ahmed is freed." Suleiman is a reporter for Roj News agency and has been [arbitrarily detained](#) by KRI authorities since 25 October 2023. The post also included photos of the three detainees Ahmed Sofi, Hassam Hassam, and Marwan Liyani.

⁶ A pseudonym was used at the source's request during an online interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 3 June 2024.

كوباني الخبر
April 7 · 🌐

#هاالم
منذ ١٦٦ يوم ولا تصل أية معلومة عن الصحفي سليمان أحمد الذي اعتقلته قوات الأسايش التابعة للحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني PDK.
سليمان يعمل صحفيا ومحررا في وكالة روج نيوز في مدينة السليمانية وهو من أهالي روجآفا، منذ ١٦٦ يوما اعتقلته أسايش الحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني ولا معلومات عن مصيره منذ ذلك الحين.
في المقابل، تم اعتقال ٣ أعضاء من المجلس الوطني الكردي في مدينة ديرك لكن لا يعرف من هي الجهة التي قامت باعتقالهم، لكن يقال بأنه في حال الإفراج عن سليمان فسيتم الافراج عن هؤلاء أيضا.



الإسم : احمد احمد



Nav: Mirwan Mihemed
KOD: Ebû Ewaz



الإسم : هسام هسام
اللقب: أبو عبو
الاب: عبدالله
الام: وصفية سليمان
التولد: قديرك 1968

18 🌟👍 24 comments 3 shares

Image 1 - Screenshot of the post on the detention of the three KNC members. Source: [Kobani News](#) Facebook page.

Rinas says Ahmed Sofi's family saw the posts and noted that **"what stands out is that the photos of these three detainees seem recent. [They are] wearing the same clothes they had on the day of their arrest according to what we learned from their families."** He adds that the family believes these posts are "messages from pages affiliated with them [AANES], sent so as not to bear responsibility directly."

Unlike the Sofi family, the family of Hassam Hassam—a member of the regional committee of the Kurdistan People's Party-Syria, another KNC-affiliated party—received information confirming Hassam's detention is related to journalist Suleiman Ahmed's case, who is detained in Iraq, according to Walid Nasser,⁷ an acquaintance of the family.

On 1 April 2024, an unknown entity "kidnapped" Hassam (known as Hassam Dorsin) in al-Malikiya/Dêrik city around midnight. Walid said:

"Two cars carrying masked gunmen kidnapped Hassam and one of our relatives [Rudi Salih Hassam]. They put each in a separate car. After an hour, Rudi was released but Hassam was kidnapped along with his car."

Walid affirmed the family is certain the responsible party is affiliated with the PYD. He added the family received information from a reliable source saying:

"Hassam and a number of other journalists are hostages until the release of Roj News agency reporter Suleiman Ahmed, who is detained in the [Iraqi] Kurdistan Region."

Marwan Liyani's family received similar information, indicating that "[Marwan] was detained as a hostage until the Kurdistan Regional Government releases a journalist named Suleiman Ahmed," according to Shiyar. He added:

"One of our acquaintances inquired about Marwan and the reason for his arrest. They said, 'Marwan has a brother in Kurdistan; have him take some action so Kurdistan releases Suleiman Ahmed'"

The KRI authorities detained the Syrian Kurdish journalist Suleiman Ahmed, residing in the region since 2018, at the Semalka-Fishkhabour/Bishkhabour border crossing with Dohuk governorate, upon his return from a visit to Aleppo, northern Syria, where his family lives after they were displaced from Afrin, according to Muafak al-Abed,⁸ one of the journalist's relatives.

Muafak said that Sulaiman's family tried to contact the KRI authorities to inquire about the reasons for his arrest, but they did not receive a response. He added that Sulaiman contacted his brother living in Germany only once since his arrest. The call "did not last more than two minutes," during which Sulaiman told him he needed a lawyer to find out the reasons for his arrest. Muafak added:

"According to Roj News agency, Sulaiman was detained in solitary confinement and subjected to torture, without specifying whether it was psychological or physical. Later, we learned from sources in Sulaimaniyah [city in Iraqi Kurdistan] that he was subjected to physical torture."

In a [report](#) issued in November 2023, the Committee to Protect Journalists called on the local authorities in the region to disclose Sulaiman's place of detention, noting that **"it is unacceptable for journalists in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to continuously face all forms of harassment, from illegal arrests to physical assaults. The Iraqi Kurdish authorities must allow journalists to work freely and without fear of retaliation."** Sulaiman's family confirmed to the committee that he had all the necessary legal documents and had not been arrested before.

⁷ A pseudonym was used at the source's request during an online interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 6 June 2024.

⁸ A pseudonym was used at the source's request during an online interview conducted by STJ's field researcher on 25 May 2024.

However, the Asayish security directorate, responsible for border security in Duhok governorate, [claimed](#) in a statement about the arrest that they had detained Sulaiman because "he was secretly and illegally acting on behalf of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), so he was arrested and confessed to his acts during the investigation," and that his detention "has nothing to do with journalistic work." The regional authorities and the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iraq consider Roj News agency, where Sulaiman works, to be loyal to the PKK.

In a [statement](#) issued on 30 June 2024, Roj News expressed concern over the beginning of the first hearing in Sulaiman's trial in Duhok governorate after 250 days of his "kidnapping by the Kurdistan Democratic Party," noting that "in violation of local and national laws, his lawyers were able to meet him for the first time after 211 days of his detention, according to Article 123 of the 1971 Iraqi Criminal Procedure Law."

In a 2021 [report](#), STJ documented a similar incident where AANES-affiliated security agencies arrested a number of PDK-s-affiliated activists and media workers in response to the detention of its representatives who were PYD members by the KRI government, which funds and supports the PDK and the KNC in Syria.

Notably, the arrests carried out by the local authorities in northeast Syria and the KRI constitute a violation of several provisions of the [International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance](#), which stipulates that no one shall be subjected to enforced disappearance and no exceptional circumstances whatsoever shall be invoked as justification for enforced disappearance (Article 1), and provisions of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which ensure the protection of journalists from arbitrary arrest (Article 9) and torture (Article 7), as well as their right to a fair trial (Article 14).



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 unflinching 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.