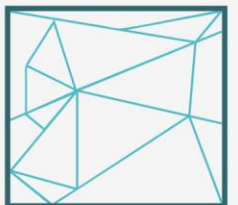


Northwest Syria: Local Authorities Arrest 15 Syrians for Protesting near a Turkish Convoy



- Local authorities continue to violate civilians' freedom of opinion and expression unabated to satisfy Türkiye, who exercises de facto control over them and the region



Northwest Syria: Local Authorities Arrest 15 Syrians for Protesting near a Turkish Convoy

Local authorities continue to violate civilians' freedom of opinion and expression unabated to satisfy Türkiye, who exercises de facto control over them and the region

On 16 June 2024, local authorities in the Aleppo countryside, northern Syria, released eight individuals who had been arbitrarily detained for nearly four months in the central military prison in the Al-Rai town, where they were being tried on charges of "disturbing relations with a foreign country".

Those released were out of 15 people [arrested](#) by local authorities in northern rural Aleppo following a peaceful demonstration at the Sajo roundabout near the Bab al-Salam crossing on 17 March 2024. During the demonstration, the protesters intercepted a convoy of Turkish individuals, believing that it included members of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, linked to Turkey, and of its offshoot, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). This was done to protest against their policies in the region.

It is important to note that the Syrian National Army (SNA) exercises military control over northern rural Aleppo, part of the so-called Euphrates Shield area. This is under the umbrella of the SIG, which manages administrative, legal, and judicial affairs in the area under the almost complete direction of the [Turkish coordinator](#).

The demonstration was organized by residents of an IDP camp in Sajo, 5 kilometres away from the city of A'zaz in northern rural Aleppo. Notably, northern rural Aleppo is a concentration of camps for internally displaced persons from the city of Tall Rifat, which witnessed a wave of displacement in 2016 following a military operation led by the People's Protection Units (YPG) – which operates under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – resulted in the SDF gaining control over the city.

The Levant Front/Al-Jabha al-Shamiya,¹ in control of the Sajo camp area, conducted the arrests along with Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50.² The Front compelled 15 young men from the camp to surrender, detained them for three days, and then handed them over to the Military Police in A'zaz city. After two days of investigation at its headquarters, the Military Police released seven of the detainees and handed over the other eight to the judiciary, which decided to detain and try them based on the above claim.

The residents of the area held [three protests](#) near the Bab al-Salam crossing on the border with Türkiye to demand the release of the detainees. According to a source, the turnout was low because the residents were afraid of becoming wanted by the Turks due to the demonstration.

¹ The Levant Front/Al-Jabha al-Shamiya was established in 2014 through the merger of several major armed factions in Aleppo, including the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Brigades, the Mujahideen Army, the Islamic Front, the Fastaqim Kama Umirt Union, the Authenticity and Development Front, and the Suqour al-Sham Brigades. Currently, the Front is under the leadership of Azzam al-Gharib (better known as Abu al-Ezz Saraqib), who was previously associated with the faction led by Muhannad al-Khalaf (Abu al-Ezz Saraqib Abu Ahmed Nour). The Levant Front/Al-Jabha al-Shamiya makes up the largest part of the Third Corps of the SNA. The Front controls the entire city of A'zaz and had previously withdrawn from the city of Afrin after fighting with the HTS.

² The Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50 was established on 23 December 2022, to be part of the SNA's Third Corps. The division is composed of the First Central, the 55th Force, the al-Fatah Brigade/Conquest Brigade, the 322nd Free Brigade, the Fifth Regiment, the 343rd Brigade, and the Sultan Osman Brigade. All the fighters in the Division are internally displaced from the city of Tall Rifat and its countryside.

In this brief report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) highlights the deterioration of freedom of opinion and expression and the lack of safe spaces for civilians in northern Syria. This occurs as the controlling factions and administrative authorities seek to maintain their relationship with Türkiye, their biggest supporter, which negatively affects local judicial institutions and justice processes. Residents in northern Syria, where “[everything is by the power of the weapon](#)”, are unable to demand better living conditions and are unable to stop the violations they face from the military factions in control. Criticizing these factions or authorities can lead to the risk of arrest, as these factions operate with impunity under the watchful eye of Türkiye, which exercises [de facto control](#) in the region.

This report is based on interviews conducted by STJ researchers with local sources: a participant in the demonstration, a detainee who was held for five days despite not participating in the demonstration, and a lawyer who was familiar with the trial proceedings of those detained.

All three interviews were conducted online using a secure communication application. The sources were informed that the interviews were voluntary and were told how the information they provided would be used, including in this report. While obtaining their informed consent, all three requested to conceal their identities and any related details due to concerns about potential reprisals by the controlling factions in the area.

In the context of monitoring the state of main freedoms in northern Syria, STJ previously published a [report](#) documenting attacks against journalists. The attacks occurred while journalists were covering a protest organized by the Free Syrian Lawyers Syndicate in front of the Palace of Justice in al-Rai town, in northern rural Aleppo. The protest aimed to demand an end to the interference of the Turkish coordinator in the work of the judiciary and the Bar Association.

Details of the Incident

Hassan Shaddad,³one of the demonstrators, reported that on 17 March 2024, a message sent in a WhatsApp group for residents and activists in Tall Rifat city stated that a group of politicians from the Syrian National Coalition, controlled by Türkiye, would pass through the northern countryside of Aleppo. Thereby, residents decided to organize a demonstration to communicate their demands to the Turkish side.

The demonstrators were startled by [gunfire](#) from the convoy’s escort as they passed, despite the peaceful nature of the gathering. According to Hassan it turns out later that the convoy included,

“High-ranking officials from Turkish intelligence, the Turkish presidency, and Qatari intelligence and political personnel. They arrived in A’zaz for breakfast with the leaders of the Levant Front.”

³ A pseudonym was used at the witness's request during an online interview on 15 April 2024.

A military source in the SNA [stated](#) to Enab Baladi that, “The convoy included Turkish figures who came to attend a breakfast meeting in the area before heading towards the Bab al-Salam crossing to enter Turkish territory.” Multiple sources also confirmed to STJ that a high-ranking officer from the Turkish intelligence service and a general known as Abu Saeed, responsible for the Syria and Iraq file, were in the convoy.

Naim Mohammed,⁴ a lawyer familiar with the incident, stated that the security personnel assigned to protect the procession were members of the SNA. He mentioned, “They fired live bullets over the heads of the protesters” in an attempt to disperse the demonstration, even though the protesters did not engage in any violence.

The shooting was followed by an immediate [mobilization](#) of SNA factions, especially the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and the Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat), and then arrests of a number of protesters after the demonstration was dispersed.

Hassan noted that the people of Tall Rifat published an apology letter on local social media groups and sent a copy to the Turkish side who ignored it, emphasizing that:

“The demonstration was peaceful. However, the escort fired into the air in an attempt to scare the demonstrators who were protesting against the Turkish policy towards Syria, Türkiye’s reconciliation with the Syrian regime, and Erdogan’s repeated political statements on this matter. [We protested to highlight our desire to] return to our homes in Tall Rifat, which the SDF currently controls, and against the lack of action by Türkiye towards this matter and the widespread corruption and violations in the north by the leaders of the SNA.”

Arrests and Handovers

According to Hassan, the arrests did not take place directly at the demonstration but the day after it, following interactions with the residents at the Sajo camp in which the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya acted as the Turkish side’s representative, he said,

“Leaders of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya contacted leaders of the Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50 from Tall Rifat and informed them that Turkish intelligence is accusing several residents of the area of terrorism, and they must hand them over to be held accountable for their actions; otherwise, there would be very serious consequences.”

Hassan added that the military leaders in Tall Rifat informed the residents about the message from the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya regarding the necessity of handing over wanted individuals. In response, 15 young men from Tall Rifat, who were staying at the Sajo camp, surrendered themselves to the Front.

Three days later, security forces of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya handed over 15 young men to the Military Police branch in the A’zaz countryside. The Military Police began

⁴ A pseudonym was used at the witness’s request during an online interview on 14 April 2024.

investigations and took the detainees' statements without the presence of a lawyer, according to Naim who confirmed,

"On 21 March 2024, Military Public Prosecution Judge Mohammed Hilal came from al-Rai Court to A'zaz. He summoned the detainees from the Military Police Branch to the office of the Military Single Judge in A'zaz, interrogated them, and took their statements without the presence of a defense attorney".

Naim added that after a five-hour investigation session from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. that same day, Judge Mohammed Hilal decided to release seven of the young men and detain the other eight. He also issued an order to arrest seven additional people who were still "in hiding". The detained young men were transferred from the Military Police branch in A'zaz to the central military prison in al-Rai the next day. He noted,

"The prison is run by the Military Police, under the supervision of Turkish intelligence".

Based on information from the STJ database provided by a military leader in the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, the prison is managed by leaders from the latter under the oversight of Turkish intelligence, which regularly assists the prison administration with financial support for the salaries of employees and guards and food allowances. A group of Turkish officers are also stationed at the prison to conduct special investigations on counter-terrorism efforts and incidents targeting Türkiye.

Fawaz al-Nasser,⁵ a member of the Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50 who lives in the town of Sajo, was one of the seven young men who were released. He explained to STJ the reasons why the group decided to surrender and also talked about the Military Police's investigation process. Fawaz was held by the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya for three days and then by the Military Police in A'zaz for two days.

It is relevant to recall that in 2015, the Front established a military court code named *al-Maslakiyah* that was concerned with punishing members of the faction. On this, Fawaz explained,

"The human slaughterhouse, may God help whoever enters it. There are many detainees in it without trials because it does not belong to a judicial institution but rather to the [Levant] Front."

Fawaz and three other young men surrendered themselves to "prevent bloodshed." Even though Fawaz did not participate in the demonstration, a leader from the Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50 informed him that his name was on a leaked wanted list provided by a leader in the Levant Front. Fawaz added,

^{5 5} A pseudonym was used at the witness's request during an online interview on 15 April 2024.

"We went to the headquarters of the Levant Front at Bab al-Salam crossing and spoke with its commander Abu al-Ezz Saraqib. He told us to surrender ourselves, otherwise our homes would be raided by the SNA factions (The al-Hamza Division and Suleiman Shah Brigade)."

Fawaz confirmed that they were interrogated during the two days they were held in Military Police custody. The investigator focused on two questions during the interrogation:

"Who pushed you?" and "Did you know that there were Turkish figures in the convoy?"

Fawaz was released without being tortured or harmed due to his good relationship with the investigator, he said, adding that three civilians remained in police custody even though they did not participate in the demonstration. He confirmed that they were arrested primarily because they were working in the Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50 or were present near the demonstration site.

The [Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50](#) was initially part of the Levant Front but later defected when it started fighting with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). It then pledged allegiance to the latter and subsequently joined the [al-Shahba Gathering](#) in rural Aleppo, which includes the Ahrar al-Sham—eastern sector, the Ahrar al-Tawhid/Division 50, and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, which has a tense [relationship](#) with the SNA⁶.

It is important to note that the accusation of intercepting the convoy was initially directed at the al-Shahba Gathering. However, the latter issued a [statement](#) denying its involvement in the demonstration and emphasized the "state of brotherhood between the Syrian people and Türkiye".

A relative of Fawaz was among the eight arrested. Fawaz explained that his relative believed that the incoming convoy was from the SIG and joined the demonstration for that reason. He added,

"The convoy was intercepted against the backdrop of the difficult living conditions we face as forgotten displaced people."

Violations Against Detainees

The arrest of 15 young men and the continued detention of eight of them for about four months pending trial constitute a continuation of widespread violations of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in the region. The detained young men were subjected to additional violations before their release. These violations stemmed from the lack of independence of the judicial system affiliated with the SIG and its failure to respect the basic

⁶ The Gathering consists of factions loyal to the HTS and there are concerns about potential military operations against them by the SNA. Even though they are technically under the SNA's umbrella, the Gathering's factions do not have the approval of Turkish intelligence. As a result, they do not receive support from Türkiye, but rather from the HTS.

principles of fair trial. This was evident in the charges against the detainees and the subsequent measures the judiciary took against them.

Lawyer Naim stated that the Military Prosecutor charged the detainees under Article 278 of the Syrian Penal Code and the case was filed against them with the first military investigative judge in al-Rai, Tawfiq al-Ali.

As one of the laws in force before 2011 that the SIG and its associated institutions claim to apply, the [Syrian Penal Code](#) prescribes a penalty of temporary detention for “Anyone who, by engaging in acts or making written or spoken statements not authorized by the Government, exposes Syria to the risk of acts of aggression, disrupts its relations with foreign States or exposes Syrians to reprisals against their person or their property.” (Article 278.b) However, the application of this article de jure is possible only if the alleged situation occurred between two fully sovereign States, which does not apply to areas under the de facto control of Türkiye, the latter treating these areas as if they were part of their territory, rather than as an independent State.

Regardless of previous claims, peaceful protests are considered a fundamental way to express opinions, guaranteed by successive Syrian constitutions, including the 1950 Constitution – claimed to be [adopted](#) by political and military opposition groups in those areas – which states, “The State shall guarantee freedom of opinion, and all Syrians shall be entitled to express their views freely in writing, speeches, graphically, or by any other means of expression.” (Article 14.1). This right is also protected by various international covenants and conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 10), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Article 5), and others.

The political and military authorities governing these areas cannot use the state of war, the fight against terrorism, or any other reasons to limit freedom of opinion. The Human Rights Committee, in [General Comment No. 34](#), affirmed that the right to freedom of opinion is absolute and cannot be subject to exceptions, reservations, or restrictions.

Several lawyers requested to issue powers of attorney for the detainees and to meet their clients in prison at the start of their detention. However, they faced delays that lasted for five days. Afterward, they were allowed to visit their clients, but they were not permitted to copy or review the investigation file. Naim stated that this violates judicial independence, as “the judge's refusal to allow copying the files was reportedly a directive from Türkiye.”

The restrictions on the defense attorneys’ work were followed by what Naim described as a “fraudulent operation” involving collusion between the al-Rai prison administration and the judge in charge of the case, allegedly due to “external orders.” The first military investigative judge scheduled an interrogation session for the detainees on 27 March 2024. Still, the al-Rai prison administration ignored the court order to bring the detainees to the session, although the prison brought detainees to hearings for other cases on the same day.

Afterward, the judge manipulated the hearing dates by bringing the detainees from al-Rai Prison for interrogation on 31 March 2024, even though the lawyers were informed that the hearing would be on 1 April 2024.

The lawyers heard about the change of the hearing date and were able to attend. The following day, they submitted a request for the release of their clients. However, the judge did not consider the request, and the young men remained detained until their release date on 16 June 2024.

Finally, it is important to note that the case of the demonstrators is not isolated from the overall context of justice in the region. It is an example of the lack of independence of the judiciary. Legal institutions are controlled by the so-called "Turkish coordinator", and suffer extensive interventions from the armed factions. In this vein, STJ published a [report](#) in March 2024 documenting a case where a young Syrian man was subjected to public flogging for allegedly "insulting god" without being given a fair trial. This punishment was carried out by a military force affiliated with the Liberation and Building Movement (LBM), which operates under the Türkiye-backed SNA.



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.