

The Syrian Regime's Registration of Media Activist Ali Othman's Death in the Civil Registry Department Is a Damning Indictment of the Regime

52 Media Workers Killed as a Result of Torture in Syrian Regime Detention Centers; Killing Witnesses Is a Deliberate Regime Tactic to Conceal Evidence

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Tuesday, April 30, 2019

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

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I. The Syrian Regime Continues to Register New Cases of Disappeared Persons in the Civil Registry Departments as Dead Without Their Families' Knowledge

Since the beginning of 2018, many families of the forcibly disappeared, held in the Syrian regime's detention centers, have been shocked to find the names of relatives who had been forcibly disappeared registered as having died on the incidents of deaths recorded in the civil registry departments without the families being previously notified; instead the family members learnt about their loved ones' demise by coincidence whilst conducting unrelated transactions in the civil registry departments such as obtaining an individual civil status registration or a family statement. This is contrary to the provisions of the Syrian Civil Status Law concerning death procedures in prisons, which states that "Deaths occurring at prisons, detentions, and hospitals shall be recorded pursuant to a certificate submitted by the directors of said institutions, or their representatives, to the relevant civil registrar. These institutions shall maintain special registries of such incidents."

These incidents have taken place repeatedly until the death data of the disappeared has been sent in the form of lists to the civil registry departments, probably by military bodies such as the military judiciary, the military police and the security branches. These lists include the first and last name of the disappeared person, his/her entry in the register, date of his/her death and the governorate in which he or she died, without referring to the causes of death or place of detention.



Since May 2018 up to the present, the Syrian Network for Human Rights' (SNHR) team has documented the Syrian regime's registration of forcibly disappeared persons as dead in the civil registry departments. In [two previous reports](#), we outlined the details of these operations and have retained death certificates of many of them in our archive.

Our team noted a change in the regime's policy on informing the families of the disappeared in the period at the end of 2018 and early 2019, when the civil registry departments began hiding the lists of disappeared persons who were registered as dead and stopped presenting them collectively as they had done when they published the lists on billboards within each civil registry department. In addition, the civil registry departments now no longer directly issue death certificates to family members of the deceased visiting the departments. Instead, they ask the family members to return later for them. This request may be repeated several times. It seems to us that this tactic has been instructed by the security services for several reasons. First, such instructions further humiliate the family members, as well as helping to spread terror and fear in society; secondly, they increase desperation and despair among the family members that could lead some families to stop asking about their children's fate; and finally, they avoid congestion and gatherings of the families of the disappeared in front of civil registry headquarters of the civil registry, reducing the spread of new reports about civil registry departments receiving data on the deaths of the forcibly disappeared, as it seems that they want to pass the shocking news of death gradually over time.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of the SNHR, states:

“We have been able to document 890 cases since May 2018 so far, of which four cases have been included in the Caesar photos, but we do not know how many among those named as forcibly disappeared are in the lists distributed by the Syrian regime to civil registry departments to be registered as dead. Do they include the 82,000 forcibly disappeared by the regime? Or only a few thousand? We do not have a specific answer, and we could not obtain the lists, but it is certain that the Syrian regime manipulates Syrian society and treats the people as less than slaves.”



II. Four of Those Shown in the Caesar Photos Are Among the Disappeared Whose Deaths were Announced Recently by the Syrian Regime

The SNHR's team managed through cross-checking data and investigations, as well as through conducting follow-up interviews with families, to definitively ascertain that four cases of disappeared persons whose deaths were announced recently in civil registry departments' records, their families had already identified their loved ones' fate, identifying them as being among the bodies of the regime torture victims seen in the photographs of 'Caesar' on March 8, 2015, which we discussed in detail in [a previous report](#). We had already documented these four cases among the 890 cases we have recorded since May 2018. This intersection constitutes additional damning evidence against the Syrian regime. The families had identified the bodies of their loved ones among the Caesar photos, which were originally intended to document the bodies of detainees who died in regime prisons as a result of torture; meanwhile the civil registry departments registering these individuals as dead, along with the Syrian regime and its security services who arrested these people and tortured them to death for arresting these individuals, torturing them to death, concealing their fate for years, before announcing through the civil registry departments that they had died.

III. Detainee Ali Othman, A Prominent Media Figure Who Appeared on State Television, Registered as Dead

A new case has been added in the last few days, which is a blatant example of how brutally the Syrian regime deals with those who it has forcibly disappeared and registering them in the civil registry as dead. The SNHR learnt on April 14th that the family of media activist Ali Othman received confirmation of his death at the Civil Registry Department in Homs city when they went there to obtain a family registration statement; in the remarks column of the statement it had been noted that "Ali" died on December 30, 2013, without providing any further details about the place or cause of death. The SNHR has obtained a copy of the family's registration statement which we have retained in our records. We confirm that the Syrian regime has still not handed over Ali's body or the bodies of other disappeared people killed in regime custody their families so that they can be buried in proper graves; without handing over the body, this document is not a complete disclosure of the truth. We further note that the family statement also included notification of the death of Ali's brother, Ibrahim Mahmoud Othman, who was arrested by personnel affiliated with Syrian Regime forces on Tuesday, May 8, 2012, in Sehnaya town west of Damascus Suburbs governorate, along with his brother, Huzayfa, his father, his uncle, his cousin and his brother in law. The statement



indicates that Ibrahim died on Sunday, June 28, 2015; their family has been unable to take any legal action with local judicial authorities because of the significant dominance of the security services over these authorities, as is the case with most Syrian state institutions, making any family which attempts to obtain any justice for their loved ones vulnerable to persecution and threat.

All these actions by the Syrian regime, including arrest, forcibly disappearance, and killing under torture, to not informing families when their loved ones were killed, postponing release of this information for years, then informing them through the civil registry departments and not handing over the body, further confirm that the mindset and techniques of the ruling authorities resemble those of a Mafia family rather than a government.

Ali Mahmoud Othman, nicknamed 'al Jid' (grandfather), from Baba Amr neighborhood southwest of Homs city, was born in 1977. He was a vegetable seller before becoming a media activist with the start of the popular uprising for democracy in March 2011, when he participated in covering the peaceful demonstrations. Thereafter, he was present during the incursions carried out by Syrian Regime forces in the old neighborhoods of Homs. Ali provided reports and footage to regional and international media outlets, working with the media center in Baba Amr neighborhood, as well as accompanying foreign journalists who visited the neighborhood in secret, and participating in their tours to cover the demonstrations and the regime's bombardment of the neighborhood seen at that time.

Ali was one of the witnesses to the bombardment of the media center in Baba Amr neighborhood on Wednesday, February 22, 2012, when Syrian Regime forces targeted the building where a group of foreign journalists were present. The American journalist Marie Colvin and the French journalist Rémi Ochlik were killed in this bombardment, while the British journalist Paul Conroy and the French journalist Edith Bouvier were injured. Ali helped many of the foreign journalists present to escape the neighborhood via the border with Lebanon.

Syrian Regime forces subsequently stormed the Baba Amr neighborhood at the end of February 2012, with Ali hiding until he managed to escape towards Aleppo city, where Syrian Regime forces arrested him on Wednesday, March 28, 2012, according to the SNHR's team's record. In April 2012, Ali appeared in several interviews broadcast on the Syrian satellite TV channel "Syrian Satellite" affiliated with the Syrian regime, confirming that the regime was responsible for his arrest. In these interviews, entitled '['Khafaya Baba Amr'](#) (Mysteries of Baba Amr)", Ali appeared to be in good health. The interviews were filmed in a dark room, with Ali making clearly scripted 'confessions' consistent with the Syrian regime's version of the



existence of terrorists in Baba Amr neighborhood and other claims, promoted by the Syrian regime against all those who oppose its authority. We have documented many similar cases in which the Syrian regime forces activists who it arrested to appear on state television, giving 'confessions' that appear to have been extracted from them under torture and threats.

According to accounts received by SNHR from former detainees, Ali Othman was last seen in the regime's infamous Palestine Branch of the General Military Intelligence Directorate in Damascus city in May 2012. He was subjected to brutal torture, according to the account of one of the released detainees.

Ali Othman was one of the witnesses of several types of violations committed by the Syrian regime in Baba Amr neighborhood, where he took hundreds of photographs of the impact of the bombings and destruction, the dead and the wounded. He also witnessed the incident of the killing of the foreign journalists who were deliberately targeted while they were carrying out their work in Baba Amr Media Center, primarily the American journalist "Marie Colvin". The vicious torture and murder of Ali in the Syrian regime's prisons is further evidence of the regime's blatant misrepresentation of facts and of its determination to terrorize media workers and journalists and silence their voices.

Ali's appearance on Syrian regime-run state television confirms that the Syrian Regime forces were responsible for his arrest. In addition, the civil registry's announcement of his death without mentioning any reason, as well as the state's preventing his family or any lawyer from visiting him, is further evidence of the Syrian regime's responsibility for torturing and killing Ali. The Syrian regime has also failed to investigate any of the deaths in its detention centers, and to any of the perpetrators accountable; this is the case for at least 14,000 Syrians, who are documented as having been killed under torture by the Syrian regime.

IV. Record of Victims of Torture Killed by the Syrian Regime and the Death Toll of Media Workers Killed as a Result of Torture

According to SNHR's database, created by constant and cumulative monitoring of news and incidents, and according to our methodology¹, at least 14,009 civilians have been killed as a result of torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers between March 2011 and April 2019, including at least 52 media workers, with at least 349 media workers still detained or forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime. Some of these may have been killed under torture without us being able to know their fate, as happened with the activist Ali Othman, whose death nearly four-and-a-half years ago was unknown for that entire period by his family until they discovered it by coincidence.

¹ "Syrian Network for Human Rights Methodology", Syrian Network for Human Rights, <http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/SNHR_Methodology_en.pdf>



V. Conclusions and Recommendations

Legal Conclusions:

- The Syrian regime has undoubtedly committed a large number of violations in these incidents, primarily the deliberate concealment of the fate of 90 percent of the detainees who it imprisons and tortures by the most cruel and sadistic methods, leaving them to suffer to death, as well as the humiliation and terrorizing of wider society and the detainees' families by depriving them of the most basic rights and fundamental human dignity by not informing them of the deaths of their loved ones, or refraining from handing over their bodies and finally registering them as dead without the families' knowledge. The Syrian regime has weaponized the resources, wealth and institutions of the Syrian state as tools of persecution and war against anyone who dares to oppose it.
- The Syrian regime has clearly violated the second paragraph of Article 53 of the Syrian Constitution, which it established itself in 2012, and violated Article 391 of the Syrian Penal Code on the prohibition of torture and the punishment of perpetrators. It has also ensured that protection and immunity are reserved for the security services through legislation effectively licensing their crimes, specifically Article 16 of Law No. 14 of 1969, under which immunity is granted to security personnel in the event of committing crimes, so they cannot be prosecuted without the consent of the commander in charge. Through this immunity, which has operated for half a century in Syrian courts and continues to this day, no security official has ever been penalized or convicted for his practice of torture. This immunity constitutes a flagrant violation of the most basic principles of human rights, international law and the Convention against Torture ratified by the Syrian government.
- The Syrian regime has also committed the crime of torture against its opponents in the midst of the internal armed conflict as part of a widespread, systematic and deliberate strategy used against civilians and detainees. According to this report and previous reports, this amounts to a crime against humanity and a war crime under articles 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Recommendations:

UN Security Council and the United Nations:

- Impose sanctions on the Syrian regime, starting with an arms embargo and diplomatic boycotts, rising to military sanctions in the event that it continues to commit such horrendous violations, as it is doing until now.
- Protect civilians detained by the Syrian regime from torture to death, and rescue those who remain alive.



- The General Assembly of the United Nations must take the initiative in the Syrian situation and resort to the application of the principle of Union for Peace, given the total paralysis affecting the Security Council due to the Russian-Chinese veto.
- Establish a mechanism to compel the Syrian regime to end practices of torture, and to reveal the whereabouts of the bodies of the victims and to hand them over to their families.
- Russia must stop blocking the referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- All UN relief agencies must search for families that have lost their primary breadwinner or one of their children due to torture, ensure that aid is continuously delivered to their beneficiaries, and initiate rehabilitation.
- Immediate punishment of all individuals involved in the vast torture network.

The International Community:

- States which are parties to the Convention against Torture must take the necessary measures to establish their jurisdiction over perpetrators of torture and make all the necessary material and security efforts for this objective.
- Impose further sanctions and boycott on the Syrian regime and the countries supporting it, and designate all those who support the Syrian regime as accomplices involved in committing gross violations.
- Take serious punitive measures against the Syrian regime to deter it from continuing to kill Syrian citizens under torture.
- Provide more funds, support and sufficient grants to local organizations concerned with the care and rehabilitation of torture victims and their families.
- Provide support to individual activists and local organizations that document violations without imposing tutelage or political directives.

The Independent Impartial International Mechanism (IIIM):

Consider the cases included in this report, with the Syrian Network for Human Rights willing to cooperate and provide more evidence and details.



The Syrian regime:

- Immediately stop using all torture methods and the capabilities of the Syrian state in the torture and terror of society.
- Immediately allow access to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, the International Committee of the Red Cross and all objective human rights organizations.
- Take legal and historical responsibility for this comprehensive national disaster.
- Ensure the immediate and unconditional release of all the arbitrary detained, particularly children and women, and reveal the fate of tens of thousands of forcibly disappeared persons.

Acknowledgment

We would like to extend our thanks to all the local activists, the families and friends of the victims who contributed to the completion of this report, and to offer them our sincere condolences.





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