

## Brief Report

# World Press Freedom Day, 682 Media Workers Have been Killed since March 2011

About 82% of Them Killed at the  
Hands of the Syrian-Russian Alliance

# SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Thursday, May 3, 2018

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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The reality of journalism and media work haven't improved much since the start of the popular uprising for freedom, as any media outlets who weren't pro-Syrian regime have been almost completely banned, while anyone who tries to expose the facts of crimes and violations that have been practiced in Syria on daily basis is pursued and threatened. In light of the rapid developments in Syria, journalism and traditional journalists haven't been able to cover what was happening in detail, so it has fallen upon citizens, who received some training on journalistic work, to fill this void, which made them automatically a direct target for anyone they expose by recording, writing, or sharing news of their violations.

Not only did the Syrian regime and its allies targeted citizen journalists through killing, arrest, and torture, but they went as far as to hire tens of journalists to adopt and promote the Syrian regime's narrative, deny its violations, distort facts and strip them of any context or credibility. The Syrian regime was mainly aided by the Iranian regime who has a great deal of experience in creating English content, as well as some Hezbollah-supporting Lebanese media outlets and the Russian media. All of these apparatuses worked together to deny the bombing on hospitals, schools, and markets and deny the siege and starvation of populations, while adopting the narrative of the Syrian regime's war on terror and terrorist groups and polishing its image without forgetting to thank its Iranian and Russian allies.

As the popular demonstration turned into an internal armed conflict, the dangers that journalists had to face increased, as they became at risk of being arrested and tortured at the hands of more than one party, while some found themselves forced to work as a war reporter to make a living which took him to the frontlines that sometimes can be at the entrance of their hometowns, cities, or even by their doorsteps. Consequently, the possibility of them being killed, injured, or arrested on the frontlines was a considerably strong one.



Even though other parties emerged in the armed conflict, including Russian forces, international coalition forces, Kurdish Self-Management forces, extremist Islamic groups (such as al Nusra and ISIS), and armed opposition factions, the size and type of document violations suggest very explicitly that Syrian regime forces were responsible to approximately 90% of all violations depending on the type of violations. Nonetheless, all parties tried to oppress media outlets, distort facts, or exaggerate the brutality of their foes in some form or another and to varying degrees. This undermined the integrity and credibility of many media outlets considering that all oppressive authorities are fully aware of the danger role media can play in exposing their dictatorial methods and mentalities. Parties didn't distinguish between a male or a female journalist, children, or even a Syrian citizen and a foreign one in their violations.

The popular uprising went on and with it the risks and dangers that foreign journalists had to deal with to somehow access relevant locations. As such, many of them were killed and detained by all the parties after journalists entered Syria illegally. This made foreign media outlets realize that it is important to use citizen journalists inside, so they worked on training them and providing them with some equipment.

**Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:**

“Citizen journalist have played an integral role in recording and narrating incidents and violations, and providing human rights groups with data. We have collaborated with them a lot. We mustn't forget what they have contributed. Some of them sacrificed their lives and freedoms to expose and memorialize the truth and use it to defend their families and country.”

## I. Extrajudicial killing

Targeting camera holders that broadcasted popular uprising was a deliberate policy adopted by Syrian regime forces, either by sniping, or by having photographers working with them take pictures of citizen journalists to arrest them later. Ahmad Suleiman al Dhiek was one of the firsts to be directly targeted, which was on May 29. 2011, as he was recording the tanks raiding his hometown Talbisa in Homs suburbs.

ISIS considered abducting journalist a high priority, as they found in that a primary source of funding. In case government refused to pay large sums of money that amounted to millions of dollars in some cases, ISIS makes sure to kill those in the most theatrical ways and release video productions of these killings, which was the case with the American journalist James Foley and the Japanese journalist Kenji Goto.



Also, some factions from the armed opposition were involved in killing citizen journalists. It should be noted, though, that many of them were killed in clashes within factions.

Even though Russian forces didn't intervene in Syria until September 2015, they have already been responsible for a major number of citizen journalist deaths, particularly as a result of their double-strike<sup>1</sup> method which has been implemented hundreds of times.

Some cameras were able to catch the killing of some citizen journalists, such as the media worker [Ahmad Khaled Yasouf](#), known as Software, who was killed on November 6, 2015, by Syrian regime forces as he was recording an interview on a battlefield in Hama, and [Wasim al Adl](#) who was killed on October 23, 2015, by Russian forces as he was recording the airstrikes by the Russian airstrikes on Beneen village, Idlib governorate.

We've recorded, at SNHR, the killing of 682 media workers, including seven children and six women at the hands of the parties to the conflict in Syria between March 2011 and May 2018. Also, among the victims were eight foreign journalists and 37 who died due to torture. The death toll is divided by the perpetrator party as follows:

Syrian regime forces and Iranian militias: 538, including 5 children, 1 woman, 5 foreign journalists, and 37 media workers who died due to torture inside detention centers.

Russian forces: 18

Extremist Islamic groups: 69, including 1 child, 2 women, and 3 foreign journalists.

- ISIS: 64, including 1 child, 2 women, and 3 foreign journalists.

- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: 5

Factions from the armed opposition: 25, including 1 child and 3 women.

Kurdish Self-Management forces: 4

International coalition forces: 1

Other parties: 27

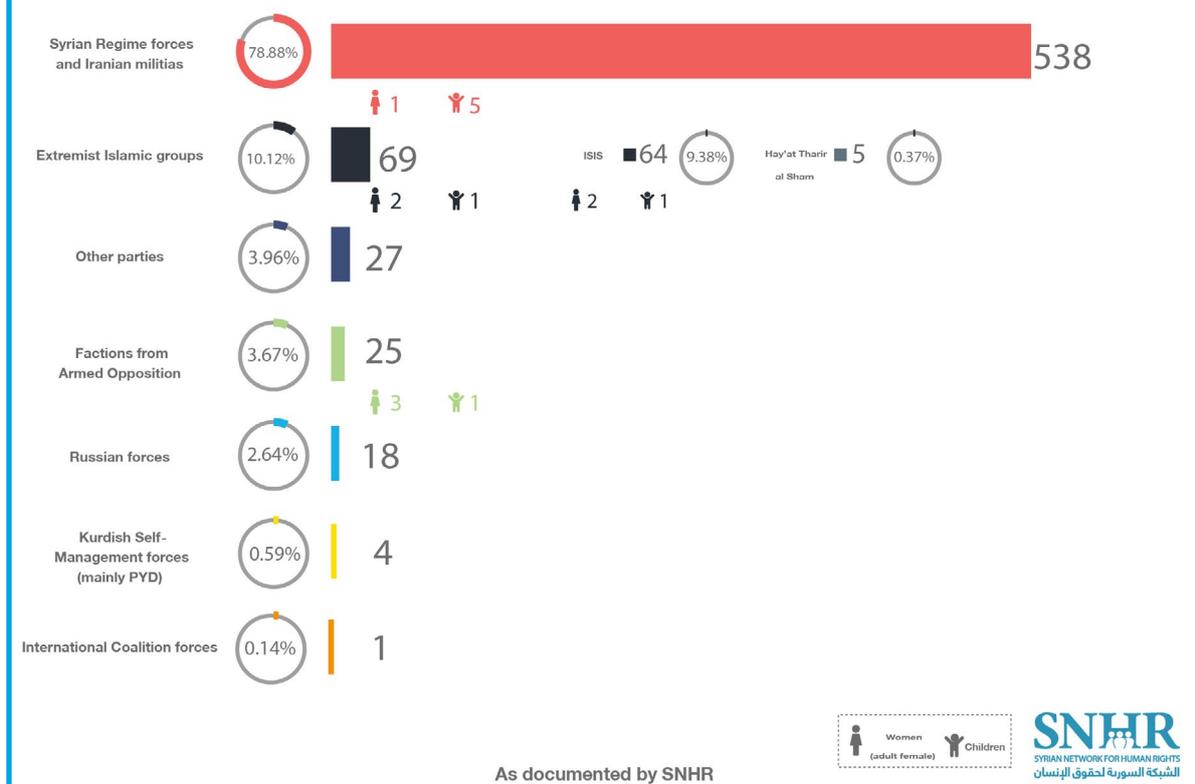
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<sup>1</sup> A policy adopted by the Syrian and Russian regimes, where they bomb the same site again a few minutes after the original strike in order to cause as many deaths as possible among civil defense and medical teams, as well as media workers.



## A total of 682 media workers were killed

at the hands of the parties to the conflict in Syria between March 2011 and May 2018, as follows



## II. Arrest or Abduction

The arrest and abduction of citizen journalists that have been going on for seven years was a part of the attempts to block and conceal the atrocities and violations that are being perpetrated in Syria. Most of the detainees have become forcibly-disappeared, such is the case of the media worker Jihad Assad Mohammad who has been forcibly-disappeared at the hands of the Syrian regime. There are also a few cases where detainees are kept in civilian prisons and their fate is still known such as Raghad al Safati and Noor al Lahham.

The emergence of extremist Islamic groups further complicated the restrictions on citizen and foreign journalists. Most of the areas these groups have seized have been turned into black holes, as we barely know a little of what is going in them. Citizen journalists Samar al Saleh and Rami al Razzouk were arrested by ISIS and their fate is still unknown. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, since it surfaced in January 2012, adopted a systematic arrest policy against media workers, where they resorted to ambushes to set them up. This was evident after they took over most of the areas in Idlib governorate that saw wide arrest campaigns that targeted citizen journalists who criticized the group's policy on social media, or who failed



to acquire a work permit. SNHR team has also recorded arrest cases that involved activists' family members as a way to force activists to surrender themselves. In most cases, media workers are detained for periods of time that range from a few days to eight months, before Hay'at Tahrir al Sham releases them after having them pledge not to oppose their policies through their media activities, or after paying \$5000, or sentence them to exile by forcing them to leave its areas of control. Foreign journalists weren't save either from abductions under the hopes of demanding large sums of ransom money.

Kurdish Self-Management forces' policies didn't prove that much better than Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's, as arbitrary arrest, abduction, and enforced-disappearance was the fate of anyone who criticized their policies or failed to acquire a work permit. Also, citizen journalists didn't fare better in the areas controlled by armed opposition factions who tried to coerce opinions through the force and rejected others' opinions. This wasn't only limited to pro-Syrian regime forces media workers, but also local activists who refused to submit to the beliefs of armed opposition factions and criticized the behavior and missteps of some armed opposition factions.

We, at SNHR, have documented that no less than 1,116 media workers have been arrested or forcibly-disappeared, including five women at the hands of the parties to the conflict in Syria between March 2011 and May 2018. Also, among the victims were 33 foreign journalists. Cases are divided by the perpetrator party as follows:

Syrian regime forces: 833, including 2 women and 4 foreign journalists.

Extremist Islamic groups: 122, including 2 women and 16 foreign journalists.

- ISIS: 67, including 1 woman and 14 foreign journalists.

- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: 55, including 1 woman and 2 foreign journalists.

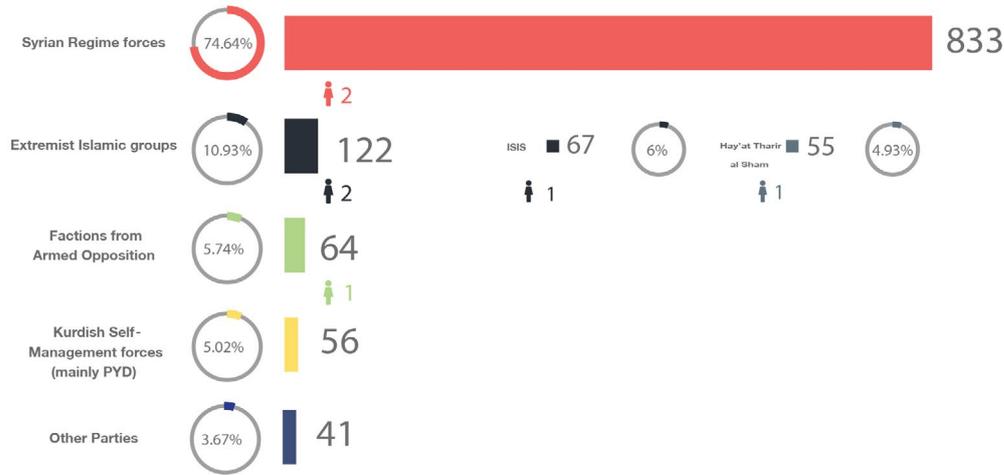
Factions from the armed opposition: 64, including 1 woman and 5 citizen journalists.

Kurdish Self-Management forces: 56

Other parties: 41, including 8 foreign journalists.



No less than 1,116 media workers were arbitrarily arrested or forcibly-disappeared at the hands of the parties to the conflict in Syria between March 2011 and May 2018, as follows:



As documented by SNHR

Women (adult female)

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### III. Abusing Media

The profession of journalism has been exploited to serve criminals and polish their image, and to terrorize anyone who dared to stand in their face. There have been many videos of the brutal torture against opposers, including the leaked video that was posted by activists on March 29, 2013, where [Syrian regime forces are shown dragging](#) a civilian through the streets in Aleppo city. Other videos talked about the fate that will await residents in case any party manages to take over their areas, such as the video that shows [Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\)](#) torturing a civilian before killing him when these forces seized control of al Rmiela neighborhood in Raqqa. The video was posted on July 21, 2017

Some media workers filmed themselves as they ran over death bodies of civilians or fighters. Also, a video was posted recently for the pro-Syrian regime media worker [Hussein Murtada](#) who filmed himself in front a bombing on Douma city, as he was visibly gloating over the agony of its residents with uttering sectarian slurs.

Since the popular uprising started, the Syrian regime has made sure to film videos and interviews with a number of individuals to prove that the clashes are with terrorists, in order to legitimize its offensives against civilians. There also have been videos supposedly refuting the allegations that its forces have perpetrated violations. The most recent of which was [a number of videos](#) with a number of residents from Eastern Ghouta who accused factions from the armed opposition and civil defense members of staging the chemical attacks.



The Russian Ministry of Defense released a [video](#) (even though Russia, a permanent member state of the Security Council. A major state should respect its stature and not resort to such an appalling pile of deceits and lies) of medical teams in Douma city, Eastern Ghouta, after they managed to take over the city, in order to disparage the authenticity of the two chemical attacks on the city on April 7. One of those two attacks resulted in the killing of 41 civilians.

In an unprecedented development, the Palestinian visual effects artist [Abd al-Baset al Loulou](#) appeared on TV on February 27, 2018 and accused the Syrian regime media of using some of his work and falsely crediting it to factions from the armed opposition, as the Syrian regime was trying to prove that the videos that activists were sharing from inside Eastern Ghouta were merely fabrications.

#### IV. Legal Description and Recommendations

The international law has stressed more than once that journalists must be protected. Article 79 of the Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 stipulates that journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians. As such, they shall be protected, provided that they take no action adversely affecting their status as civilians. According to the customary rules of the international humanitarian law, rule 34 states, **“Civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities.”** In addition, Security Council [Resolution 1738](#), adopted in December 2006, condemns attacks against journalists in situations of armed conflict.

On December 18, 2013, the United Nations General Assembly adopted [a resolution](#) on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity.

On May 27, 2015, Security Council adopted [Resolution 2222](#) which condemns attacks and acts of violence against journalist, media workers, and individuals associated with media in armed conflicts.

Even though many citizens retired from journalistic work for a variety of security and livelihood reasons, while others fled, Syria has been one of the deadliest places for journalists since the end of 2011 and for a sixth year in a row, amid a complete absence of accountability, according to [a special report](#) released by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Moreover, Syria was ranked 177 (out of 180 countries) for a fourth year in a row according to the Reporters Without Borders' [Report World Press Freedom Index 2018](#).



Syria was also the fourth-most country that saw incidents of media worker killings according to the [annual report](#) released by the International Federation of Journalist on December 31, 2017.

## **Recommendations**

### **Security Council**

Join the fight against impunity by referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

### **OHCHR**

Condemn the targeting of media workers in Syria, and shed light on their sacrifices and suffering.

### **Commission of Inquiry (COI)**

Launch investigations into the targeting of media workers specifically, given their integral role in recording incidents in Syria.

### **International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)**

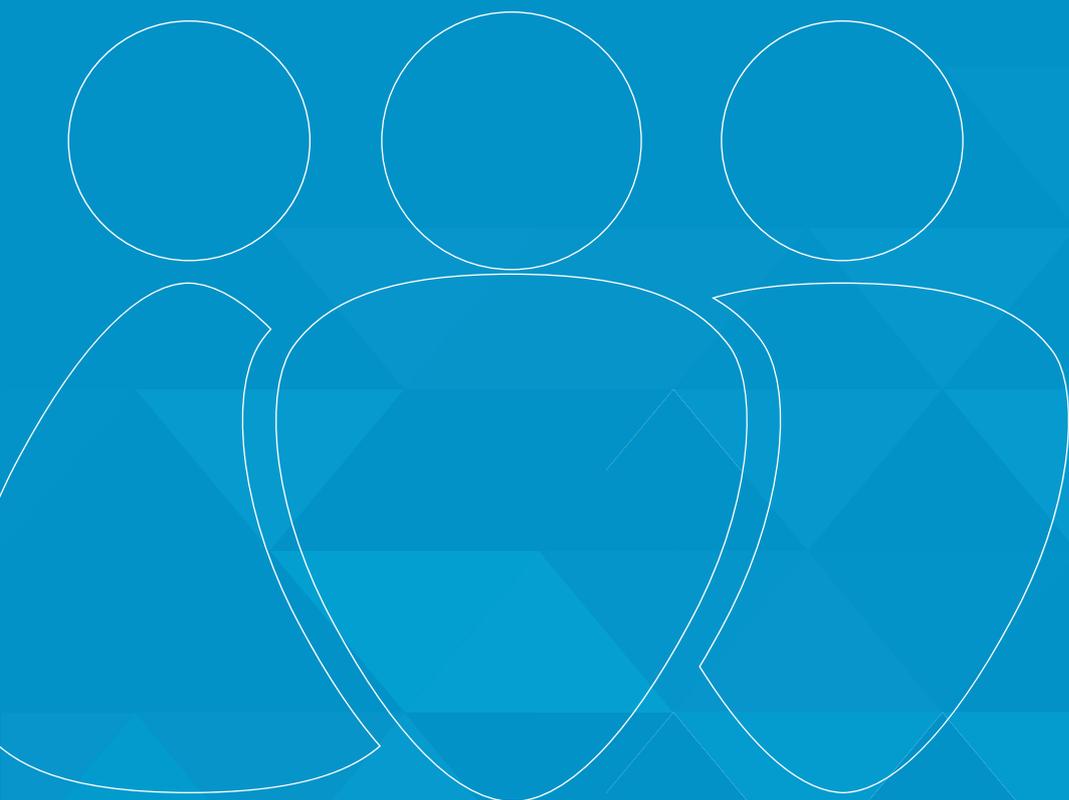
Address the cases mentioned in this report and past reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide more evidences and data.

### **International and Arabic media institutions**

Support their colleagues in the field of media by publishing periodic reports that shed light on their daily suffering and memorialize their sacrifice. Also, they must contact their families to console them.

Finally, all parties have to respect the international humanitarian law in their areas of control with respect to the protection of civilians and especially media workers and their equipment.





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