

Lewa' al Aqsa Group Carries Out Mass Executions Involving Civilians and Armed Opposition Fighters

The Execution of Detainees at al Khazzanat Detention Center in Khan Sheikhoun City in the Suburbs of Idlib Governorate Constitutes a War Crime

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights, founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, non-profit independent organization that is a primary source for the United Nations on all death toll-related statistics in Syria



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I. Introduction and Methodology

Territories overlap and intertwine in many number of areas in the Syrian regions that are outside the Syrian regime's control, where control of such areas are divided between armed opposition factions, on one side, and extremist Islamic groups, on the other. This can be clearly seen in Idlib governorate. These areas are highly unstable and a breeding ground for conflicts that occur from time to time between armed opposition factions and extremist Islamic groups, as extremist groups usually assault armed opposition factions in order to display them as weak in the eyes of their funders, and seize the armed opposition factions' support and possessions for themselves. Or in other cases to attract a larger popular support base. Finally, when an extremist group feel that its demise is nearing, this drives said faction into a hysterical state wherein the group forms new alliances, which what the group "Jund al Aqsa" did.

Based on a doctrine that is called "The Dominance Principle", the extremist groups that follow this principle have carried out many attacks as we recorded. These attacks didn't only target military bases for armed opposition, but also the vital civilian centers, in addition to targeting fighters and their popular support bases in abduction, arrest, and enforced-disappearance operations through masked groups that carry out these killings or abductions. Such operations have declined considerably after Jund al Aqsa and Lewa' al Aqsa departed, which supports our theory that these groups were behind these incidents which most of them are still being investigated.



In this report, we will be recording mass killings, through shooting, of individuals who most of them are affiliated with armed opposition factions at the hands of “Lewa’ al Aqsa” group, which is an extremist Islamic group that pledged allegiance to ISIS. Furthermore, some of those victims were civilians that aren’t connected to any fighting factions. These killings took place at a detention center called “al Khazzanat” which is a former government facility that was used to store fuel in Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate.

Currently, Khan Sheikhoun city is under the joint control of armed opposition factions and Fateh al Sham Front (formerly al Nusra). SNHR team has contacted a number of victims’ families and civil defense teams in the area, and we were able to acquire a number of accounts, where we included three in this report. One of these accounts is for a survivor who was being detained at “al Khazzanat” detention center. We have explained the purpose of the interviews for the witnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without offering or giving them any incentives. SNHR has tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible. We also made sure to conceal the identity of any witnesses who preferred to use an alias.

We have also reviewed the pictures received, and verified their authenticity. These pictures show civil defense teams pulling out victims from mass graves near “al Khazzanat” detention center. Also, the pictures contained signs that suggest that most of the victims were handtied and blindfolded, and were killed by being shot at the back of the head in most cases.

We store copies pictures and videos mentioned in this report in a secret online database, and back-up copies on hard drives. For more information, please see our general work [methodology](#).

II. A Profile on Lewa’ al Aqsa and Incident-Related Facts

In October 2016, an agreement was signed for a ceasefire between Jund al Aqsa group and Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement -an armed opposition faction. The agreement provided for a ceasefire and stated that both sides shall deliver the detainees to the other side. The agreement also stated that Jund al Aqsa group shall dissolve itself, as its former fighters have the choice to either join Fateh al Sham Front or the Turkistan Islamic Party. Some of Jund al Aqsa fighters rejected the agreement and defected, starting a new group called “Lewa’ al Aqsa Group”.



Lewa' al Aqsa group centered in military bases in a number of areas in the southern suburbs of Idlib and the northern suburbs of Hama, and mainly in Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate and Kafr Zita city in the northern suburbs of Hama, where the group was able to take over these areas in early-February 2017 after clashes with the armed opposition factions that was present there. The group even established its own courts and detention centers in these areas - most notably detention centers in al Khazzanat facility which is addressed in this report, where this facility was turned into a detention center that consists of four large rooms with each room having its own bathroom, and four solidarity cells. All of these cells were built to take in large number off detainees.

On Monday, February 6, 2017, Lewa' al Aqsa Group raided military centers affiliated to Jaish al Naser - an armed opposition faction in Kafr Zita city in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate. Lewa' al Aqsa took over these centers and arrested about 50 fighters from Jaish al Naser in the process. The group continued to expand and take over more cities and towns in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate, where between February 6 and February 9 the group arrested and abducted no less than 196 individuals who are mostly armed opposition fighters (from the following factions: Jaish al Naser wal Ezza, al Ferqa al Westa, Failaq al Sham, Ajnad al Sham, and Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement) in addition to a small number of fighters affiliated to Fateh al Sham Front. These arrests and abduction were carried out either by raids or when those fighters had passed one of the many checkpoints the group established in its areas of control.

The attacks against armed opposition factions and Fateh al Sham Front were carried out by Lewa' al Aqsa in order to expand its area of control. In retaliation, Fateh al Sham Front carried out military attacks aiming to exterminate Lewa' al Aqsa from its territories. Consequently, Heated clashes erupted between the two sides, in which many fighters from both sides were killed. The clashes ended with an agreement on February 17, 2017 via a mediation by the Turkistan Islamic Party -an extremist Islamic group. The group stated that Lewa' al Aqsa shall leave Fateh al Sham's areas of control for the ISIS-held areas in the eastern suburbs of Hama, and then to al Raqqa city, Also, detainees were exchanged between two sides.

On Friday, February 17, 2017, we recorded that Lewa' al Aqsa released approximately 17 civilians, and in exchange Fateh al Sham released a number of captives from Lewa' al Aqsa.



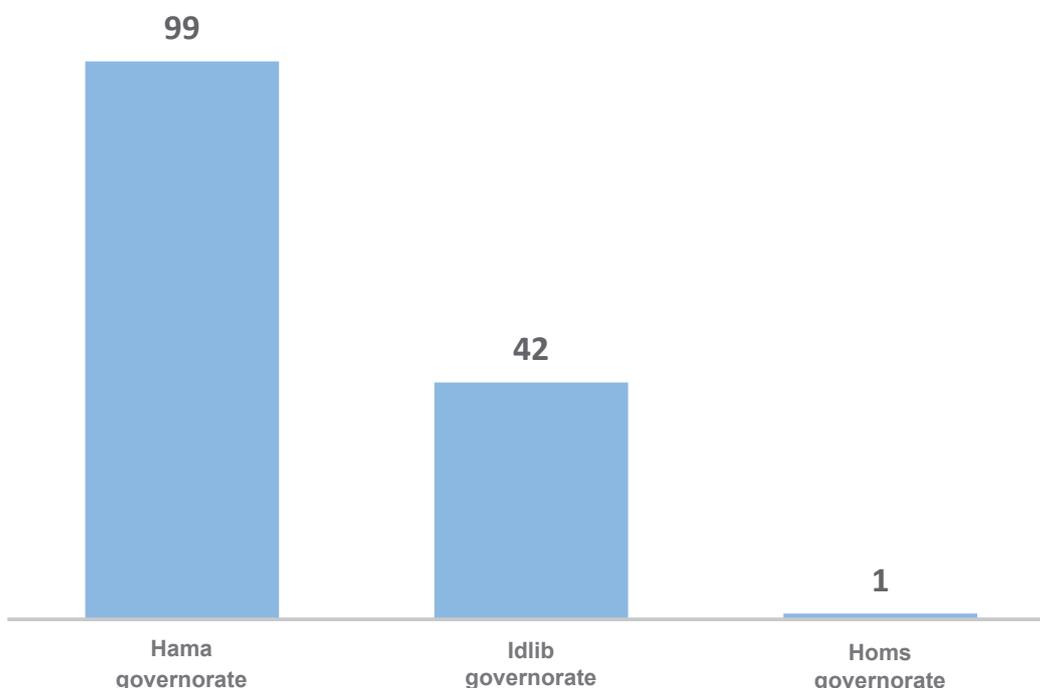
On Saturday, February 18, 2017, Lewa' al Aqsa started withdrawing towards ISIS-held areas in the eastern suburbs of Hama governorate. The process took days, during which the group planted an elaborate grid of explosive devices around al Khazzanat Prison.

Turkistan Islamic Party took over Lewa' al Aqsa's old bases in al Khazzanat Prison and prohibited residents from getting near the detention center area, while they allowed civil defense team and engineering teams to enter and dismantle the landmine grid. And a search party for the detainees' dead bodies killed by Lewa' al Aqsa has taken off.

III. Details

Wednesday and Thursday, February 22-23, 2017, civil defense teams found mass graves near al Khazzanat detention center. The area residents identified most of the victims' dead bodies, while some of the corpses are yet to be identified. The corpses were buried in local cemeteries in the area.

SNHR team documented the killing of 142 individuals who are mostly fighters. There were bullet holes in the head. Among the victims were one civilian media activist. We found out that the killings happened on Wednesday, February 15, and on Thursday night February 16, 2017. Through contacting the victims' families, we found out the victims are distributed across Syrian governorates as follows:



C.R. is a civilian who was arrested by Lewa' al Aqsa at a checkpoint in Ma'ar Zita on February 8, 2017 in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, where he was arrested by masked men who were stationed at a military checkpoint at the end of the road out of the town. C.R. told SNHR, via phone:



“They asked for my name, and if I was with a certain faction. I told them that I am a civilian, then they asked me about my views on ISIS. At this point, I knew that they were Lewa’ al Aqsa. One of them asked me to wait, and went to talk to his leader via a wireless talking device, called him “Amir”, via a wireless talking device. He told him that he arrested a suspected. As I was waiting, the masked guy started assaulting me and accused me of fighting ISIS in the northern suburbs of Aleppo. After that, a car came and I was blindfolded, and they took me to a place like a cave. I knew later that this is al Khazzanat Prison in Khan Sheikhoun.”

C.R. added that he was beaten inside the detention center and accused of infidelity and apostasy. He also talked about the situation in the prison and the overcrowded detention center:

“I couldn’t sleep that day unless in a sitting position, because there wasn’t enough space for this big number of detainees. I was interrogated three times each day, and each time it was a different guy. All of them were from Arabic nationalities, and the interrogation was in a special room assigned for interrogation. They accused me of the same things such as infidelity, treason, and taking part in fighting Lewa’ al Aqsa and ISIS. During the interrogation, they would beat me with a metal bar and an cables. I denied all the accusation, and kept assuring that I am only a civilian.”

C.R., the survivor, told SNHR about what he witnessed: the execution of the other detainees who are affiliated to armed opposition factions at the hands of Lewa’ al Aqsa:

“On the eighth day, at 7:00 PM, the interrogator came to our room along with a number of fighters, and they were all masked. They told us that some of us will be released and exchanged. They called out seven names and let them out of the cave. After less than a minute, we heard gunfire. They would take detainees out in groups, each group was 5-7 individuals, with each group going out, we would hear more gunfire. When we asked them why they kept shooting, as they were talking the groups, they said it was to draw the attention of the nearby al Nusra Front checkpoints that a detainees group was coming out, as, according to them, they couldn’t reach them on the talking devices. They would keep taking out prisoners, and more shots were fired. That until about 19 detainees and I remained. We were all civilians, and we weren’t convicted of being affiliated to any faction during interrogation. Approximately at 3:00 AM, we heard bulldozers and some digging. One of the fighters told us that they are installing barricades around the prison.”



C.R. told us that he was released on the next day at approximately 01:00 along with the remaining detainees inside the prison as a part of a prisoner exchange with Fateh al Sham Front:

“They transferred us in a van. We were blindfolded. On the road, I heard them talking to fighters from Fateh al Sham Front via talking devices, as they were asking them to bring the detainees. Fateh al Sham Front handed them six fighters, and Lewa’ al Aqsa gave us up in a place located near Khan Sheikhoun.”

Abu Hashem, a civil defense member in Kafr Zita city in the northern suburbs of Hama, told SNHR, via the phone, that he took part in pulling out dead bodies from the mass graves near al Khazzanat detention center. The operation went on for two days:

“Most of the victims were killed by shooting and mainly on the head and the chest. Some of the victims were handtied and blindfolded. We couldn’t examine the dead bodies properly, due to the lack of forensics, and residents gathering, and the overwhelming state of outrage among the people.”

Mrs. Fatma al Sattouf, from Kafr Zita city in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate. Fatma’s only brother was abducted by Lewa’ al Aqsa on February 10, 2017 as he was at Kafr Zita Specialized Hospital in Kafr Zita city. He was taken to al Khazzanat detention center. On February 23, Fatma identified him among the victims who were pulled out from the mass graves in the vicinity of al Khazzanat checkpoint. Fatma speaking to SNHR, via phone:

“My brother joined the Free Army when it was first established, and he fought the Syrian regime. He never took part in any fighting between factions. I learned from the neighbors that all the families of the detainees of Kafr Zita who were held by Lewa’ al Aqsa in will go and search for their beloved ones among the victims’ dead bodies. I went with them to al Khazzanat in Khan Sheikhoun. I saw tens of dead bodies. Everyone was looking for his beloved one. After an hour and a half of searching, I found my brother. I identified him by his clothes. He was covered in mud, and his head was distorted from the bullets. I don’t know how they could kill him. How could they justify killing him like that?”



Most notable victims

Thursday, February 23, 2017, civil defense in Idlib governorate announced that they found the dead body of the media activist [Bassil Ahmad al Darwish](#), who was shot dead, in a mass grave. Bassil was arrested by Lewa' al Aqsa on Wednesday, February 8, 2017, when the group raided bases for Jaish al Naser, an armed opposition faction, near Taybat al Imam city in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate.

Bassil, a photographer for the media office of Jaish al Naser, from al Zaka village in the suburbs of Hama governorate, born in 1990, married and a father of two.

Thursday, February 23, 2017, civil defense in Idlib governorate announced that they found the dead body of the captain [Tareq Mustafa Al Jaddoua'](#), who was shot dead, in a mass grave. Tareq was arrested by Lewa' al Aqsa on Wednesday, February 8, 2017, when the group raided bases for Jaish al Naser, an armed opposition faction, near Taybat al Imam city in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate.

Tareq, a captain that defected from Syrian army forces. He is affiliated to Jaish al Naser, an armed opposition faction, from Kafr Zita city in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate.

Wednesday, February 22, 2017, civil defense announced that they found the dead body of the 1st lieutenant Mohammad Dukhan, who was shot dead, in a mass grave. Mohammad was arrested by Lewa' al Aqsa on Wednesday, February 8, 2017, when the group raided bases for Jaish al Naser, an armed opposition faction, near Taybat al Imam city in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate.

Mohammad, a 1st lieutenant who defected from Syrian army forces. He is affiliated to Jaish al Naser, an armed opposition faction, from Al Mardam town in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Lewa' al Aqsa carried out acts of violence against its detainees that manifested in torture and conditions of detention, and conducted quick executions of detained fighters who were unable to fight, as these executions were carried out with no trials. This constitutes willful killing crimes, which is all a violation of the Common Article 3 of Geneva Conventions and the customary international law, and amount to war crimes.



Recommendations

The International community and the Security council

The Security Council has adopted a number of Resolutions, some of which were under chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, to target extremist Islamists in Syria and Iraq. However, the Security Council never tracked the reasons behind the emergence of these extremist groups. If the Syrian regime hadn't faced the popular uprising in March 2011 with bullets, killing, and torture, none of these groups would have existed. Therefore, the root of the problem must be addressed, namely the regime of oppression.

The strikes and military attacks against extremist groups must be in parallel with working immediately on ending the daily killings and torture which are being carried out by the Syrian regime and its Iranian ally in a sectarian manner. All crime perpetrators must be held accountable. The Security Council's failure to do so is the main fuel for the recruitment operations those extremist groups conduct.

Extremist groups and Iranian militias exist in failing states and in conflicts and wars. Therefore, the process of a political transition toward freedom must be accelerated, and the Syrian state's path to restore peace and stability must be assisted.

The international coalition's airstrikes must target all extremist global cross-border groups, such as Iranian groups, and the PKK, and not only the Islamic groups. This creates a feeling of martyr sympathy in societies toward these groups, as terrorism is indivisible.

All networks that support the global groups in Syria must be dismantled and crushed. Steps have to be taken to take it all out.

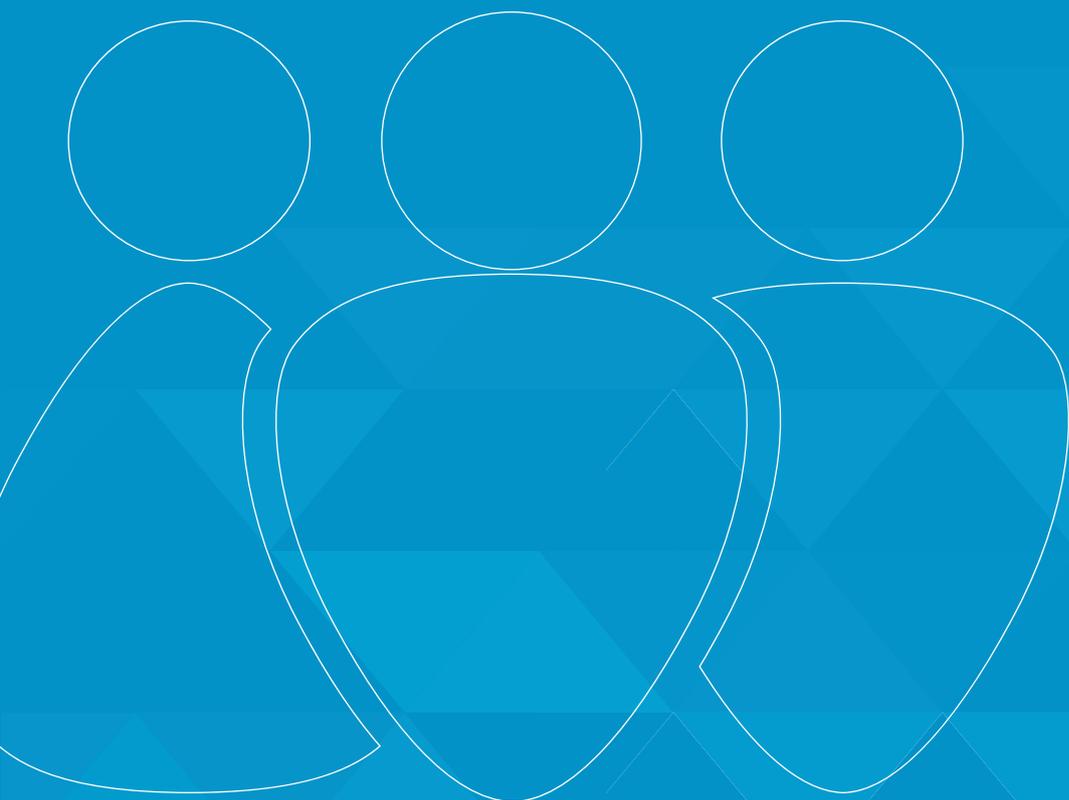
Efforts have to be made in order to form a community alliance to eliminate these extremist groups, instead of relying on an ethnic or sectarian part in the society under the pretext of eliminating these extremist groups. This contributes to the fragmentation and division of society and establishes for wars of other kinds.

Extremist groups represent a core threat to all Syrians. These groups have enough financial resources to pay the wages of their fighters. The community factions must be supported in their war on global extremist groups on all material and military levels.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank and extend our most heartfelt condolences to all the local residents and activists who effectively contributed to this report.





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