



Center for Media and Cultural Freedom

SYRIA

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Spreading Terror through Media

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The images of American journalists slaughtered in front of the camera have not – and will not – leave the memory of their colleagues around the world. Time will not easily erase the gruesome videos that were professionally shot and directed by the Islamic State (IS). This was probably not the first time that media were used to terrorize other media but the purpose was in fact to create a new type of “terror media.” The more video clips IS broadcast, the more people square up to watch bodies and heads being slain. The crimes of IS are no longer only targeting Syrians or Iraqis alone. The hands of the organization have reached those who entered Syria and Iraq, including journalists seeking to convey the stories of the Syrian people to the outside world, which remains mostly oblivious to what occurs in that boiling spot of the world.

The phrase “terror media” is not about satire or catchy titles, but rather a reflection of the reality that Syria has reached four years after the start of the revolution. In 2014 alone, almost 65 Syrian journalists, intellectuals and artists, as well as two American journalists were killed. The word “almost” is not to say that the figures are imprecise but to emphasize that more people have been detained either by the Syrian regime or in the terriers of IS and other terrorist groups without any information about their fate.

Some of the Syrian media practitioners who disappeared in the inferno of IS or Al-Nusra Front, and before them, in the dungeons of the secret services of the Syrian regime, might have died. Some are still waiting, expecting everyday their demise under torture or because of hunger or any of the numerous diseases that have been ravaging their bodies. Some others were publically crucified or killed in the most barbaric form as is the case of those who opposed the reign of terrorist organizations in the northern part of Syria. Some had their

bodies tossed in mass graves with photos of their remains surfacing, like the fifty thousand photos that went public, piercing through the thick walls of the regime. Perhaps the regime wanted these pictures to be released to convey a clear message to the world, saying that such will be the fate of dissidents while, at the same time, spreading fear among Syrians.

Terrorism hit hard the Syrian media scene. Terrorist organizations spread death, took prisoners and wreaked havoc and destruction. Furthermore, the Syrian regime is still preventing foreign media outlets from officially accessing Syria for the fourth consecutive year, which forced many journalists to “infiltrate” the country in their attempt to get to the truth. However, unlike previous years, when various opposition factions provided cooperation and assistance to foreign journalists, reporters today need, first, a lot of cash and a great deal of caution, as well as the patronage of a military group in order to reach most areas in the country. Otherwise, they will be caught in the traps of terrorism leading to a long process of negotiation for ransom. They also risk the dramatic fate of US journalists James Foley and Steven Joel Sotloff.

Horrific violations have taken their toll on Syrians as well. At the beginning of the year, IS executed four media activists in the Eye Specialist Hospital of Aleppo. Their bodies were found among fifty others at the hospital that was abandoned by the organization following clashes with Syrian armed opposition groups. This crime was not the only one during the first month of the year. In fact, nine other media activists were killed in different ways.

The onset of the year was also characterized by regime violations against Syrian actors Leila Awad and Samar Kokash who were both arrested and transferred to the anti-terrorism court. Towards the end of the year, the court issued a five-year prison sentence against Kokash for financing the armed opposition. The anti-terrorism court became the legal arm used by the regime to repress its dissidents. That same court is still delaying to this day the settlement of the case of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression members. The founder of the Center, Mazen Darwish, and his two colleagues, Hani Al-Zitani and Hussein Ghreir are still in detention since February 2012. The series of adjournments has been continuous and the last decision of the kind was for an undetermined period. These trials bring back to mind the trials conducted by the State security apparatus in the 1980s and 1990s when the regime established the anti-terrorism court by a presidential decree in order to look into the cases of Muslim Brotherhood supporters as reported by the media at the time.

The series of violations continued in February, also perpetrated by different armed Kurdish groups in areas under their control, particularly the Asayish that arrested a number of media figures during the year, investigated with them and restricted their work. Going into the third month of the year, cases of death under torture in the regime prisons started to surface again. The first case was the death of Syrian journalist Moaz Al-Khaled after two years of imprisonment then the death of media activist Kanaan Al-Atassi. During the preparation of the annual report, we conducted several interviews with former detainees who survived the secret services’ departments in order to determine the causes and details of death in detention. Briefly, we can conclude that every injury, however small, becomes life threatening due to infections and bacteria as well as the total lack of medical care. And injuries are highly

probable in light of the torture equipment and methods used in the detention centers. If someone is detained because of their work in the media sector, torture is more intense in order to get to the related network of reporters or cooperators in addition to torture for the sake of torture. Then come diseases, the most prevailing ones in prisons being tuberculosis and scabies, which inflict detainees and cause slow death.

We will not elaborate more, as most reports issued by the international human rights organizations confirm what we have described. However, the main purpose of the small scale investigation we conducted with ten female and male former detainees was to validate the information and understand the intrinsic nature of secret services' prisons, where daily cases of assassinations and executions occur in a systematic and organized fashion. The Saidnaya prison has replaced today the infamous Tadmur prison in Palmyra's desert as the center of organized executions and torture practices. Among the torture victims in the Saidnaya prison was another journalist, Bilal Bilal, who passed away at the end of April 2014.

Also in April, relatives of prominent human rights activist Razan Zaytouneh released several appeals calling for her liberation, alongside her husband Wael Hamada and activists Nazim Al-Hamadi and Samira Al-Khalil. They were kidnapped by a group operating in Eastern Ghouta in the outskirts of Damascus at the end of 2013. Their fate remains unclear to this day. These violations perpetrated by the armed opposition and particularly by Islamist groups from all trends have put a great deal of pressure on media activists in the areas outside regime control, as journalists and human rights defenders there became the target of arbitrary arrest or saw their duty stations raided. For instance, Raed Fares, the head of the media bureau of Kafranbel, survived an assassination attempt. He was later held for hours at the end of 2014 at an Al-Nusra Front checkpoint for investigation.

In light of all these incidents and violations, talking about the regime's decision to confiscate the properties of 52 Syrian media professionals, artists and opposition figures may seem pale in comparison. The same would apply to the trial of 3,000 Syrian citizens accused of spreading anti-regime rumors through social media. However, these cases too reflect the nature of the Syrian authorities and their eagerness to exert full control over citizens' freedom of expression.

Killings, arrests, destruction, raids and kidnappings intensified in the second half of 2014, when the reporter of Xinhua agency, Ahmad Abdul-Lateef, was hit by stray bullets shot by supporters of President Bashar Al-Assad celebrating his reelection. Syrian journalist Mohammad Al-Khateeb was also killed, but not by stray bullets or by mistake; he died under torture in the Saidnaya prison.

Meanwhile, IS continued its killing campaign and also sought to constrain the work of media professionals in the areas it controls like Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor. The self-declared Caliphate issued instructions prohibiting communication with "infidel" media and restricted news coverage to media facilities it owns. IS killed, arrested and kidnapped a number of media activists and dissidents, many of which decided to freeze their activities, stay home or, mostly, leave the country fearing for their lives. The mere communication with a foreign media agency or cooperation with a local independent newspaper could lead to accusation of

blasphemy and subsequent killing. In the best-case scenario, IS would raid the headquarters and duty stations of independent journalists, confiscate or destroy their equipment as it did in Idlib and Deir Ez-Zor. Another shocking development was when kidnapped British journalist John Cantlie was forced by IS to address people in a recorded tape entitled “Hear me out” before appearing himself in a documentary shot by IS itself in Ayn al-Arab - Kobani.

The wave of violence that has invaded the lives of all Syrians continued to the end of 2014 and is very likely to last much longer. It will hit journalists, media practitioners and cultural and human rights activists. The result will be death, torture and detention. Some more will disappear like cartoonist Akram Reslan who has been held incommunicado since his arrest in October 2012. A fate shared with prominent human rights lawyer Khalil Maatouk who was arrested around the same period and remains in captivity to this day in spite of his critical health situation. On the Islamic State’s side, many have also disappeared, such as media activist Abdul-Wahab Al-Malla who has been kidnapped since November 2013 and photographer Abboud Al-Haddad, also abducted in the same year by the same organization.

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