

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: Syria

The kidnapped People in Eastern Ghouta – Damascus: Missing until further notice!

CASE BACKGROUND

The kidnapping issue has emerged in Syria since 2011, as the country witnessed thousands of kidnappings throughout the years of war in several regions for many reasons and motives, occurring by many perpetrators and victims.

These actions aimed to achieve numerous profits, including financial profits by blackmailing and demanding ransoms, which constituted a war economy source. Some of these actions are also included in the framework of taking revenge against one of the conflict parties, a specific sect or region, in addition to other profits, such as exploiting the kidnapped people to exert pressure or negotiate specific terms, and demands that some wish to impose on another party.

Accordingly, it is worth distinguishing between two terms that had different meanings and concepts during the war in Syria, namely, the kidnapped and the detainees. The term “detainees” usually refers to all those detained in the Syrian regime prisons due to accusations related to opposition actions, such as demonstrating, engaging in relief work and carrying weapons; many of them are still unknown until now¹. However, the term “kidnapped” refers to civilians and military personnel kidnapped by different parties, pro-regime and opposition groups, to achieve some of the profits mentioned above².

According to the Syrian government’s perspective, the case of the kidnapped people falls within the tasks’ framework of the Ministry of National Reconciliation, which was established in 2011 to “achieve security, social peace and reconciliation among members of the Syrian community”, and in 2018 it turned into a national reconciliation body³. As a result of its work, very few kidnapped and detainees were released over the years of the war, after negotiations, exchanges and local reconciliations, some of which followed military operations that led to the regime’s restoration of control over regions that were under the authority of the opposition⁴, which made, in an interview with media outlets, the minister of the National Reconciliation to consider working for the kidnapped people as “inoperative and unsuccessful”⁵.

The present paper examines a specific case of kidnappings in Syria, which is the “kidnapped people in Eastern Ghouta”.

CASE CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Eastern Ghouta is located a few kilometers east of the Syrian capital, Damascus, and its area is estimated at almost 110 kilometers of buildings, agricultural lands and orchards. It includes dozens of cities, villages and towns, and its population in 2011 reached almost two million people.

³ More details about the Ministry of Reconciliation, its goals and its activities can be found on the following link on the People’s Assembly of Syria website <https://goo.gl/p3Lch6> and the National Reconciliation Commission Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Syria.Ministry.National.Reconciliation/>

⁴ President Al-Assad and his husband during their meeting with 34 released kidnapped people: The issue of the kidnapped and missing people is a fundamental concern for us as a state, 2017, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=565655>

⁵ Muhammad Manar Hamijo, Haider for Al-Watan: Preparing an adequate file for the missing to be tackled in the upcoming entitlements, 2018, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/138982>

¹ At least 95,000 thousand people have been forcibly disappeared in Syria since March 2018, 2011, <http://sn4hr.org/arabic/10347/30/08/2018/>

² Muhammad Manar Hamijo, Haider for “Al-Watan”: 10 thousand kidnapped people are registered at the Ministry of Reconciliation, preparing an adequate file for the missing people to be dealt with in the upcoming entitlements, 2018, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/138982>

Eastern Ghouta is considered among the first regions where peaceful demonstrations occurred at the beginning of the Syrian movement. Later, it witnessed the formation of the first military group of the “Free Syrian Army”. The Syrian regime lost control over it in 2012. The region became under the authority of multiple military opposition groups, most notably the “Jaysh al-Islam”, “Faylaq al-Rahman” and “Ahrar al-Sham”⁶, before turning into a location of a severe siege on hundreds of thousands of residents after many of them had been displaced.

The heaviest fighting occurred in Ghouta and lasted until April 2018, with the end of the war in the region and the restoration of complete control over it, after vast areas of it were destroyed, and tens of thousands of its residents were killed, injured and displaced.

As a result of the proximity of Eastern Ghouta to Damascus and other residential areas, it remained under the control of the Syrian regime. Over the years, the opposition fighters were able to kidnap and captivate fighters in the Syrian Army, security forces and auxiliary forces. They also kidnapped and detained civilians, most of whom are pro-regime citizens and live in regime-controlled regions, which was a way to exert pressure on it and its popular base, to release thousands of detainees and missing people in its prisons, or as a way of political negotiations that have been ongoing since the beginning of the war in Syria until today, or even just for revenge.

The kidnapped people were held in many prisons located in different regions of Eastern Ghouta⁷. A prominent example of these incidents is Adra Industrial city massacre in December 2013, when fighters from the opposition groups in Ghouta infiltrated the neighboring city of Adra, killed and kidnapped hundreds and drove them to Ghouta’s prisons.

No official statistics are available to indicate the number of detainees in Eastern Ghouta, but some figures indicate that almost 2,500 to 5,000 people were kidnapped from Adra Industrial city only⁸.

It is worth noting that the official statistics about the kidnapped people require the initiative of their families to register their data at the Office of Missing Persons in the Ministry or Authority of National Reconciliation Authority, which also means the absence of any information about the kidnapped people who are not registered in this office.

TRANSFORMATIONAL MOMENTS

During the years of the war, limited numbers of kidnapped people in Eastern Ghouta were released through negotiations and exchanges on a local and small scale⁹, but this case had a great momentum in the recent military campaign launched by the regime against Ghouta in February, March and April 2018 to regain control of the region after almost 6 years of the control of the armed opposition fighters.

⁶ The most prominent armed groups in Eastern Ghouta, 2018, <https://goo.gl/11fi5k>

⁷ Natalia Abdullah, Jaysh al-Islam Prisons in Douma, Eastern Ghouta, 2018, <https://goo.gl/AxqazU>

⁸ The following links can be found in this regard: Expectations for exchanging Adra captives, the highway in front of Douma and Harasta will reopen soon, 2017, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/116766>

Adra Industrialized city kidnapped, official indifference and media blackout, 2015, <https://goo.gl/BE9vqh>

⁹ The following links can be found in this regard: Releasing 9 of the Adra Industrialized city captives, 2015, <https://goo.gl/YWpgj5>

Soha Suleiman, Dam Press is keeping pace with the return of the Adra captives, what did they ask for?, 2016, <https://goo.gl/EcGRSA>

Releasing kidnapped people, including women and children, who were held by armed groups in Eastern Ghouta, 2017, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=684978>



In that campaign, the Syrian regime greatly promoted the negotiations it was conducting with the armed opposition groups in Ghouta, which prioritized the clause related to the kidnapped people, according to its officials’ statements. It also made promises to release thousands of them from the prisons of those groups, in parallel with the implementation of other clauses represented in ending the fighting, breaking the siege and withdrawing the opposition fighters and civilians who wish to enter northern Syria, in addition to releasing detainees from the regime’s prisons.

Those negotiations prompted thousands of families of the kidnapped to arrive from all Syria to the demarcation lines on the borders of Ghouta, hoping to meet their children after years of absence¹⁰.

None of these promises were fulfilled, and only almost two hundred of those kidnapped¹¹ were released, yet the fate of thousands remains unknown to this day.

¹⁰ The following links can be found in this regard:

Shaheedi Ajeeb, a glimmer of hope born in the hearts of the families of the kidnapped with the victory of the army in Eastern Ghouta, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=730940>

At the Harasta crossing, Syrians hope to meet loved ones of the kidnapped, 2018, <https://goo.gl/jyGNeA>

A Syrian scene awaits joy, families of the kidnapped: confidence in the good news after the liberation of Ghouta, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=733602>

The families of the kidnapped: The homeland deserves the sacrifice, and we hold onto hope, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=736650>

¹¹ The following links can be found in this regard:

The Army releases 8 missing people from Eastern Ghouta, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=730282>

The army releases 28 missing people who were being held by terrorist groups in Irbin, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=731350>

The army releases 8 kidnapped people who were being held by terrorist groups in Ghouta, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=732946>

Releasing 5 kidnapped people who were held by the terrorists of Jaysh al-Islam in Douma, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=734635>

Releasing the first group of kidnapped people who were held by the terrorist Jaysh al-Islam in Douma, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=736292>

Douma kidnapped people were released, happy, sad and disappointed, 2018, <https://goo.gl/QQ5g6b>

This reality caused a wave of great anger in the pro-government street, as hundreds of the families of the kidnapped people gathered in the center of the capital, Damascus, for several days in a row, and protested demanding to know the fate of their children if they were alive or not, receive their bodies in the event of their death, and determine the party responsible for everything that happened for them¹².

The Syrian authorities and the local media tried to deny the existence of this high number of kidnapped people, although they had previously confirmed the opposite and blamed the opposition groups under the pretext of providing wrong information on the subject, as an attempt to limit the popular anger that reached an unprecedented level in the pro-Syrian regime street at that time¹³.

CIVIL SOCIETY EFFORTS

The case of the kidnapped people in Eastern Ghouta has been accompanied from the beginning by civil and popular demands and campaigns to raise this case and include it among the negotiating terms between the regime and the opposition.

These campaigns were targeted mainly at the Syrian Ministry of Reconciliation, as it is the main responsible, and to the local mediators who work in reconciliations between the two parties and who have strong connections and relations that sometimes allow them to exert pressure to release the kidnapped or detainees. Many of these campaigns relied on social media platforms, including "Adra Industrialized: internal messages"¹⁴ and the "Day of the Syrian Kidnapped" campaign¹⁵.

Throughout the years of the war, many Syrian organizations working in the field of documentation and accountability have called to allow independent observers or a neutral party with international credibility and respect for unconditional access to all detention centers and prisons in Syria and stressed the need to issue accurate lists identifying detained people by all parties¹⁶. The parties participating in political negotiations inside and outside Syria have also included the clauses related to the missing people in most local and international negotiations, such as the Geneva and Astana negotiations¹⁷.

The transformational moment in the path of the kidnapped people case occurred in the first months of 2018 when the movement on this case had the greatest momentum inside and outside Syria and in various forms.

In Syria, the movement began with appeals on social media and among the families of the kidnapped people to know their children's fate. The appeals escalated into calls to come

to Damascus to emphasize the demands and increase the parties' pressure for the Ghouta negotiations. This movement reached its highest level in the first week of April 2018, when the families of the kidnapped people demonstrated in the center of Damascus and closed some roads, which was an incident that can be considered unprecedented in the country in terms of its implementation by the pro-Syrian regime popular base. Various media outlets were prevented from covering it, and their news was limited to some leaked pictures, videos and interviews, in which the families of the kidnapped people appear in some of them with great anger and rage.

This movement was not organized but random. It was informal in organizing the people, those affected and their movements, the parties to which they went as the parties concerned with resolving their case. Social networking platforms, foremost among them Facebook, were the main platforms for the movement and verbal communication among people of different geographies of their presence in the various Syrian governorates.

In an interview with the mother of one of the kidnapped, she reported that she came from the coastal city of Jableh to Damascus and lay down in the street for four consecutive nights because she heard from relatives who had read on Facebook that her kidnapped son would return, without her having any other detail related the parties that called for the action or the parties to be contacted to address the problem.

However, outside Syria, the movement consisted of appeals and calls sent by many civil society organizations to the opposition groups to demand the release of the kidnapped and reveal their fate, as well as to the negotiating parties to reach an optimal solution to the case of Eastern Ghouta, provided that it includes ending the case of the kidnapped and uncovering their fate.

POLITICAL RESULTS

The efforts of civil society in the case of the kidnapped people in Eastern Ghouta failed in achieving their goal of releasing them or revealing their fate, which remained unknown even after the final military settlement in Ghouta.

The reasons of failure and deficiencies can be summarized in the following points:

- According to the pro-regime civil and local community, the kidnapped people in Ghouta are considered one of the rare cases that this community carried out with a civil movement. Hence, it was not effectively organized to achieve the desired goal. It did not have the essential mechanisms to put pressure on the Syrian regime to implement its demands and release the kidnapped people, or even, at least, to know their fate, which would prevent them from being exposed to blackmail, hoping to access any information about them. The movements of the civil society in Ghouta were limited to some gatherings, appeals and demands, particularly on social media, while the campaigns and strategies followed were characterized by being random and completely improvised. To this day, this pro-Syrian regime civil society in several regions of the country remains too weak to put pressure on the regime¹⁸.

12 The families of the kidnapped people, to Al-Thawra newspaper: When our children become free from terrorism, a new dawn breaks in Syria's future, 2018, <https://goo.gl/WZwBKm>

13 The following links can be found in this regard: The entire release of the kidnapped people by the Jaysh al-Islam terrorists Douma, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=736682>
Releasing the kidnapped people is not only a humanitarian issue but also a national one, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=737032>

14 Facebook page link: <https://www.facebook.com/free.addra/>

15 Ramah Zwan, A Day for the Syrian Kidnapped, A popular campaign that demands the kidnapped and revives hopes for their cause, 2018, <https://goo.gl/51o5Zo>

16 Letter issued by Syrian organizations working in the field of documentation, accountability and transitional justice, 2016, <https://goo.gl/oXVaDz>

17 The following links can be found in this regard: The Syria Working Group holds its first meeting in Geneva, 2012, <https://goo.gl/KSnAuz>

De Mistura imminent agreement regarding Syrian detainees, 2017, <https://goo.gl/wLV22X>
Nader Abdul-Raouf, The 12 De Mistura Principles Amending the Syrian Settlement, 2017, <https://goo.gl/CqK5hZ>

The working group for the release of detainees in Syria meets today in the framework of the Astana negotiations, 2018, <https://goo.gl/Wutpgc>

18 Interviews many families of kidnapped people in Damascus

- The absence of any civil, human rights or even political party on both sides of the conflict capable of putting pressure on the Syrian regime or the armed groups to implement specific humanitarian demands. That reflected on the stalemate of the missing terms during the political negotiations related to Syria¹⁹. In this context, a report issued by the Syrian Network for Human Rights in November 2017 confirms that "almost no progress has been made in the negotiations on the case of the missing people in Syria. This case is almost the only dilemma in which there has been no significant progress during the negotiations"²⁰.
- The reflection of the division within the opposition civil society organizations on this case. Some of these organizations refused to put pressure on the armed groups to reveal the kidnapped people's fate. Yet, others only cared about the missing people who were affiliated with a certain party and demanded the reveal of one group's fate at the expense of another²¹. This division was evident during the last battle in Ghouta and the return of the case of its kidnapped people to light. According to some organizations, some priorities were more important than the kidnapped people's case, such as focusing on sending humanitarian aid and evacuating civilians from Ghouta during the last battle²². In fact, other organizations have not included this case in their agenda at all, either in line with certain political pressures, or to avoid a clash with interests linked to specific opposition military groups, or because this issue does not fall within the scope of their competence, or because they do not possess the practical and material capabilities to tackle it.
- In general, the kidnapped and forcibly missing people have not been a priority during the war in Syria, whether for many civil society organizations of all sects, or those involved in political negotiations. In fact, civil society workers are preoccupied with priorities they find more urgent, such as relief or development projects, whose implementation is usually easier and less problematic than engaging in other issues such as enforced disappearance, thus ensuring the continuity of their work. As for political negotiations, this case and other humanitarian cases have turned into a mere political case that can be exploited by both parties to achieve specific goals without considering its dimensions or those affected by it.
- Currently, the missing people's case is one of the biggest human tragedies in Syria, as thousands of families are waiting, yet in vain, to know the fate of their children, and it does not seem that this case will bring any attention in the foreseeable future. Many activists and human rights defenders feel very disappointed in this regard, as they consider that: "The case of the kidnapped people was one of our biggest disappointments when the military operation in Eastern Ghouta ended. Our appeals for the release of detainees in the regime's prisons had failed. We were not able to put pressure on any of the conflict parties. Unfortunately, today we, as activists and human rights defenders, are weaker than that"²³.

CONCLUSION

Although the case of the kidnapped people in Eastern Ghouta is being forgotten and is no longer bringing any attention, it is essential for civil society organizations to re-make all possible efforts to uncover the fate of thousands of disappeared people by accurately documenting the names of all the disappeared people, emphasizing the priority and importance of this case, and practicing all possible pressure on the parties of the negotiations to include the forcibly disappeared people on all the conflict parties without exception.



¹⁹ The Peace Conference ended and generated food and medical aid, 2014, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/26011>

²⁰ The full report can be found on the following link: <https://goo.gl/RJCKCX>

²¹ Ghouta media ask the armed groups to release the prisoners ahead of Eid, 2017, <https://goo.gl/H9xvAR>

²² Interview with Mutassim Al-Sioufi, Executive Director of The Day After Organization, on December 2018 ,16.

²³ Interview with activist lawyer in the defense of detainees in Damascus on December 2018 ,15.

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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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