

The Populations of Deir Ezzor and Conflict Outbids

A Brief Report on Extortion Acts Practiced by Parties to Conflict in Deir Ezzor

INTRODUCTION

From an administrative and military perspective, Deir Ezzor province is divided into two parts; the first one is located in the south of the Euphrates River, which is known in media outlets as West of Euphrates. This part includes the main three cities; Deir Ezzor, Al Mayadin, and Al Boukmal, along with the subdistricts and towns. This part is controlled by the Syrian government forces. There is a presence for the Russian forces, local militias such as tribes' forces, and foreign militias like Liwa Al Qudus. On the other hand, the second part is controlled by Syria Democratic Forces, and located in the north of the Euphrates river, which is also known as East of Euphrates, and includes the sub-districts of Al Kasra, Al Bsaira, Theeban, and Hajeen.

Similarly, the Syrian authorities launched what they called "[reconciliations](#)" to facilitate the returning of the IDPs and refugees, especially those who are opponents for the government. The reconciliation is a pledge to "not to return to riot, sabotage, terrorism, no assaults on public or private property, no assaults on army or security forces, and not to use weapons". These reconciliations formed an entry to hundreds of people to return to their homes, yet the majority of the IDPs are hesitant to return, where some reject it at all for multiple [reasons](#) no least the distrust in Syrian security apparatuses, who have committed and still committing grave [violations](#) during war.

There are security checkpoints in the areas held by the Syrian government forces. These checkpoints are run by the security branches and military forces present in Deir Ezzor such as the Fourth Brigade, Republican Guard, and [National Defense](#). These forces have been and still committing violations against civilians, including the returnees as per reconciliations. There are arbitrary detention, extortion, threats, and looting. All of these violations form an obstacle in the way back and force the IDPs to stay in their displacement areas despite the risks they face, especially in the light of military actions in Idlib province where there are displaced families from Deir Ezzor. Absence of protection guarantees for returnees from any imminent violations is decreasing the returning rejection.

On the other hand, the intelligence, military, and security apparatuses of SDF are exerting pressure on IDPs in the camps in order to get money from them. The charge of dealing with military groups or groups backed by Turkey or working with "Islamic State" group are charges for extortion in case of objecting the behavior of the abovementioned parties.

This report observes paying huge funds to the Syrian security apparatuses and officials of intelligence, counterterrorism, and public security that are affiliated with SDF in return to release detainees or stop threatening or returning of valuable stolen properties.

This report sheds the light on extortion acts that are practiced by controlling forces in Deir Ezzor. JFL field research interviewed 12 persons who were exposed to different types of extortion.

SYSTEMATIC ACTS

SYRIAN GOVERNMENT HELD AREAS

Extortion acts practiced by members of Syrian security and military forces are systematic ones as it is noted that all acts are alike according to the testimonies collected by JFL from the witnesses.

“A security apparatus affiliated to Syrian authorities arrested me and moved me to Damascus branch as I was required to pay millions of pounds. I was required by a governmental party during my detention. I was not released until I paid the entire sum as they threatened me to keep me arrested if I do not pay. They know that I have money that I earned during years of work. They ordered me to give them major part of it”, according to one of the witnesses. It is noted that despite the detention was by a security party, yet it was instructed by a ministry party in order to cover a shortfall of one of the ministries.

The witness A.G works in cars trading. One of the militias members told him to go to the [Military Security](#) branch in Deir Ezzor city. The hesitant witness was afraid from detention. Yet, based on guarantees of the member that he is not going to be arrested, decided to go. “When I entered the branch building, I was arrested. Hours later, I was moved to Philistine¹ branch in Damascus. I remained there for a month, where no one beaten me. Then, I was moved to Adra central jail as I was released. Then I learned that my family had to pay four million SYP to one of the branch officials to guarantee my release”. A.G was accused to sell a car to an IS member during IS control on Deir Ezzor and Al Raqqa. Despite that he confirmed that he does not know the background of all of his customers, yet he remained arrested. A.G does not like to leave Syria despite his family advice. He believes that he was arrested for sake of money, and he will not be arrested again as he paid the required sum.

The fourth brigade members are positioned on the bank of Euphrates river in Al Mayadin city. They get money in return to anything enters the Syrian government held areas from the areas of the north of the river.

¹ Philistine branch, or branch 235, is a detention center affiliated with Military Intelligence Apparatus and based in Damascus.

The witness H.S. works in commercial sector. He decided to return to Syrian government held areas following defeat of IS. He was not wanted to any security party. He assumed that his return will be easy. He wanted to enter his vehicle. This requires paying money to the brigade members. He says “In mid-2018, I made a deal with one of the militias members to enter my vehicle at a reasonable sum, and this what happened. On the next day, the fourth brigade members stormed my house and ordered me to pay a high sum as my vehicle did not pass throughout their checkpoints. I had no such sum. One of the members ordered me to open the vehicle. I found weapons inside my vehicle. He ordered to arrest me despite the fact that I did not carry one of those weapons inside my vehicle. I recognized them by the badges they put on their shoulders as the Fourth Brigade was written on them”. The witness asked them to wait until the morning of the next day to pay the sum. He communicated with one of the local figures for mediation. The sum was decreased, and the witness paid commission for the mediator.

Construction contractors in government held areas are exposed to the extortion of security branches’ economic offices as they are forced to pay in return for not revealing old cases, where these cases are often fake ones. The most extorting parties are the political and military security branches.

Some of the IDPs, especially the elderly who have not been involved in any civil, political, or military activities since 2011, head to Damascus for medical treatment. Some of them complete their journey peacefully, whereas other do not. The witness M.Z. went from the opposition “National Army Forces” held areas to Damascus in September 2019 as he suffered from bad health condition. He says “The Air Force Intelligence members stormed the house I resided in. I was accused for being engaged in peaceful protests in 2011. I was moved to Philistine branch. Thirteen days later, I was moved to Adra jail despite that no questioning sessions were held. Three days later, I was sent to a judge where he released me. When I exited the jail, I found my relatives outside as they told me that they paid five million SYP to one official to release me”. The witness confirmed that he was not tortured in the branch, when he was asking the prison guard, he was answered that “You are supported by high rank person, and you have to be grateful that we did not torture you”.

The families returning to the government held areas desire to normalize their life following long years of displacement, and to be away from any conflict with the authorities. The witness H.Y. says “One of my relatives returned to Deir Ezzor in 2018. He worked on having a license for a

pistol that he owned. He reached out to a member of the military security for this purpose and he was promised to have positive response. On the next day, he was arrested by the military security members and then moved to Philistine branch in Damascus by the charge of having a weapon for the terrorists. He was released after paying two million SYP under sponsorship of one of the senior merchants who has links to the government”.

The witness Abu Walid, a pseudonym, is an IDP from Al Boukmal city who resided in Al Bab city. He was detained in Philistine branch where he was exposed to the most severe forms of torture and verbal humiliation as he was arrested by the charge of dealing with “IS” group. He says “Following the control of the government forces on Deir Ezzor areas, I returned to my hometown. Only five days later, I was arrested by the military security forces, then I was moved to Philistine branch in Damascus, where I remained there for forty-five days. Then, I was moved to Adra central jail as one of the female lawyers intervened to release me after being paid with about three million SYP by one of my relatives. The sum was including her commission and the fees of the judge who will be questioning me, as she said”.

SYRIA DEMOCRATIC FORCES HELD AREAS

The issue of extortion against civilians forms one of countless problems of the security and military apparatuses affiliated to the Autonomous Administration institutions. The populations do not feel safe for their works and funds. Charges such as dealing with Turkish-backed opposition groups or “IS” group are the most dangerous ones against any person. Accordingly,

there is a need for intervention either by figures, paying funds, or reaching out to security apparatuses officials to release the accused as the body responsible for justice cannot impose or implement its provisions. This is the feature of all civil institutions located in east of the Euphrates river.

SDF policy of the arbitrary arrest and release based on the abovementioned reasons led to release previous members of “IS” who participated in security and military actions. Their release was in exchange of funds, or as a response for a local mediation effort that the military leadership sees it necessary to meet.

The witness A.B. who resides in Al Kasra sub-district told JFL researcher that one of his friends told him that an intelligence report, or as locally called Takmilat, included his name and other names by the charge of dealing with Syrian opposition in the north of Syria; “Three month ago, the intelligence member who reported him, asked him to pay \$1000 in exchange for shredding the report. I refused to pay anything and made use of a personal relation with one of the Public Security apparatus members. One of my relatives paid \$500 to get rid of the same charge recently”.

A teacher from one of the villages in the western countryside of Deir Ezzor was teaching the neighborhood children during the control of “IS” group. He was accused by SDF counter-terrorism apparatus to deal with “IS” group. He was required to attend a questioning session. The witness says “I did not teach ISIS curriculum; I only taught the neighborhood children to make minimum wage. I have never dealt with the group or its members. I did not attend the questioning session as I know that I will be arrested, and this will negatively impact my work. One of the influential persons in the public security apparatus intervened after I paid \$700”.

IDPs’ camps in Deir Ezzor are out of the most attracting places for the security and military members who practice extortion and exploit the needs of IDPs. One of the displaced females, who was a wife of a foreign fighter within “IS” group, was exploited by an intelligence member. She says “He asked me for illegal affair as he got my phone number. I changed my number many times, but without any result. Then, he started asking me to pay him money and threatening me that he will take my children. I have no idea how to get rid of this situation. I am thinking of going away”.

Abu Imad, a pseudonym, left Al Raqqa city due to the threats he received from SDF intelligence members after he tried to get his stolen vehicle back from one of them. He says “As I was sure about the identity of the thief who stole my vehicle, who was an intelligence member, I submitted an official complaint. They asked me to pay \$5000 to get my vehicle back. I rejected to do so. I asked my friends, some of them are notables and other were members of security apparatuses, to intervene, but it was fruitless. I was threatened to kidnap my children despite the fact that I waived my vehicle and told them that I will never seek for getting it back, but it was also fruitless. Then, I realized that they are after my funds. I decided to leave the city for my own and my family’s safety.

CONCLUSION

In the Syrian government held areas, the chain of extortion starts from the lowest rank of security apparatus, Mukhtar, a businessman linked with security branch or a member of military group. Most of cases documented by JFL are cases of extortion by military security branch, other cases by State Security, Air Force Intelligence, and Fourth Brigade branches. Philistine branch is a central station for most of the cases. No decision is made to move the detainee to a civil prison

until huge funds are paid. The officials who receive the funds do not reveal their names. They are known with nicknames, that are changeable on periodic basis.

The intervention of a governmental party in one of the “detention for extortion” cases may indicate that the extortion acts turned into a means by many state institutions, military or civil ones, to get funds and cover the financial shortfall in some ministries.

In the Syrian government held areas, everyone is exposed to the risk of extortion regardless of their attitudes or political backgrounds. There are no guarantees for not to be a victim of extortion one more time. This puts civilians between the choice of remaining in these areas and being exposed to extortion, or to be displaced with an unknown fate.

In SDF held areas, the members of intelligence, public security, and counterterrorism often practice acts of extortion directly. Sometimes they response to some mediation efforts, but usually they do not pay attention to these efforts. In the light of decreasing level of security, and the involvement of groups with affiliation to the controlling forces in acts that endanger the civilians’ funds and safety, the civilians’ options are too limited; it is difficult to move to the government held areas. The areas in the north, that are controlled by the National Army, are not stable. Thus, the best of their bad options is to stay in their areas.