

# Olive Branch: Documentation of 633 Arrests in Afrin During 2022



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## Olive Branch: The Documentation of 633 Arrests in Afrin During 2022

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## Introduction:

During 2022, Hevesti-Synergy Association for Victims documented the arbitrary arrest of at least 633 people, including 40 women and 21 children, in Syria's Kurdish region of Afrin, at the hands of Turkish forces and factions of the Turkish-backed opposition Syrian National Army (SNA).

Three detainees were brutally tortured to death in SNA's prisons. Only 208 persons out of the total toll of the detainees were released, including 13 women and 11 children while the fate of 422 persons, among them 27 women and 10 children, remains unaccounted for.

The majority of arbitrary detentions and deprivation of liberty in Afrin area were conducted against the Kurdish civilians. The SNA's fighters either wished to blackmail families of the detainees to get ransoms or to intimidate the civilians into leaving the area to seize their possessions and properties.

The majority of the civilians were arrested for alleged former links to the Autonomous Administration while others were arrested only for being Kurdish. The arrestees were denied retaining lawyers, and in some incidents, were interrogated by Turkish officials with the assist of interpreters.

The testimonies collected by Hevesti-Synergy indicated that Turkish forces and officials were regularly present in SNA's detention centers, including in both the Military Police headquarter and Hawar Kilis prison; two places where detainees were subject to ill-treatment. Three former detainees said that Turkish officials were present during interrogation sessions where torture had been used.

In most of the cases documented by Hevesti-Synergy, civilians were held in prisons run by the Military Police or in the city, Afrin Central Prison, [Hawar Kilis](#) prison, Sijin al-Ma'sara (al-Ma'sara prison) located in [Azaz](#) area in the north countryside of Aleppo, and in prisons run by the same factions that arrested them where they were kept in dire conditions. Others were taken to an anonymous place.

Inside detention centers and during interrogation, the civilians described being severely beaten and tortured, repeatedly deprived of food and water, and interrogated about their ethnic/national affiliation. Hevesti-Synergy documented joint arrests carried out by the SNA's Military Police and Turkish security and intelligence forces in Afrin.

Upon kidnapping, the victims, mostly Kurds, were usually taken to the headquarter of the specific group that conducted the arrest in Afrin or in its outskirts/towns, and victims were often confiscated of their property or livestock. Threats and extortions continued even after their release.

Different factions kidnapped the same civilians several times. Some were released after paying financial ransoms, however, others were missing or found dead days after their abduction. For instance, on August 8, 2022, the 18-year-old Abdulrahman al-Izzo's body was found dumped by the river in Afrin city only a day following his abduction by some gunmen. Security forces affiliated with the SNA, or the Turkish forces has yet to give any details concerning circumstances of the crime.

The SNA's factions deliberately concealed many detainees forcibly. When the detainees' families contacted the SNA's fighters asking about the whereabouts of their loved ones, they were often given no information, or they were threatened and extorted.

Detention of civilians, primarily the Kurds and Yezidis, by the SNA was accompanied by other practices like systematic confiscation of the victims' possessions, extortion, and beating, which ultimately forced many to leave their homes. Hevdesti-Synergy documented tens of cases of arbitrary arrests in Afrin, the main purpose of which was to forcibly displace victims.

**Detention has multi-faceted impacts on men, women and children including both physical and mental harm. Most of the former detainees described suffering from chronic physical pain resulting from brutal torture they sustained in prisons and unhealthy conditions they experienced inside detention facilities, let alone suffering headaches and post-traumatic stress disorder.**

Hundreds of families of those forcibly disappeared by the SNA in Afrin since its occupation in "Olive Branch" operation in 2018 are still suffering a general feeling of anguish, hardship, and confusion as protection was not provided to them and they were left to manage their affairs alone. Many families tirelessly worked to obtain information about their missing ones but to no avail.

### **Legal Liability:**

The SNA violated detainees' rights in accordance with international legal obligations. Various factions affiliated with the SNA have arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals and practiced cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment towards the detainees and the forcibly disappeared, as well as their families in various ways. One way is the deliberate concealment of the fate and whereabouts of the detainees and the disappeared persons in violation to the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Fundamental Principles of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the effective removal of these persons from the protection of the law,

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<sup>1</sup> ICRC Rule 98. Enforced disappearance are also characterized as a composite war crime by ICRC; See Rule 156.

if protection is found originally, and the failure to establish their fate constitutes a violation to the right to life<sup>2</sup>.

In the light of the continuous documented use of torture against detainees and the failure of the factions' commanders as well as leaders of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)/the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) to take effective steps to prevent such practices, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the SNA may be practicing such conduct in pursuance of an organizational policy. Therefore, such conduct may be part of a systematic attack against the detainees in its custody, amounting to a crime against humanity; the crime of torture.

The SNA conducted no investigations in its forces' practices, which continue to arrest civilians ensuing them forcibly disappeared persons and violating their rights, nor did the Turkish government that has effective command and control on these forces to change their arbitrary conduct. On the contrary, it appears in some cases that the Turkish government was involved as a partner in committing such violations.

Therefore, the Turkish military commanders are held criminally responsible for violations committed by these parties [the SNA forces] in instances where the Turkish leaders knew or should have known about such crimes or failed to take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent their commission.<sup>3</sup>

As an occupying power, Turkish authorities must ensure that their own officials and those under their command in the SNA do not arbitrarily detain or mistreat anyone. The Turkish authorities are also obliged to investigate alleged violations and ensure that those responsible are appropriately punished.

### **Arbitrary Arrest as A Systematic Policy:**

As the factions of the opposition SNA expanded control on Afrin since its occupation by Turkey in 2018, arbitrary detention and arrests became widespread, alongside other practices, such as systematic confiscation of the victim's property, extortion and beating and even killing under torture.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of victims of arbitrary arrests in Afrin during 2022 belonged to specific religion or ethnic minority groups. The SNA's factions subjected families of the detained to extortion which confirm that such conduct is practiced systematically with a view to push the

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<sup>2</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, general comment no. 36 (2018), para 58.

<sup>3</sup> Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court, Article 28.

<sup>4</sup> For more, read the [report](#) published by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic released in February 2021, specifically para 41, document no (A/HRC/46/55). (Last accessed: January 6, 2023)

indigenous population, of the Kurds and the Yezidis origin, to flee the area and the SNA's fighters could seize their properties.

The most cases of arrests and forcibly disappearance in 2022 in Afrin were felt in August, as 112 arrest cases, including eight women and 11 children were documented. 90 other cases took place in September while the least cases were recorded in October, in which 23 persons were arrested.

The biggest toll of arbitrary arrests was in the third quarter of 2022 (July, August, September) as 278 arrests documented, among them 24 women and 18 children. 137 arrests took place in the first quarter (January, February and March). In the second quarter (April, May and June), 128 cases of arrests took place, and 90 cases were conducted in the fourth quarter (October, November and December).

Forces of the Military Police were responsible for a third of arbitrary arrests in Afrin in 2022, as it conducted 203 arrests out of the total toll documented by Hevdesti-Synergy. The Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham carried out 109 arrests while the Turkish intelligence forces were responsible for 89 cases in Afrin and its outskirts.

Regarding the other factions that implemented the arrests: the Civil Police 57 cases, the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya 41 cases, the 13<sup>th</sup> Division 29 cases, The al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division 23 cases, Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) 16 cases, the terrorist- designated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)/formerly al-Nura Front carried out 7 arrests. Hevdesti-Synergy could not precisely identify the factions responsible for other cases of arrests in Afrin.

The following table illustrates the arbitrary arrests in Afrin during 2022 according to Hevdesti-Synergy Association for Victims:

Month	Total Toll Of The Arrests	Men	Women	Children	Released	Killed Under Torture	Still Detained
January	45	43	2	0	23	1	21
February	38	37	1	0	26	1	11
March	54	49	4	1	40	0	14
April	41	39	1	1	28	0	13
May	34	32	2	0	23	0	11
June	53	50	2	1	19	0	34
July	76	70	6	0	5	0	71

August	112	93	8	11	18	0	94
September	90	73	10	7	14	0	76
October	23	23	0	0	7	0	16
November	25	24	1	0	1	0	24
December	42	39	3	0	4	1	37
<b>Sum</b>	<b>633</b>	<b>572</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>422</b>

Hevdesti-Synergy Association relied in its documentation process on the information collected in its database provided by a network of field researchers scattered in the region, and on accounts they obtained from local sources and eyewitnesses. Furthermore, it verified the information from publicly available sources (open sources).

Hevdesti-Synergy Association notes that violations committed by Turkey and the SNA-affiliated factions in Afrin are far more than what have been documented and verified by name, surname, place and date of the detention as the Association believes that the actual number of arrest cases is significantly higher than the figure given in this statistic report.

### **Killing in Custody:**

Hevdesti-Synergy documented the death of at least three persons due to torture during imprisonment in detention centers run by factions affiliated to the opposition SNA in Afrin in 2022, among them a Kurdish lawyer who was killed only three days after being arbitrarily arrested right in front of his house in the city.

On December 19, 2022, a joint patrol of the SNA fighters and Turkish forces arbitrarily arrested the lawyer Luqman Hamid Hanan, 45, right in front of his house located in al-Mahmoudiya neighborhood in Afrin at the sight of his eldest daughter, known as “Revin”. The lawyer went out to buy sweets for his daughter’s ninth birthday.

Only three days later, his family learned that their son had lost his life in the military hospital in Afrin as his health condition deteriorated due to torture in a detention center run by the SNA. The family recovered the body and posted photos of the lawyer bearing signs of torture on his body.

The victim, married and a father of three, was previously arrested twice by the SNA which set him free after his family paid financial ransoms each time for his release.

Hevdesti-Synergy interviewed the victim’s brother, known as “Jamil Hanan”, who narrated circumstance of the arrest and the charges that his brother faced. He said:



**“My brother was arrested on the charge of commenting on a post about the Istanbul explosion on social media as well as other charges like alleged dealing with the Autonomous Administration and helping the Kurds local population to restore their properties that were dispossessed by factions affiliated to the Syrian opposition SNA's.”**

The victim's family attempted to follow the case and learn the whereabouts of the lawyer and even resorted to mediators in the city to intervene and assist to release him for a ransom, as usual, but they received a sudden and shocking phone call. The witness narrated:

**“For three days, we knew nothing about my brother's fate and whereabouts, until my other brother, known as Siyamand Hanan received a phone call from the military hospital run by the SNA in Afrin asking him to visit the hospital as soon as possible to recover the body of his deceased brother who died after he was exposed to a bad heart attack in custody.”**

The next morning, the victim's family and relatives headed to the Afrin Military Hospital to recognize and recover the body. The witness detailed to Hevdesti-Synergy:

**“My family spoke to the doctors who checked my brother. The doctors said he died due to an acute heart attack in custody, as he did not have his own medication. The doctors told the same story to the media, even to Orient TV channel that was present there. The doctors' aim was to cover up the crime which is killing my brother under torture and keeping him in bad detention conditions.”**







Images no (1) and (2) showing the body of the victim "Luqman Hanan" while handing it over to his family in Afrin. Photo credit: the victim's family

Following the murder of the lawyer, Afrin Military Hospital issued a medical report on December 22, 2022 titled “a verification report on the transfer and examination of the body of the deceased Luqman Hanan, the son of Hamid and Khadija” in which they denied any marks of torture, beatings, fractures, dislocations, or the exit of smell or any secretion of a toxic substance out of the victim’s mouth or nose. The report added that the death occurred as the victim’s heart and breath stopped due to myocardial infarction and there was no need for autopsy. The family denied the verification report altogether and confirmed its

own son was killed under torture and posted photos of him bearing marks of torture on his body.

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<p>محرر انتقال وكشف على جثة الماتو في لقمان حنان بن حميد وخديجة كولر</p> <p>بناءً على الاتصال الرافق الوارد اليه قسم الأمن الجاني بتاريخ ١٤/١٠/٢٠٢٢ والمتضمن وجود جثة في براو المسجون المكون في عوينة وعليه فقد انتقلت أنا محمد ابو قاصي المتأوب في عدلية عوينة مرافقني المساء الذي كنا خارج على والطبيب الشرعي محمد سدر بواسطة الشرطة في هذا اليوم الخميس ١٤/١٠/٢٠٢٢ الساعة العاشرة والنصف صباحاً وبوصولنا الى مكان وجود الجثة في المسجون المكون في عوينة وبوصولنا الى غرفة البراء شاهدنا جثة رجل في العقد الخامس من العمر أو صافحة طويل القامة خفيف البنية ملتحى بشكل خفيف شعره خفيف من الأفاع فيه نياض خفيف يرتدي بيجامة ملتحى لوناً قهوي واسود وكيكوت لون اسود حامي القديسين وبالكشف شاهدنا آثار زرقه رومية على الوجه الأيمن واليد اليمنى والبطن ولدى تقليب الجثة شاهدنا آثار زرقه رومية أكثر من الموصوفة سابقاً في منطقة الظهر والساقيين والفخذين ويوجد آثار تبرز على اللباس الداخلي صامد على إفتلات ممرات قبل الوفاة وحسب لم يبق فائدة ذكر سوى ما شاهدناه وحده شاهدنا وحنا ثم رافقنا الطبيب الشرعي المرحمة الموكلة اليه ليبين أسباب الوفاة وزرقة وقوعها وقوضتها بتسريح الجثة إذا لزم الأمر وبه تخليفه اليه القانون ليحسب حالنا فأجابني بأن الجثة وجثراً بالأيدي يبين نفس المعلومات السابقة المذكورة أملاً دون وجود آثار تعذيب أو إضرار أو كسور الطبيب الشرعي القاضي</p>



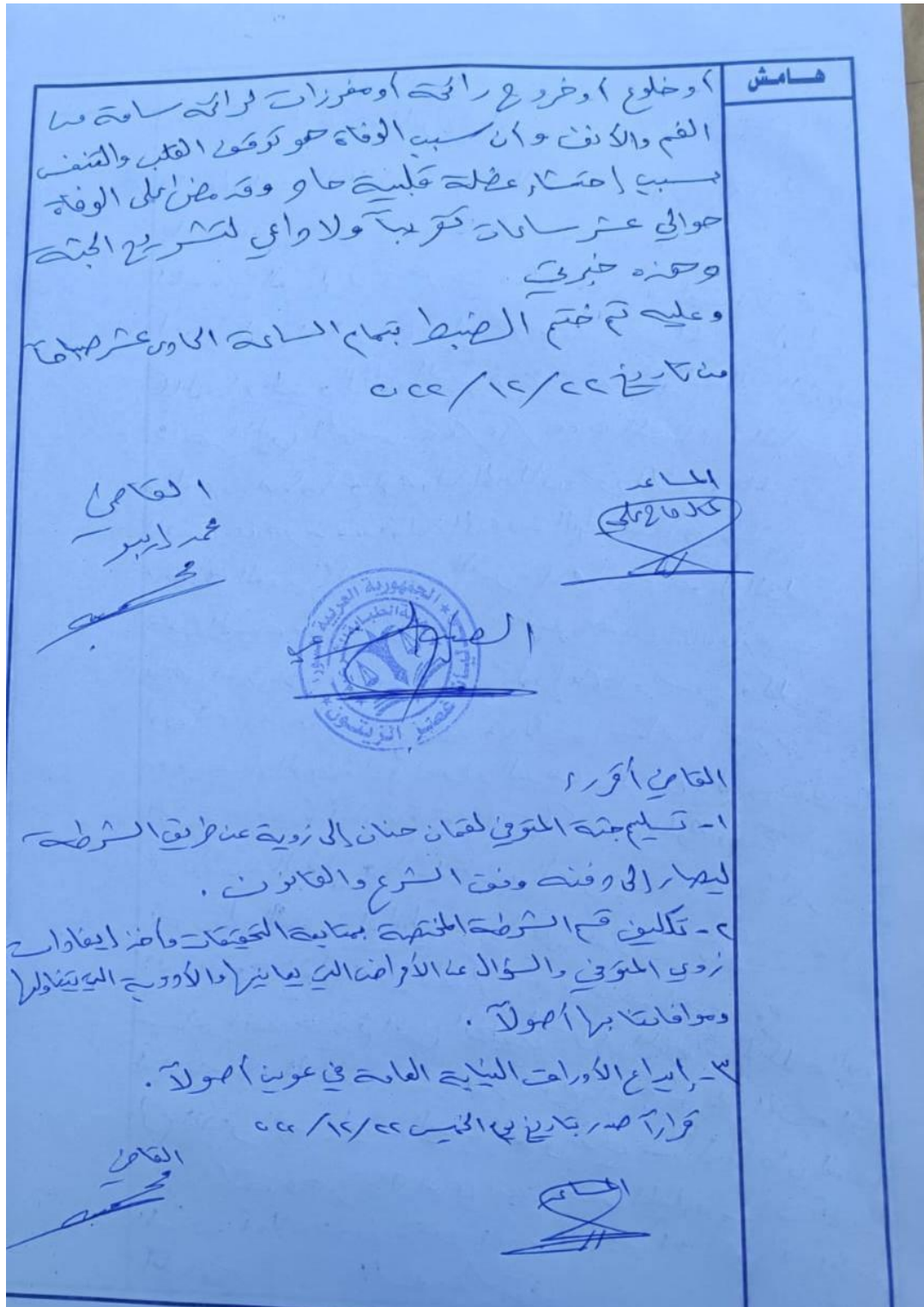


Image no (3) (4) showing the medical report/verification report of examination of the body of the deceased "Luqman Hanan", released by Afrin Military Hospital run by the SNA. Photo credit: social media platforms.

The victim was buried in the cemetery of Zaydiya village that belongs to Afrin city. The family said it avoided burying him in his hometown in Haj Qasim village that administratively

follows Maabatli/Mabeta district because it was a very long way and that plenty of notorious checkpoints were installed on the way which occasionally mistreat the indigenous people of Afrin.

On February 25, 2022, Syrian activists posted on social media photos of a dead person that shows signs of brutal torture. It was learned later that the photos belonged to a victim identified as Abdulrazaq Trad al-Obaid al-Nuaimi, who was detained and tortured in one of the security centers of al-Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham in Afrin<sup>5</sup>, which resulted in his death.

al-Nuaimi, a displaced person from Hama governorate who settled in Afrin, was arrested the day before. On February 24, 2022, members of al-Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham faction arrested him while he was on his way from home in Celemê/Jelemah village to his office in Jindires town. A member of al-Sham Legion used the victim's phone and called one of al-Nuaimi's family member saying that they had arrested him and that he was being interrogated, and he would be released soon.

al-Sham Legion had held al-Nuaimi in one of its [centers](#)<sup>6</sup> near the archaeological Tell Jindires (Jindires Hilltop). The center is originally a house belonging to one of the area's indigenous residents known as "Khojah Ziebee". The house was seized during the Turkish operation "Olive Branch" in 2018.

At dawn of Friday, February 24, al-Sham Legion delivered the body of the victim, with marks of torture, to the Military Police of the SNA and hours later informed the victim's family of his murder and handed them the body.

Photos of the body went viral on social media, showing clear signs of torture, mostly on the thighs, back and legs, in addition to bruises and traces of shackles around the wrists and feet. In a circulated voice clip, a relative of the victim said that the forensic report confirmed that the victim was electrocuted on his genitals and anus, which caused his death.

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<sup>5</sup> For more, read the [report](#): Afrin: Al-Sham Legion Tortured a Civilian to Death, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), March 31, 2022. (Last accessed: January 6, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Coordinates: 36.38777965722025, 36.69010468861586



Image no (5) showing marks of torture on the back of the victim Abdulrazaq Trad al-Obaid al-Nuaimi. Photo credit: social media platforms



Image no (6) showing marks of torture on the left thigh of the victim Abdulrazaq Trad al-Obaid al-Nuaimi. Photo credit: social media platforms





Image no (7) showing marks of torture on the bottom of the feet of the victim Abdulrazaq Trad al-Obaid al-Nuaimi. Photo credit: social media platforms



Image no (8) showing marks of torture on the legs/right thigh of the victim Abdulrazaq Trad al-Obaid al-Nuaimi. Photo credit: social media platforms.



On the same day, February 25, 2022, al-Sham Legion published a statement confessing to the torture and killing of al-Nuaimi in a detention center affiliated with the faction's security administration. The faction stressed that they handed over the body of the victim to his family with marks of torture. The factions added that "we decry the practice, and we have suspended the interrogation committee and the members in charge of the detention center where the crime occurred. They were delivered to the military judiciary in Afrin for investigation and holding the perpetrators accountable to ensure achieving full justice in an impartial independent judiciary."

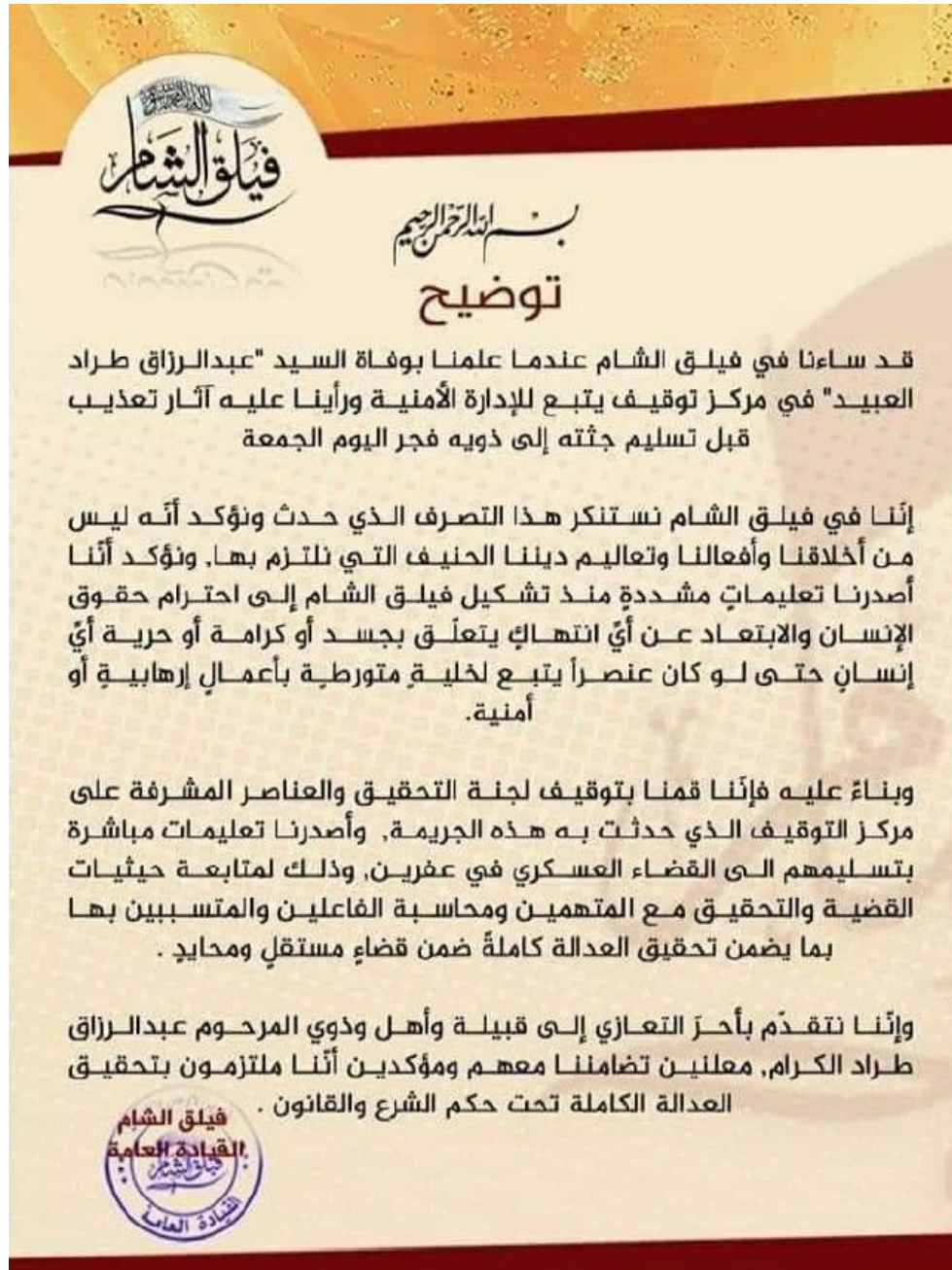


Image no (9) showing a copy of the statement published by al-Sham Legion concerning the killing of Abdulrazaq Trad al-Obaid al-Nuaimi in which it said the faction delivered the perpetrators to the judiciary.

In late January 2022, Rezan Muhammed Khalil [lost](#) his life in a hospital in Turkey's Rihaniya city. Khalil, who hailed from the village of Çeqelê/Jaqla/ Çeqelê Foqani/ of Shaykh al-Hadid/Şiyê district in Afrin countryside, was moved to Turkey from Afrin Military Hospital on January 24 due to cerebral hemorrhage as he was struck on the head with a hard object in a detention center run by Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East faction in the middle of Afrin city<sup>7</sup>.

Members of Ahrar al-Sharqiya arrested Rezan in Afrin when he visited the faction headquarter located in Velat Street in Afrin city center to inquire about the fate of his nephew Azad Ismat Khalil who was detained by the same faction in the first week of January 2022. Rezan was kept for five days in custody where he was brutally beaten and tortured to death.

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<sup>7</sup> For more, read the [report](#): Afrin: Ahrar al-Sharqiya Tortures A Civilian to Death, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), March 1, 2022. (Last accessed: January 6, 2023).



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**Hevdestî - Synergy Association for Victims, is a non-governmental, non-profit organization, aimed at educating and providing a platform and a space for victims to represent themselves and claim their rights. Synergy was founded on March 11, 2021, to seek justice for the victims of conflict in North and East Syria and to contribute to the process of accountability and justice.**

**We work to document all human rights violations in North and East Syria, and preserve evidence, documents and testimonies in order to contribute to the processes of truth-revealing, accountability and justice. In addition to build the capacities of the victims and advocate for their issues, with the aim of building a society demanding its rights.**

**We are committed to the highest degrees of accuracy and integrity, including seeking multiple perspectives to develop an in-depth and analytical understanding of events. We are cognizant of our responsibility towards the victims and witnesses who share their experiences with us. We are working closely with a wide range of actors in local and international civil society to achieve the greatest possible impact.**