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Kidnapping and Extortion in Regime-Controlled Syria

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Feb 26, 2021

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**Brief Analysis**

Interviews reveal how Syrian officials are extorting their people.

It is sometimes difficult to conceptualize what the dire situation of Syria's economy means for those who live there. Some 100 tankers of fuel flow across Lebanon's border into Syria, but the persistent lack of gas limits families' ability to heat their homes, which, in regime-held areas, already face large-scale electricity blackouts that last for hours. Likewise, hot water is a commodity afforded only to those with financial means and connections, and it is a luxury to take a hot shower in many parts of Syria. Meanwhile, on Facebook, a UNHCR tarp is for sale and women are selling their hair to feed their families—just two examples of the type of entrepreneurship needed to weather abounding hardships in a country that has known only war for the last decade.

Over the summer, the [Syrian pound collapsed](#) as U.S. sanctions continue to deter international support for the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic has likewise furthered the collapse of the country's economic infrastructure. As Syrians search for means of generating income, officials employed by the regime have gained access to funds through extortion.

A common form of this extortion is the forced detention of individuals whose families must then bribe officials for either visitation rights or the release of their loved ones. A report from January underscores the scale of such extortion operations, which have remained a staple in regime tactics for years, though they are especially prevalent now given the country's ongoing war and collapsed economy.

The [report—produced by the Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison](#)—surveyed more than 1,200 prisoners and families. Respondents said that bribes rose as high as nearly \$3 million at one jail, though the

range varied. Visitation or release fees were usually a few thousand dollars or less, but bribes would be increased for families living outside of Syria, averaging about \$30,000. The report underscored how these payments—far greater than the average public sector annual salary of roughly \$150 per month, [according to Qassioun](#), a Syrian newspaper—could feed the country’s security apparatus and the regime through guards, judges, military personnel, and middlemen who facilitate the negotiations. “The Syrian Arab Army is the primary party that is responsible for these types of arrests,” says to the report.

The Washington Institute spoke with a civilian living in regime-held western Syria who provided context into how ordinary civilians witness and are impacted by such extortion schemes which remain a mainstay in daily life. The Institute also spoke with an intelligence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity both for security reasons and because they were not authorized to speak publicly, who was sometimes able to corroborate the pervasiveness of the scheme. The officer also reveals a pathology to the scheme that may change as the country’s economic situation worsens.

Responses have been lightly edited and condensed and are taken from discussions between December and February.

A Military Intelligence Officer:

How often are you involved with this process? What is your role and is it worth the outcome?

I have never done it personally and would never do it.

Would you say it’s an acceptable practice?

It’s an immoral practice. It is happening, I see it every day, but I would never do it, I was not raised like this, I don’t take advantage of people in need, but sadly that’s only me.

How many people come to you every week for this type of assistance?

At least one person asks for a favor each month. I help for free when I can, and I rarely can help. In other cases, people insist too much and I feel bad for them so I refer them to someone else, someone corrupt, but someone who can actually help. I never take gifts or cuts for such deals. My family relies on me. Earlier on in the war, I had to make the choice to join the military intelligence. I had to enlist otherwise I was going into mandatory service. In Syria, a few months or a year in the army would be bad. I might get hurt and I, my family, could not afford this. So I opted to enlist. I do not approve of what’s going on in my workplace.

How does your involvement typically manifest?

In some cases they would arrest someone and he’d be set to be free in a month or so, so there are no charges against him, nothing; still, what they would do, the officers would reach out to the man’s family and threaten them, scare them off, for money. But he would otherwise be free in a month, because he did nothing. The family doesn’t know that. This goes for minor offenses. Sometimes they use cases like this to blackmail people simply because someone is already getting out, no need to pay anything, they would say he will stay forever or complicate his release to get money.

A Civilian Living in Regime-Controlled Syria:

How common is it for a family to pay for information on a disappeared person?

It's fairly common if someone gets arrested by the intelligence apparatus for trafficking arms or drugs, nothing political—the normal things. His family has no way of knowing where he is, because they will not be informed even if they took him from his house. The officials will not tell them from which branch the security officials are. They will keep the family in the dark. The families will have to go and seek someone they know in the intelligence community or look up someone who would take money for information on where their son is.

What is the cost to families?

Say you want to know where someone is for something normal, something criminal. I guess you would pay around \$10 dollars. If you want to know if you're wanted by officials, you might pay \$10 to \$20. Some take no less than \$100. It depends on where you're from, if you know the officer, if you don't know the officer. It varies so much. If you're in jail for political reasons and your family wants to get you freed, however, we're talking \$2,000 dollars or more. Sometimes, if you are wanted for very serious political actions, \$20,000 or \$40,000, but even then \$500 can solve the problem.

Is there a demographic that is more preyed upon than others?

Detainee women and children. Blackmailing those families, of course, is easier. Most corrupt officers prefer to deal with a brother or father, not the women, as you know women get scared easily, meaning they back down from a deal at the last minute and they cannot always pay as much. So no, they prefer to make deals with elderly males.

Have you witnessed this [where you live], the abduction and recovery process?

I've witnessed this. Here's how it goes. Your son gets arrested, so you look up officers in the branch where you think your son is. You contact them and ask about your son. The officer says he will look up the son for information and then come and say, 'Officer so-and-so knows where your son is or what he's wanted for or what will get him released and he wants this much money for the information.' The officer says, 'Once you pay me I can get the money to him.' So the family would pay the first officer who's in the middle and he'd take the cut and deliver the rest to the officer-in-charge. The family then finds out where their son is or they get scammed. Air force intelligence says he's here, but the military intelligence says he's there. It's just corrupt.

With the coronavirus pandemic, has this practice decreased or intensified?

The coronavirus pandemic has made no difference at all, as this was the normal operation before 2011, and after 2011 there was an increase. Today it is at an all-time high. The coronavirus pandemic did not make any change or slow it down or increase it. It's just continued on.

Is it a way for the regime to make money during a period of sanctions?

It's not a way for the regime to make money. It's a way for the intelligence community or military officials to make money. And it did not increase after the [Caesar] sanctions. It remains as it had before. Maybe more officials will be encouraged to do it now because of the economic situation. Some officers who would have said they would never, now they might because they need more money after the Syrian Pound collapsed. Sanctions may have made it worse. I can't say for sure. Personnel officers of these intelligence and security branches are benefiting on the personal level. It's systemic but there is no money going to, for example, to war efforts or the country's economy. Personal gains. Nothing more. ❖



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