



EUROPEAN
INSTITUTE
OF PEACE

POST-CONFLICT VIOLENCE IN DEIR AL-ASAFIR

October 2024



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Introduction

Years after the Syrian regime took full governance responsibility of the former opposition enclave of Eastern Ghouta in Damascus, it appeared to promote rapprochement between the state and the remaining population by means of launching a “reconciliation”¹ process scheme and issuing consecutive general amnesties. Yet the inhabitants of Eastern Ghouta continued to experience extreme violence perpetrated by the government security apparatus and affiliated militia; many were detained and have perished in custody since March 2018. These findings confirm other reports by local media outlets and human rights groups detailing the continuity and number of arbitrary detention cases in post-reconciliation areas.

Building on the European Institute of Peace’s previous case studies research² of security and detention practices by regime security and affiliated militias in Eastern Ghouta between 2011 and 2021, this report probes post-hostility (2018) detention dynamics in granular detail. It focuses on a single community as a case study – the town of Deir al-Asafir in Eastern Ghouta – to examine the security agencies’ post-reconciliation objectives, mandates and practices, as well as their impact on the population. Syria’s current situation represents somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, the military violence has significantly subsided, the regime is signalling its intention to reform the judicial system, issuing amnesties and repeatedly restarting reconciliation operations across the country^{3,4}, it is being reintegrated diplomatically at the regional level. On the other hand, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees appear to refrain from returning despite the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in the areas to which they have fled. For example, the 2023 earthquake affected areas (Aleppo Jindires) where a large number of IDPs from all over the country (including from Eastern Ghouta) reside, and there is growing hostility towards refugees in Lebanon and Turkey and a steady reduction in humanitarian aid made available for both IDPs and refugees⁵. Yet many still opt to risk their lives on deadly immigration routes rather than return to regime-controlled areas⁶.

The evolution of violence in Eastern Ghouta follows similar patterns to other communities: the regime responded to popular protests in 2011 with early massacres and mass detention, which provoked armed clashes, followed by a prolonged humanitarian siege. The final gruelling February – April 2018 offensive killed thousands and displaced tens of thousands.⁷ But the community was also singled out for extreme violence including the extensive bombardment of the civilian population and the repeated use of chemical weapons.

The Institute’s previous research demonstrated that detention, enforced disappearance and torture by the Syrian security apparatus were major drivers of escalations in violence in Eastern Ghouta from 2011 onwards. It also established that while arbitrary detention appears to be random, the security apparatus followed a highly procedural and meticulous logic of violence that targeted multiple (often overlapping) communities and groups defined by geography, political adversaries, profession, family, and other dimensions. Individuals or entire families marked as enemies continue to experience a range of violence at the hands of the state security and bureaucracy, including detention and enforced disappearance, forced displacement, denial of aid and services, disproportion and/or demolition of property, and legal and bureaucratic discrimination. In Deir al-Asafir, the regime appears to have detained large numbers of civilians comparable to the remaining population in the last

¹ The term reconciliation is marked by quotations in this report to indicate that it is not used by the regime in the ordinary sense i.e. it denotes a problematic security process for individuals. This is elaborated in various public reports and in briefings by the Institute which are available upon request.

² Fadi Adleh et al., [Understanding the logic behind the Syrian regime’s violence](#), Middle East Institute, November 2022.

³ Muhsen AlMustafa, [The Syrian Regime Signals Legal and Military Shifts to the World](#), Tahrir Institute, October 2022.

⁴ SNHR, [Breaking Down the Amnesty Decrees Issued by the Syrian Regime](#), The Syrian Network for Human Rights, November 2022.

⁵ “we have seen a steady reduction in funding for the Humanitarian Response Plan – from 55 per cent funded in 2021 to only 39 per cent last year (2023). This is the biggest funding gap since the start of the crisis.”, [Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria by Martin Griffiths](#), Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, May 2024

⁶ European Union Agency for Asylum, [Applications for Asylum in the EU+ in March 2024](#)

⁷ Lukas Andriukatis et al., [Breaking Ghouta](#), Atlantic Council, September 2018, accessed 9 November 2023.

days of its final offensive on Ghouta; dozens were arrested in collective shelters, detained and forcibly disappeared.

Previous publications⁸ have also established that the regime and its allies have sought to demonstrate positive steps towards reconciliation through presidential amnesties, calls for return and renewed settlement procedures issued centrally by the president, government or individual ministers. Operational security branches, judges and other lower-level executives undermine these goals by continuing the regime's maximal violence through detentions, interrogations, torture and executions. This contradiction appears to be intentional and is an essential component of the Syrian regime's systematic practice rather than discrepancies or a "few bad apples" lower down in the security apparatus.

This report concentrates on the detention of civilians from Deir al-Asafir during and after their displacement from the enclave in March 2018.⁹ It examines the reintroduction of the Syrian security forces to the conquered communities after years of absence. It explores whether the regime has introduced any due process or restraints to prevent the security services from perpetrating violence against the local population, or to prevent retaliation by militias, and whether the area has experienced any third-party mediation. These factors are especially relevant if the communities continue to experience violence years after the regime won the military campaign and reclaimed governance responsibilities. It is also pertinent to the regime's recent and repeated efforts to enforce reconciliation in other communities. The answers to these questions help explain why those communities (such as in Sweda, Daraa, Zakhia in Rural Damascus) would question the integrity and legitimacy of such calls for reconciliation and, when they have the choice, insist on retaining their agency for counter-violence.

The report investigates the role of foreign actors in post-conflict security. It finds that Russia's Military Police had little influence over the predatory behaviour of the security apparatus, even though the Russians proposed the humanitarian safe corridors and acted as a guarantor of the reconciliation agreements. It illustrates that little or no effort was made to honour the civilian protections supposedly offered by the reconciliation agreements.

The report also provides evidence of the engagement of foreign actors in the detention process, an area of high sensitivity for the regime's security apparatus. The Institute can confirm that the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah instigated the detention and disappearance of suspected opposition activists and fighters. The Syrian security services tortured and interrogated detainees they suspected to have valuable information – such as the burial location of bodies of missing Hezbollah fighters – apparently on behalf of the Lebanese militia Hezbollah. Survivors' testimonies reveal how Lebanese Hezbollah intervened in high-security detention facilities to alter the course of investigations and release detainees without following standard procedures.

Finally, through the process of engaging with the community, in Eastern Ghouta and in displacement, the report presents a picture of the reconciliation process as perceived by the population, as a long and intense period of security forces scrutinizing the people who stayed behind, collecting and crossmatching information on their past activities during the siege, their social and professional networks. Using members of the community as informants, and by detaining and interrogating people using extreme methods of torture that have killed many detainees within a short period of time. Survivors often describe reconciliation as a "trap for people to fall into".¹⁰

⁸ More on this in the methodology section.

⁹ For further details on the regime's settlement and reconciliation policies in Eastern Ghouta since 2018, see Lukas Andriukatis et al., [Breaking Ghouta](#), Atlantic Council, September 2018, accessed 9 November 2023.

¹⁰ Interview with Abu Abdullah (Hamouriyah), September 2023.

Methodology

This report complements prior work by the Institute on mass violence in Eastern Ghouta in 2022¹¹ (and Zabadani)¹² and refugee return dynamics since 2018,¹³ and is part of a broader research programme on Syria's security apparatus.¹⁴ The previous research focused on the conflict-era and post-conflict violence in Eastern Ghouta in two communities: Douma sector and Ghouta's so-called southern sector (Mleiha, Zabdeen and Deir al-Asafir) in collaboration with displaced community groups. That research identified incidents of mass detention and forced disappearance that took place from March 2018 onwards.

Further collaboration has attempted to fill in the gaps, such as by providing further details of incidents of mass violence in the post-reconciliation period, including verified lists of detentions and deaths in detention in Deir al-Asafir. By analysing the aggregated data on victims, the research team focused on specific incidents and searched for eyewitnesses, survivors, and family members to obtain background information and testimonials related to those incidents.

The report analyses three lists of detainees and missing persons from Deir al-Asafir—one compiled by displaced community members between 2018 and 2020, an update made in 2022, and another gleaned from leaked official documents the research team was able to review after the publication of the report in 2022. The three lists were then used to compare dates and determine the progress of those cases since 2018, these lists are qualitatively analysed in details (in pages 10-12).

Based on the analysis of the dates, names and timeline of events in the community, the team approached a list of people for testimonials. It conducted seven structured qualitative interviews with eyewitnesses, victims and survivors of the regime's detention practices in Deir al-Asafir before, during and after the final offensive on Eastern Ghouta. The identities of interview participants were anonymised to limit the risk of identification and the possibility of further regime violations against themselves or family members still residing in Eastern Ghouta. The research benefited from the knowledge of an expert on the Syrian security apparatus, relations with the local pro-regime militia in Syria generally and in Eastern Ghouta especially.

Many survivors, witnesses and family members contacted for this research opted not to provide testimony due to fears of retaliation against themselves or their relatives still living under regime control. This trend is prevalent in northwest Syria, Lebanon and Eastern Ghouta, and appears to have risen dramatically during the past 3 years of reporting in collaboration with members of those communities. The spike in their reluctance to collaborate seems to be in no small part a response to signs of normalisation with the regime, especially among IDPs and refugees who are afraid of looming campaigns of large-scale forced returns to regime-held areas. The regime is circulating a supposedly post-conflict narrative about reform, transitional justice and victory while continuing to perpetrate violence against its citizens with impunity¹⁵. While these fears are well understood within the community and by some observers, they are less present in programming for transitional justice and accountability. Donors and actors should do more to ensure the safety of victims, survivors and eyewitnesses as part of their support to justice initiatives related to Syria and the ongoing conflict.

¹¹ European Institute of Peace (EIP), 'Community research: Eastern Ghouta', October 2022.

¹² EIP, 'Community research: Zabadani', October 2022 – copies available on request.

¹³ EIP, 'Refugee Return to Syria', September 2021 – copies available on request.

¹⁴ EIP, 'Security and Detention in Syria', September 2021 – copies available upon request.

¹⁵ Moseab alYaseen, [The Syrian regime revenge from returnees](#), Daraj Media, November 2023.

Background

Deir al-Asafir can serve as a micro-level case study of the experiences of communities across the Ghouta enclave and the country as whole. It is an archetypal peri-urban Ghouta community; Bashar al-Assad's introduction of a market economy after 2000 upended their traditional, largely agricultural economies. Deir al-Asafir is also strategically important due to its proximity to the airport and the only highway that connects it to the capital; it was therefore surrounded by military and intelligence bases.

Early protests took place in the town in April 2011. The Syrian regime retaliated with waves of mass detention and multiple massacres committed by the military. Local armed militias were able to take control of the area and push the regime from surrounding positions in October 2012. The area effectively remained under siege until it was brought back under regime control through a regime/Hezbollah offensive in mid-2016; almost all of the 5,000 families living in the town at the time fled deeper into besieged opposition-held territory and remained in the enclave until the offensive that brought Ghouta as a whole back under regime control in spring 2018.

Box 1. Regime takeover of Eastern Ghouta

20 May 2016

The Syrian regime and its allies re-capture Deir al-Asafir and several other towns in Eastern Ghouta's Southern sector. The majority of the population is displaced to other parts of Eastern Ghouta still under opposition control. Just two families stayed in Deir al-Asafir as regime forces re-entered the area.

10 March 2018

The regime opens several Russian-mediated "safe crossings" through which civilians can leave besieged Eastern Ghouta. Soon after, there is a severe escalation in bombardments across opposition areas, forcing many civilians into underground shelters.

14 March 2018

Under the weight of relentless bombardments and ongoing regime advances on the ground, the Ghouta enclave is split into three areas: Douma (controlled by Jaish al-Islam and Harasta) and Central Sector towns controlled by Failaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham. With few options left, growing numbers of civilians cross the frontlines through crossings and are guided into collective shelters set up on the outskirts of the enclave.

17-20 March 2018

The first mass detention of men from Deir al-Asafir takes place in the Adra City and Adra Electricity Establishment shelters.

21-23 March 2018

Around 90 men from Deir al-Asafir are detained (in addition to a number of men from Hamouriyah). According to survivor testimonies, Air Force Intelligence detained and interrogated this group at al-Mezzeh Military Airport for up to 3 months. Some detainees were then sent to Sednaya Military Prison, where several died or went missing.

25 March-5 April 2018

Russian-led security committees screen and process Ghouta residents who are planning to either evacuate to the northwest or return to their origin communities—a process that comes to be known as "reconciliation". This process takes place in parallel with an identical process used to screen opposition fighters, their families and other civilians still in besieged areas.

Late March 2018

Up to 42,000 people are evacuated after Failaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham surrendered control of Central Sector towns and Harasta.

8 April 2018

Jaish al-Islam surrenders the last opposition holdout in Douma; 19,000 fighters and civilians evacuate to northern Aleppo. The regime's last offensive against Eastern Ghouta is over.

Humanitarian Crossings and Shelters

Those who left Eastern Ghouta passed through Russian-brokered “safe crossings” announced by the regime on 10 March 2018.¹⁶ One such crossing was set up at Hamouriyah in Ghouta’s Central Sector close to Saqba and Kafr Batna. Pro-regime media outlets documented the exit of thousands of civilians from areas described as “besieged by terrorist organisations inside Eastern Ghouta” through the crossing.¹⁷ IDPs fled with few personal belongings, carrying relatives injured during the weeks of regime bombardments.¹⁸ Pro-regime reporters waiting on the other side filmed civilians entering regime-held territory,¹⁹ who in some cases were left to sleep outside or in mosques while the security apparatus prepared collective shelters to receive arriving IDPs.

In mid-March, with the regime offensive still in full flow, President Assad was filmed visiting the IDPs waiting to be taken to shelters. He told the families that they would be looked after and allowed to settle their status with the regime. The video was circulated to encourage more IDPs to flee the enclave. The research team confirmed that at least three of the displaced men featured in that video were later detained and remain missing at the time of writing.²⁰

Fleeing IDPs who made it across Russian-brokered crossings were subsequently bussed to a series of collective shelters set up on the outskirts of the besieged enclave, sometimes after being kept out in the open for days while arrangements were made for their transfer. The intelligence agencies were responsible for those state-run shelters, which gave them unrestricted access to the populations who had been out of reach during the years of opposition control over Eastern Ghouta.

Table 1: Collective shelters established for Eastern Ghouta IDPs

#	Name (Arabic)	Name (English)	# Households	Security actor responsible
1	نجها	Najha	2,000	State Security
2	الحرجلة	Harjaleh	3,000	Military Security
3	عدرا الكهرباء	Adra Electricity Establishment	150	Air Force Intelligence
4	عدرا البلد	Adra City	150	Local notables
5	طلائع البعث	Ba’ath Pioneers	N/A	N/A
6	مدارس الشبابية	Al-Nashabiyeh Schools	150	N/A

The process of security screening began from the moment people exited opposition-held territory. Names were collected and crosschecked to identify individuals deemed to be persons of interest to security agencies. Local informants – many of whom had remained in regime-controlled areas throughout the siege – helped to create these lists. Abu Kareem, for example,²¹ remembered that at the al-Hamouriyah crossing, “the mayor of Deir al-

¹⁶ RFI, “[How Russian Safe Corridors Worked](#)”, 9 March 2022, accessed 11 December 2023.

¹⁷ Murselon, “[Syrian Army Secures Exiting of Hundreds of Besieged Civilians From Ghouta](#)”, 16 March 2018, accessed 5 October 2023.

¹⁸ Mya Khalaf and Mazen Haffar, “[As Fighting Rages, Eastern Ghouta Displacement Soars](#)”, UNHCR, 20 March 2018, accessed 5 October 2023.

¹⁹ See, for example: Syrian Network for Human Rights (YouTube), “[Ruptly: Residents of Eastern Ghouta Exit Hamouriya Crossing 15 3 2018](#)”, 25 March 2018, accessed 5 October 2023.

²⁰ For more information, see Case Study #1.

²¹ Interview with Abu Kareem (Deir al-Asafir), September 2023.

Asafir, Hassan al-Hassan, recognized us and told the officers that we were relatives of [a wanted person] so they took all of [our family] to Palestine Branch”.²²

Victims’ and survivors’ testimonies gathered for this report named several individuals, including civil servants and local officials, who were local informants in Deir al-Asafir: they included the town’s mayor and several individuals with close familial or institutional links to the regime and/or its security apparatus. One survivor described informants as “mayors, mukhtars and Ba’ath Party members from each area” who would “come to [a] shelter, see who was there and who wasn’t, and then pass on any information there to security [agencies]”.²³ These networks were strengthened through brokers who mobilised civilians into militarised intelligence or *shabiha* entities. These brokers played a crucial role not only as military combatants but also in bolstering the regime's information about the individuals and groups in besieged areas. Militiamen maintained their connections with individuals living in Ghouta during the siege through kinship, friendship or shared interests.

The regime appears to have used the shelters as a security quarantine for the population, to gather intelligence and filter out unwanted elements. IDPs were first registered by intelligence officers or local figures acting on their behalf. After 2 days in the shelters, detentions began. The first mass detention of men from Deir al-Asafir took place in the Adra City and Adra Electricity Establishment shelters between 17 and 20 March 2018, when dozens were arrested. Between 21 and 23 March, another 90 men from Deir al-Asafir and others from Hamouriyah were detained and taken to al-Mezzeh Military Airport by Air Force Intelligence. Ahmad, a teenager at the time, remembered how on the first day there was little organisation at the Adra Electricity Establishment [shelter], “but then they put a checkpoint at the entrance to the shelter and prevented anyone from leaving or entering or leaving [...] and began checking everyone extensively”.²⁴

The Russian-led security committees delegated by regime security branches visited each shelter to summon all camp residents over the age of 15 (including unaccompanied minors like Ahmad).²⁵ Those undergoing seemingly routine interviews were often told this was a necessary step in their resettlement. Abu Kareem, who was transferred to the Harjaleh shelter after a spell in Military Intelligence detention, remembered how “they told everyone this was just a routine settlement procedure, but this turned out to be a lie; what they were doing was gathering confessions so they could arrest people later”.²⁶

Similar processes of registration and intelligence gathering took place among the population that remained in the community during the conflict. Abu Rafiq and his family stayed in Kafr Batna throughout the offensive and remembered that the mayor took a census of families who stayed in Ghouta rather than go to shelters.

This registration was done by a civilian in charge of each building. So, they would take down: ‘There is this building, there are this many families in it, these are the names of the people in the building.’²⁷

Enlisting to return to the community took months for the IDPs in the shelters. In Deir al-Asafir, residents were given the opportunity to enlist after about 4 months. In July 2018, the regime started to send people back to their hometowns. This process continued until October 2018, when all residents of the town who were still in collective shelters were allowed to return. By 2020, almost all of the population had been screened and interrogated. Only after this was completed were all restrictions on residents’ freedom of movement lifted.

²² The Military Intelligence Branch #235 also known as the Palestine Branch, established in 1969 and dissolved in 2023, <https://mappingmena.org/map/syria/military-intelligence-detention-center-palestine-branch-no235>

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Interview with Ahmad (Deir al-Asafir), September 2023.

²⁵ These committees, each headed by a Chechen officer from the Russian Military Police, interviewed all men, women and children over the age of 15 using a set of questions often from a structured questionnaire. IDPs were asked for their name, the name of their parents and, where applicable, the names of their wife and children. Information was also requested about any opposition fighters within the family and the names of relatives killed as a result of conflict-related violence (such as bombardments and/or armed clashes). Committees completed the registration and investigation of everyone residing in shelters, and the Russian officer signed, photographed and kept records of all relevant documents.

²⁶ Interview with Abu Kareem (Deir al-Asafir), September 2023.

²⁷ Interview with Abu Rafiq (Zabdeen), September 2023.

Detention Trends in Deir al-Asafir

Under Russian patronage, people could choose to either go to opposition-controlled Idlib or Aleppo, or to stay behind under a process of reconciliation. And while the Russian Military Police effectively oversaw public security, and the deportation to the North West of Syria and prevented militia violence, the Russians do not appear to have intervened in or mitigated the actions of the security bureaucracy, which interrogated, investigated and detained both the reconciled or non-reconciled population.

Hundreds of people from Eastern Ghouta have reportedly been detained in the process of the regime regaining governance control over the population. Overall figures from one monitor recorded as many as 1,500 people (mostly from Ghouta) who were arrested from shelters, in addition to 1,200 people who were arbitrarily detained and transferred to Adra Central Prison between March 2018 and February 2019.²⁸ A further 500 people were still unaccounted for months after their arrest from the shelters.²⁹

Around 600 families stayed on in Deir al-Asafir in 2018. Their experience presents a snapshot of how detention-related violence was employed in areas under regime control. At least the 135 people from the town who were detained after March 2018 (Table 3 presents an overview of numbers of detention), of those 114 were arrested in collective shelters (Table 1).³⁰ Most of these detentions happened quickly, in two waves: 17–20 March 2018 and 21–24 March 2018.³¹

Table one: Fate of detainees from collective shelters in 2018

Total	Dead	In Detention	Missing	Released
114	31	1	23	59

Abu Kareem’s family was detained almost immediately: several relatives were taken before 20 March 2018. The men in particular were targeted because of the family’s perceived dissident activity and knowledge of regime violations carried out after 2011. At least nine of them were reported to have died in detention on the same day in 2019, by the regime’s security bureaucracy.

One man, the father of a military defector, remembered that after 4 days in the shelter, two regime-linked community members from Deir al-Asafir came to the shelter, “going from [room to room] and asking: ‘Who here is from Mleiha, Zabdeen, Deir al-Asafir...?’ They’d greet us and take down people’s names. We were taken away on the same day they registered our names.”³² The then-mayor of Deir al-Asafir was the person who called Abu Hamid’s name immediately before his arrest. “I thought he was coming to visit us,” Abu Hamid added.

Ahmad similarly recounted how:

During our first week there, there were officers and [regime] members coming every day [...] to check people’s names. If their name showed up, then they’d take them off to the side and then take them away without anyone knowing what happened. There are lots of people who were taken out of the shelters during that period and nothing is known about them until now.³³

²⁸ ETANA and Middle East Institute (MEI), *Forgotten Lives: Life under Regime Rule in Former Opposition-Held East Ghouta*, May 2019, pp. 8–9, accessed 14 September 2023.

²⁹ ETANA and MEI, *Despair and Decay: East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule*, November 2019, p.10, accessed 20 September 2023.

³⁰ Analysis of data provided by the Media Office of the Southern Sector, August 2023.

³¹ Analysis of data provided by the Media Office of the Southern Sector, August 2023.

³² Interview with Abu Hamid (Deir al-Asafir), September 2023.

³³ Interview with Ahmad (Deir al-Asafir), September 2023.

On 20 March 2018, Air Force Intelligence entered the Adra City and Adra Electricity Establishment shelters and collected a list of names of all those present from Deir al-Asafir. Different reasons were given: some were told they were volunteering to rehabilitate the town's infrastructure,³⁴ while others believed they were initiating a settlement procedure. The next day, on 21 March, everyone registered was loaded onto a bus.

These detentions took place before Russian-led security committees entered the shelters to initiate settlement procedures. Mass detentions were therefore conducted at the behest of, and with the involvement of, Air Force Intelligence, the Fourth Division and Hezbollah.

After the arrests, it was apparent as the torture and interrogations began that the regime had maintained surprisingly detailed files on individuals targeted for persecution, including pre-conflict interactions with the security apparatus and post-2011 examples of real or imputed opposition activity. Abu Abdullah said that during one of his interrogations, the interrogator "started recounting all these different events that happened to me: 'You went to Marj al-Sultan on this day and on this day you did this and...' It was like he'd been there with me."³⁵

Abu Rafiq was an opposition fighter in Ghouta after 2011. Because he and his family did not flee to the shelters and stayed in Ghouta throughout the final offensive, he conducted a settlement procedure in Kafr Batna itself.

From the outset of that process, Abu Rafiq was aware that the regime knew he had taken up arms after 2011. The response was not immediate: for months, until October 2018, he was able to cross checkpoints, go to work and "nobody said anything to [him]". He was detained during a random security check while working on a local farm.

After being transferred to an Air Force Intelligence detention facility in al-Mezzeh Military Airport, Abu Rafiq saw that one of his cousins had also been arrested. When he was being interrogated, he was staggered by the level of information that his interrogators had about his family, past and, crucially, his involvement in events after 2011:

For the first half hour of the investigation, they ran through my entire CV from the moment I came into the world until the moment I arrived at the branch. For example, questions like: "What's your name? The name of your mother? Her sisters? Do they have kids? What are their kids' names? Your mother's sisters' daughters, what are their names? What were you studying? Who was your professor? Who was the principal?"

The CV was so detailed that if you made a mistake then the interrogator would correct you, as if he had everything in front of him and he was just listening to you.

After the CV, the investigation into the revolution started.

The first thing they wanted to know was: "Were you armed, or weren't you?"

I told him I was with Failaq al-Rahman for 3 months.

"What was your job?" he asked.

I told him I worked as a guard at the headquarters.

So he said: "I'll tell you something. We brought all the headquarters guards, all the restaurant workers, all the doctors, everyone. We want something new. If everyone that we brought was a guard or a cook or a doctor then who exactly was fighting for the factions? So I'll ask you again," he said, "did you or did you not fight at the frontlines against the regime?"

I told him I never went.

The officer said to one of the others: "Take him."

After a series of brutal torture sessions that lasted for nearly 2 weeks, Abu Rafiq was brought in again and expected to provide more information:

[Another interrogator] said to me: "Your name is so-and-so. You were with the Ahrar al-Sham movement. When your faction left [the area], you joined Failaq al-Rahman..." He went on and on like this, telling me everything they knew about me from when I'd been a fighter.

He told someone in the office with him to lift up the blind and turn on a screen. They started showing photos and videos and asking: "Who's this? Who's that?" These video clips were mine, some of them I'd even forgotten I'd filmed. They kept showing me pictures and videos for half an hour. I didn't say a word.

³⁴ EIP, 'Community Research: Eastern Ghouta', p. 27.

³⁵ Interview with Abu Abdullah (Hamouriyah), remote, September 2023.

Then the interrogator said to the soldier: “Bring in Muhammad.”
He turned out to [...] a defector who was in the same battalion as me in Failaq al-Rahman. He was arrested in 2018, although I had no idea [at the time] that he had been arrested. He had suffered an injury to his hand while still in Ghouta, and was interrogated extensively and confessed to everything he had lived and seen, and he provided extensive details about [me] with verification.

Box 2. Case study 1: Abu Rafiq

Like other former opposition-held areas that experienced processes of surrender, evacuation and/or reconciliation, detention remains a fact of life in Deir al-Asafir.³⁶ As part of the return procedures, Air Force Intelligence – the agency with mandated security authority over Deir al-Asafir and the rest of Ghouta’s southern sector – numbered every house in the town from 1 to 2,150. Returning residents were detained or called in for interrogations, sometimes repeatedly, to allow the security agencies to intimidate residents and fully map their social networks. One former resident stated that “every numbered household is supposed to be visited by the [Air Force Intelligence] security detachment in the village, either on a regular basis or just by calling out the number on loudspeakers”.³⁷ This tactic, they added, is designed to “intimidate people and to let them know indirectly that [security] knows even the smallest details about [families in Deir al-Asafir]”.³⁸ The following testimony demonstrates how return was not the end of the process, but merely another opportunity to screen IDPs, returnees and their social networks.³⁹

Salwa and her family lived a relatively ordinary, apolitical life in Deir al-Asafir in the years before the conflict. Her husband, Abu Ammar, worked in real estate and agriculture—typical jobs in the town at the time. He was not politically active and had no prior grievances with the regime. That remained the case after the protests and armed uprising broke out after 2011.

“We weren’t involved”, Salwa remembered. “My husband didn’t have a relationship with any party, he spent his time between his home, work and his children.”

Displaced for the first time in 2016 as the regime retook Deir al-Asafir, the family sought refuge deeper inside opposition-held territory. Once the final offensive began in February 2018, Salwa and her family were then forced to leave Saqba and ended up in Jisreen. After regime forces retook the area, families were left sleeping near a checkpoint while arrangements were made for their transfer to collective shelters.

The next day, Bashar al-Assad visited the group at Jisreen, seemingly a ploy to drum up support for the shelters and to encourage more IDPs from Ghouta to flee to regime-held areas through the crossings. Surrounded by pro-regime media outlets and plainclothes security officers, families cheered and chanted for the president as he told them they would not be harmed as long as they completed a *teswiyah* (settlement) procedure. Abu Ammar and others were all there, and even met Assad. “My husband cheered for the president, but told me later that in his heart he was cursing him at the same time,” Salwa remembered.

Two days later, they were bussed to a shelter. The detentions started soon thereafter. “On the second or third day after we arrived [...] they started taking the young men who were wanted. They told us they were just taking them until their settlement procedures were completed”, Salwa said. Almost none of the men came back.

Abu Ammar (and other members of the family) managed to stay in the shelter for months without encountering any problems. The problems started after they applied to leave the shelter and return to Deir al-Asafir. In July 2018, one brother was called up for reserve military service; 2 weeks later, Abu Ammar (and other male members of the family) were told that their settlement papers had not yet been finalised. Once Salwa realised they had been detained, she discovered through family that a pro-regime relative had written a report about their family. Despite never being politically active during the uprising, since the names of the family’s male members were now on file, they were processed through the most extreme sections of the system—detention by Air Force Intelligence and then sentencing by a military field court. As such, targeting on community lines transformed into targeting on family lines, marking the family as deserving of persecution. To date, five men from the family have been detained.

³⁶ See, for example, *Sowt al-Asmeh*, ‘[Regime intelligence launches a forced recruitment campaign in Eastern Ghouta](#)’ (Ar.), 19 March 2022, accessed 7 October 2023; *Sowt al-Asmeh*, ‘[Forcible recruitment campaigns continue in Eastern Ghouta...What is their outcome?](#)’ (Ar.), 19 February 2022, accessed 7 October 2023; *Sowt al-Asmeh*, ‘[Including members of the regime’s army...12 young men arrested in Eastern Ghouta](#)’ (Ar.), 17 November 2021, accessed 7 October 2023; *Sowt al-Asmeh*, ‘[Regime intelligence arrests five young men from “Awtava” in Eastern Ghouta](#)’ (Ar.), 16 September 2021, accessed 7 October 2023.

³⁷ Interview with Abu Kareem (Deir al-Asafir), September 2023.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Interview with Salwa (Deir al-Asafir), remote, September 2023.

Months later, Salwa discovered from a released detainee that Abu Ammar was being held at al-Mezzeh Military Airport. They said he would probably be released soon. “But then after 3 months, we lost any contact with him”, she said. “We went to the Military Police [in eastern Damascus’ al-Qaboun] to ask after him. It was then that they told us he was in Sednaya.”

For up to a year, Salwa and her mother-in-law were able to visit Abu Ammar more than once at Sednaya. “The last visit was in [...] autumn 2019. I remember because I went with the children and there were leaves falling on the ground.” But the next time Salwa’s mother-in-law went to visit, she was “told that all [relatives] weren’t there anymore”. “Since then, we haven’t heard anything about them.” Salwa and her family have fled regime-held areas, her mother-in-law is planning to do the same.

Box 3. Case study 2: Salwa

The case studies confirm the use of the dragnet-like process described in previous reports: all military-age Sunni males from Eastern Ghouta who stayed in the enclave during the siege under opposition control are primary suspects (markers: age, gender, geography and ethnicity). Some clans/families are at higher risk of being investigated and then being mentioned by name because, for example, they were named by an informant, or in someone else’s confession under torture, or because of kinship (father, brother, sister, wife, etc.). This is almost certain to develop into accusations of wrongdoing and detention. From there, the accused will be tortured until they confess and name other people as suspects. Interrogators often ask about specific relatives and affiliates.

The outcome can vary from there. If the detainee survives, they will be referred for trial under a counter-terrorism court, military court or criminal court; most such trials end in convictions. Although this has changed slightly since an April 2022 amnesty covered detainees held on counter-terrorism charges,⁴⁰ the amnesty included exceptions, and the court must establish that the case does not fall into any of the exclusions.

In both case studies discussed above, persecution was slow, taking place months after the regime’s takeover of Ghouta in April 2018. But once it arrived, the regime employed maximal violence against detainees – in the case of Salwa’s family, it resulted in the disappearance (and possible death) of four male family members. This points to the regime’s willingness to use violence against marked “enemies” over long periods, which has dissuaded community members from returning to affected and targeted communities.

Quantitative Analysis of Detentions and Death Certificate Data

The Institute’s past reporting on regime violence in Eastern Ghouta as well as broader post-2011 trends in detentions and deaths in detention around the country⁴¹ identified three main phases in incidents of mass detention since 2011.

1. **March 2011 to mid-2011:** During the first months of the uprising, protesters were arrested but usually released without charge or bailed with charges pending.
2. **Mid-2011 to 2014:** The regime used indiscriminate raids, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances against targeted populations, combined with mass casualty (and often highly sectarianised) massacres in targeted communities. The regime’s highly deliberate use of torture, enforced disappearance and other forms of violence was a major cause of the escalation in conflict-related violence in Eastern Ghouta after 2011; armed opposition groups were formed to defend areas and ultimately push out regime forces.

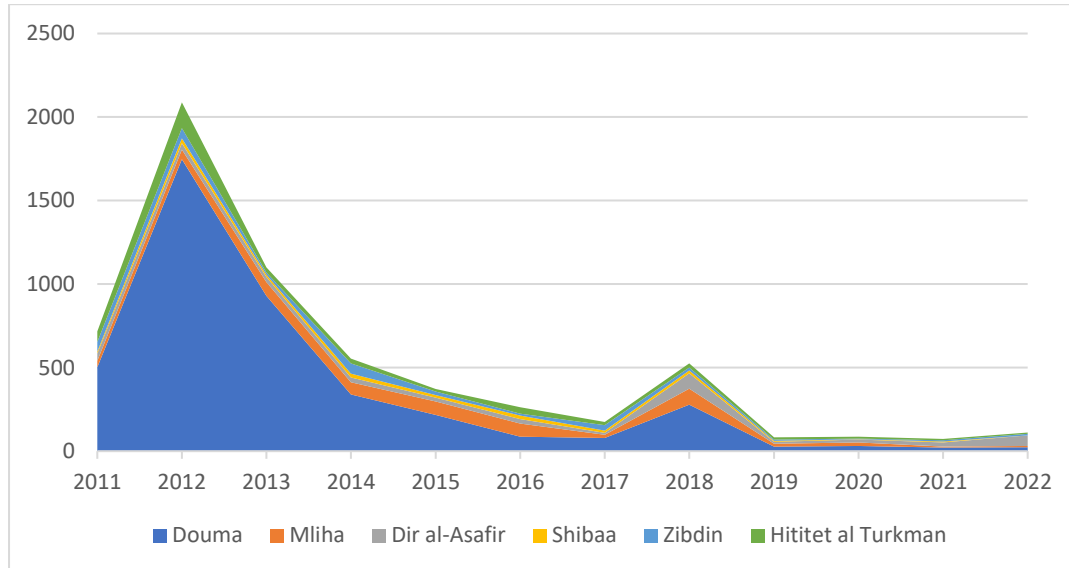
⁴⁰ COAR Global, “[Terrorism’ Amnesty is Wartime Syria’s Most Sweeping Yet](#)”, 9 May 2022, accessed 13 October 2023.

⁴¹ EIP, “Community Research: Eastern Ghouta”; EIP, “Security and Detention in Syria”.

3. **2016 to 2019:** Formerly opposition-held areas were brought back under regime control; residents of these areas were detained, interrogated and, in some cases, killed.⁴²

Figure 1 plots the detention data from Douma and five other towns.

Figure 1. Detention in Douma and the Southern Sector



Data provided by the Syrian Network for Human Rights

Since 2021, a research team commissioned by the Institute, in collaboration with a local documentation team, has worked to precisely document the mass detention in Dir al-Asafir, especially after 2018, using data from multiple sources including detainees' lists, releases, missing and deceased from the town.

The first list was obtained as part of a review of an online list of the names of detainees who the regime had declared dead. Although the status of many of the cases was wrong, all the names on the list were in fact detainees, and the list included the names of individuals who were later confirmed dead through death certificates or reported dead through inmates or regime-linked middlemen (who seek out information on missing detainees on behalf of families in return for bribes). Other names on the list were released. The second dataset included information on death certificates from the Civil Registry, which was reportedly updated sometime in 2022.

The third dataset is the result of a community effort to document the detainees and missing persons in Ghouta's southern sector after 2018. It is by far the most reliable dataset and contains the most details regarding the personal information, detention incidents and current status of the detainees from Deir al-Asafir.

The above data sources were combined to document the evolution of the regime's detention tactics (see Table 2). The combined list was subjected to descriptive analysis based on changes in values between the three lists – for example, if a name that appeared as missing on the first list was later confirmed as released or deceased (through a death certificate) on the third list.

⁴² EIP, "Security and Detention in Syria", pp. 29–31.

Table 2. Detention status of detainees from Deir al-Asafir: detained or forcibly disappeared 2011–2019

Status	Year of detention										Totals	%
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Unknown		
Detained		4	5	1	2	1		3	1		17	7%
Missing	1	8	3					27	1	33	73	30%
Reported dead	1	8	9	3			2	44		2	69	28%
Released								59		25	84	35%
	2	20	17	4	2	1	2	133	2	60	243	

The numbers incorporate the testimonies of survivors. Deir al-Asafir witnessed a profound increase in detentions – and in detentions that resulted in death under regime control; 133 people were detained in 2018 alone (54% of the total documented detentions), a little more than a third were released, a little under a third were declared dead, and similar number remained missing as of July 2023.

Death Certificates

Confirmations of deaths in detention were not forthcoming. Consistent with its practice of obfuscating detention practices in other formerly opposition-held areas, the regime did not issue death certificates for many of the Deir al-Asafir detainees who later died in detention until 4 years after their deaths. Death certificates were issued for 56 people from Deir al-Asafir in early 2022 as part of a wave of more than 1,000 death certificates concerning detentions from 2018.⁴³ Accounts from former detainees continue to trickle out: a former detainee in 2021 remembered seeing four men from Deir al-Asafir die under torture in the custody of the Fourth Division after 2018.⁴⁴

Two-thirds of the detentions reported in Table 3 took place in 2018. According to their death certificates, they were killed in detention sometime between their detention and the issuance of their death certificates in 2019. This is corroborated by the testimonies of individual detainees who experienced maximal violence at the beginning of their detention. Many described interrogators’ intentional use of fatal force while torturing detainees, especially those deemed to be “un-useful” or “uncooperative”. Former detainees interviewed for this study also mentioned being in groups with other inmates who were destined to be executed through the military field court system.⁴⁵ Interrogators threatened detainees with referral to military field courts as a way to signify certain death.

⁴³ Sowt al-’Asmeh, “Regime Acknowledges the Killing of 1,056 Forcibly Disappeared Citizens” (Ar.), 14 April 2023, accessed 7 October 2023.

⁴⁴ Enab Baladi, “Detainees Released in Damascus Countryside... ‘Peaceful’ steps towards justice” (Ar.), 11 July 2021, accessed 7 October 2023.

⁴⁵ During this research, the Syrian regime issued Decree 32/2023, which dissolved the entire system of military field courts and referred all remaining cases under its jurisdiction to the counter-terrorism and military courts.

Table 3. Year of detention vs. year that death certificates were issued

Year of detention	Year of death certificate being issued									Totals
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
2011		1								1
2012	2	4				1	1			8
2013		1	5				1	1	1	9
2014			2							2
2017							2			2
2018						1	37	1		39
Blank		1					1			2
	2	7	7			2	42	2	1	63

The death certificates were issued in a broader context of security reforms that affected the counter-terrorism laws and the related court procedures, and consecutive amnesty decrees, merging or abolishing some parts of the system, and reassigning responsibilities. Notably, those reforms focused mainly on the outcome of the security bureaucracy (issuing death certificate, release of some survivors from detention) rather than the altering the process itself (the arbitrary arrest, the interrogation, the torture and killing of detainees), which saw little change as demonstrated in the case at hand. These efforts are best understood as part of the regime’s attempt to rebrand itself regionally and internationally.

Hezbollah’s Role in Detentions

Despite Hezbollah’s heavy involvement with the Syrian regime forces, their role in the detention system is still ambiguous and anecdotal. It is not clear if Hezbollah has the ability to command the security bureaucracy and exchange information with it, or whether they run their own or share detention facilities. Until 2011, the Syrian regime exclusively performed these functions. It is important to understand whether the regime, which owed its “victory” to its allies, was forced to share these intimate functions with Hezbollah as well, as it did with other civilian and military resources.

From early in the conflict, Lebanese Hezbollah and a range of Iranian-backed militias supported by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) were integral to regime offensives in and around Eastern Ghouta. Iranian-backed groups initially attempted to conceal their presence on closed military bases such as the regime’s airbase in Marj al-Sultan.⁴⁶ In late 2012, the Free Syria Army⁴⁷-affiliated Al-Baraa Brigade’s capture of 48 Iranian men – accused of being Iranian military advisers working alongside the Syrian army – appeared to substantiate reports and rumours of a growing Iranian presence in and around Damascus.⁴⁸ Iran’s influence became more overt in

⁴⁶ ETANA and MEI, *Forgotten Lives*, pp. 3–4.

⁴⁷ An umbrella coalition of local armed opposition groups, announced in 2011 by defector Col. Ryad al Assad.

⁴⁸ The 48 Iranians reportedly included a small number of officers who were actively working with the regime, as well as pilgrims and others visiting the Syrian capital for reasons totally unconnected to the burgeoning conflict. The men were released following months of negotiations mediated by Turkey and Qatar. For more information, see Zaman al-Wasl, “[The First Interview with the Engineer of the ‘Iran’ deal...Captain Shamir Recounts the Details of the Negotiations and the ‘Infiltration of the Airport’](#)” (Ar), 15 January 2013, accessed 19 September 2023; *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, “[Announcement of the Capture of 48 Iranians in Damascus](#)” (Ar), 4 August 2012, accessed 18

2013; Iranian-backed groups were centred in Sayeda Zeinab, al-Marj and areas to the west, north and north-east of Damascus International Airport – a highly strategic area in Ghouta’s southern sector.⁴⁹ That same year, Hezbollah’s growing involvement helped Assad’s forces consolidate control over crucial areas; it helped army units capture Eastern Ghouta’s al-‘Atebeh, one of the last supply routes into opposition-held Ghouta, in April 2013.⁵⁰

Dozens of Hezbollah fighters died in and around Damascus between June and August 2013⁵¹ as regime and opposition forces exchanged a series of offensives and counter-offensives to seize and hold strategic territory. In late November 2013, armed opposition groups launched a broad counter-offensive in Eastern Ghouta that expanded their control over several neighbourhoods and towns.⁵² Lebanese media reports suggested at the time that 13 Hezbollah fighters were killed in clashes with armed opposition groups.⁵³ But with the opposition still advancing in several areas, one Hezbollah commander was quoted days later as saying that 21 of the group’s fighters had been confirmed killed following a “human wave attack by hundreds of terrorists and rebel fighters” that “took several villages and [...] several Hezbollah positions”.⁵⁴ Lebanese media outlets subsequently reported that Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al Nusra,⁵⁵ executed at least one Hezbollah fighter in captivity.⁵⁶ Open-source footage from that time showed opposition fighters overrunning purported Hezbollah positions,⁵⁷ where they found personal items and ID cards apparently belonging to Hezbollah fighters.⁵⁸ Opposition accounts claimed groups also captured the bodies of Iranian-backed fighters, which were later buried in a series of unmarked mass graves dotted around the opposition-held enclave.⁵⁹

Iranian-backed militias continued their key role in subsequent regime offensives: Hezbollah and the regime retook Deir al-Asafir and other southern sector towns in mid-2016.⁶⁰ A host of Iranian-backed groups also participated in the final offensive against Ghouta between February and April 2018.

According to testimonies from some of those detained in 2018 and then released, individuals were interrogated about the whereabouts of Hezbollah fighters’ remains, who was responsible for capturing the 48 Iranian men in 2012, and the identities of opposition intelligence sources who enabled these operations. For example, former opposition fighter Abu Rafiq was brutally tortured at an Air Force Intelligence branch and told that he could be released if he handed over sensitive information:

[The interrogator] told me: “I want to know about: places where fighters or officers were buried; places where weapons were buried; or places where explosives were buried. You will be sent to Sednaya and the field court because of your evidence and its ramifications.

September 2023; Damien Cave and Hwaida Saad, “[48 Captives are Iran ‘Thugs,’ Say Rebels in Syria](#)”, *The New York Times*, 5 August 2012, accessed 18 September 2023.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Mariam Karouny and Erika Solomon, “[Syrian Army Seizes Strategic Town Near Capital](#)”, *Reuters*, 24 April 2013, accessed 18 September 2023.

⁵¹ Marisa Sullivan, [Hezbollah in Syria](#), Institute for the Study of War, April 2014, p.19, accessed 18 September 2023.

⁵² Christopher Kingdon, “[The Rebel Offensives in East Ghouta: ‘The Battle of God is the Greatest and Most Honorable’ \(November 22nd–December 21st\)](#)”, Brown Moses Blog, 23 December 2013, accessed 18 September 2023.

⁵³ *Janoubiya*, “[13 Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Eastern Ghouta](#)” (Ar), 27 November 2013, accessed 14 September 2023.

⁵⁴ Mitchell Prothero, “[Hezbollah Takes Casualties in Syrian Rebel Offensive; Peace Talks Set for January](#)”, *McClatchy/Anchorage Daily News*, 26 November 2013, accessed 14 September 2023.

⁵⁵ HTS is a jihadist Salafist opposition group that controls parts of North West Syria as of 2024, it was formed in Syria in 2011 as al-Qaeda’s affiliate within the opposition to the Assad regime.

⁵⁶ *Janoubiya*, “[Hezbollah Fighters Fall in Syria and Jabhat al-Nusra Boasts about Beheading One of Them](#)” (Ar), 25 November 2013, accessed 19 September 2023.

⁵⁷ Jaish al-Islam (YouTube), “[‘The Battle of God is Most High and Most High’: The Moment a Shia Headquarters Is Stormed in Eastern Ghouta](#)” (Ar), 16 December 2013, accessed 19 September 2023.

⁵⁸ Samer Moselly (YouTube), “[‘Important / Hezbollah Members’ Belongings after They Were Killed by the Mujahideen in Eastern Ghouta](#)” (Ar), 24 November 2013, accessed 14 September 2023.

⁵⁹ *SyriaTV*, “[‘Eastern Ghouta...’Hezbollah’ Exchanges the Bodies of its Dead for Money or Detainees](#)”, 27 April 2021, accessed 14 September 2023.

⁶⁰ John Davison, “[Syrian Government Forces, Allies Capture Extensive Area near Damascus](#)”, *Reuters*, 19 May 2016, accessed 14 September 2023.

But I am giving you a way out to try to help you. If you tell me and show me these things, then we'll cancel your detention."⁶¹

The interrogator also threatened sexual violence against Abu Rafiq's female family members as part of this "offer".⁶²

Once a detainee made it clear that they may know information about grave sites, they were handed over to Hezbollah – often within a matter of days – to point out their location. After 2018, media reports indicated that Hezbollah had begun to locate the bodies of missing fighters,⁶³ with searches aided by detainees or those offered financial compensation in return for information.⁶⁴ Open-source reporting indicates that the remains of three Hezbollah fighters were found, repatriated and buried in Lebanon in 2022, likely the result of one of these arrangements.⁶⁵

In one such case, documented in the case study below, a detainee described how they were brutally tortured in Syrian security branches before Hezbollah intervened and transferred a group of detainees to a hotel on the southern outskirts of Damascus. Several detainees with knowledge of burial sites were able to use that knowledge to negotiate their release.

Box 4. Case study 3: Abu Abdullah

A former political prisoner detained in the 1990s, Abu Abdullah was quick to join demonstrations in Eastern Ghouta in 2011 and later became a senior figure in the opposition-affiliated local administrations after the regime withdrew from the area.

Because of his role in the opposition-led administration, Abu Abdullah was privy to sensitive information about goings-on in the enclave. At some point during the siege years, a contact from an opposition faction in Hamouriyah told him "that they buried [the Hezbollah fighters] in coffins and he showed me the burial site as well".

During the Syrian government's final offensive, Abu Abdullah and his family opted to leave via the Russian-brokered humanitarian crossing at Hamouriyah. From there, he was transferred by bus to the collective shelter at the Adra Electricity Administration. The day after arriving there, he was detained with dozens of other men from Eastern Ghouta—first processed by the Fourth Division before being taken to Air Force Intelligence's Counter-Terrorism Branch in al-Mezzeh. He was later taken to Branch 248 for around a month and then transferred to Sednaya Military Prison.

Tortured for months on end, often brutally, Abu Abdullah learned how security interrogators employed violence differently according to how they viewed a detainee's profile. He explained, "Torture is used differently for different people. Some people who are going to be executed, like those who took up arms, don't get tortured much; they are executed instead. There are people who are tortured the most because [the interrogators] want information from them. And then there are people they don't want anything from; they torture these people as a kind of revenge. I was one of the people that they wanted something [information] from."

After months of egregious torture, Abu Abdullah was ready to die rather than undergo more abuse. "Once in the branch, the jailers started shouting: 'We want two of you to die.' So I started banging on the door and shouting: 'Here, here!' And they told me to be silent, saying: 'It's not your turn yet. We still want something from you.'" Abdullah did not know what information they wanted from him.

⁶¹ Interview with Abu Rafiq (Zabdeen), September 2023.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ See, for example, Sy24, "[New Operations in Eastern Ghouta to Search for the Bodies of Foreign Mercenaries](#)" (Ar), 30 November 2021, accessed 14 September 2023; *Al-Arabiya*, "[Years Later...Pictures of Bodies of Slain Hezbollah Fighters in the Battles of Ghouta](#)" (Ar), 20 May 2020, accessed 14 September 2020; *Sowt al-Asmeh*, "[Hezbollah Investigates Former Jaish al-Islam Leaders in the Southern Suburbs](#)" (Ar), 31 August 2019, accessed 18 September 2023.

⁶⁴ *SyriaTV*, "Eastern Ghouta 'Hezbollah' Exchanges the Bodies of its Dead for Money or Detainees".

⁶⁵ *Al-Siyasa*, "[In Pictures...The Bodies of Three Hezbollah Martyrs](#)" (Ar), 19 May 2020, accessed 18 September 2023.

Suddenly transferred from detention to a hotel in Sayeda Zeinab, Abu Abdullah was offered food, cigarettes, a shower, and even a haircut. The following day, a Hezbollah commander named Hajj Abu al-Abbas summoned him to tell him that he wanted information about the whereabouts of slain Hezbollah fighters. “I’ve been following you specifically since I came to Eastern Ghouta. You know about six bodies and I want them.”

Abu Abdullah accompanied a Hezbollah-affiliated exhumation team to the burial site that he had been told about years before. He was released soon after as part of prisoner swap negotiations between Hezbollah and Ha’yat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra). He was then able to leave for an HTS-controlled area of the north-west.

Hezbollah engaged in similar negotiations—detainees held by the government in return for information about graves. Abu Abdullah was privy to a similar deal in 2019. “I knew someone who had information about four [other] bodies. Hezbollah approached him and asked him to give the names of however many detainees it would take and they would release them.” Three names were given; a couple of days later, a Hezbollah mediator said that two of those people had already died in regime detention. Four more names were given; soon after, they too were released. One was sentenced by a military field court in 2018 while the other four men were detained before 2018. All subsequently reached the north-west.

Abu Abdullah’s testimony indicates the level of intelligence gathering by the security apparatus among individuals designated as being of interest – either because of what they did or, as in Abu Abdullah’s case, because of what they knew. However, Abu Abdullah’s testimony also indicates how the nature of detention changed. Despite its incredibly brutal character, detention in security branches is often highly procedural as well, motivated by a desire to obtain confessions – through horrific, repeated torture sessions – that dictate a detainee’s passage through the detention system ever after. However, the kind of reprisal-motivated detention seen in Deir al-Asafir in 2018 denotes a shift in the attitudes of interrogators, who became more driven by anger and sectarianism. Detainees who were later released recounted how for weeks and months on end they were never asked more than basic family information. “I spent 20 days being tortured without them even asking my name”, Abdullah recounted. “When the torture finished, I was destroyed physically and psychologically...completely destroyed. I started willing God to let me die”.⁶⁶

Abu Abdullah’s ability to secure release by providing intelligence to Hezbollah points to detailed coordination between security agencies and Hezbollah that prior studies of Syria’s detention system have rarely highlighted. The case of Deir al-Asafir demonstrates how Hezbollah had granular access to information and detainees, and was able to extract those detainees from sensitive detention sites such as Sednaya within a matter of days. Even high-ranking intelligence officers would not have been able to do this, given the complex and highly procedural inner workings of the detention system. This degree of access points to broader coordination mechanisms between the various regime- and Iranian-backed security actors who were responsible for post-reconciliation detentions in Deir al-Asafir.

The sequence of detention, torture, questions and release reveal information sharing between Hezbollah and the security services, as well as access to prison management – although perhaps not to the records, as evidenced by what Abu Abdullah was told. The security apparatus appears to have at least acted upon the objectives of other actors, Hezbollah or the Iranians.

⁶⁶ Interview with Abu Abdullah (Hamouriyah), September 2023.

The Security Structure

The reconciliation process⁶⁷ enabled the security apparatus to gather information and identify what it considered high-risk elements in the population, which it used to subdue or otherwise eliminate these individuals. The case of Deir al-Asafir illustrates how detention was used in that process, and demonstrates how detention functions as a complex social phenomenon involving bureaucratic, institutional and community-level systems of surveillance and repression, animosity, moral disengagement, and other factors.

The testimonies gathered for this study point out that arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances were largely conducted by Air Force Intelligence and the Syrian Army's Fourth Division. Those actors operate in a dynamic environment in which power is not evenly distributed from the top down or between actors; strongmen tend to temporarily hold great significance and act autonomously. The actors and structures relevant to Eastern Ghouta are:

- **Central coordination:** The presidential palace's security committee comprises the president, his National Security Bureau (NSB) adviser, and the directors of Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence and State Security. This committee acts as a coordinating body between the regime and Iranian and Russian forces stationed in the country. It secret bureau, led by Bassam al-Hassan, plays a significant role in coordinating with the Iranians. The NSB oversees the regime's contractual relationships with Iranian-backed militias.
- **Iranian delegation at Sayeda Zeinab:** An Iranian delegation stationed in Sayeda Zeinab in southern Damascus was formed after 2011 to facilitate coordination between the regime's security agencies and Iranian-backed forces. In an attempt to retool the security apparatus to respond to the evolving situation in the country after 2011, the regime established local and central security committees. Each local committee, led by an intelligence officer, has three main tasks: top-down coordination to relay orders from the leadership to the forces; bottom-up transmission of field information and reports to the palace; and horizontal coordination. The central committee also coordinates with foreign actors through the joint military committee for military operations and through liaison networks for security matters. These liaisons are often draftees or officers from the secret bureau inside the palace.
- **Fourth Division:** An elite army division with its own Security Bureau, the Fourth Division operates under the direct supervision of the office of Maher al-Assad (the president's brother). Led by its director Ghassan Bilal, the Security Bureau is responsible for overseeing the Fourth Division's far-reaching business empire, its investments via brokers and paramilitary groups, and its relationship with the Ghaith Forces (the Fourth Division's 42nd Armoured Brigade).⁶⁸ Rumours and detainee testimonies suggest that the Security Bureau's headquarters has a detention facility, although its wartime use remains relatively unclear.⁶⁹ Additionally, Air Force Intelligence operates a special detention facility on the base of the 555th Regiment, an army unit affiliated with the Fourth Division.⁷⁰ The Security Bureau plays a key role in coordinating with the Iranian delegation at Sayeda Zeinab and the IRGC. The Fourth Division also hosts the Local Defence Forces, one of the most prominent Syrian Shia paramilitary groups, in its registration department.

⁶⁷ Alice Al Maleh, "[Embrace of the Nation](#)": How the Syrian Government Seeks To Control, Obstruct Refugee Returns", *Syria Direct*, 25 October 2018, accessed 4 October 2023.

⁶⁸ Ayman Aldassouky, "[The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict](#)", European University Institute, 24 January 2020, accessed 4 October 2023; Gregory Waters, "[The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth](#)", Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019, accessed 4 October 2023.

⁶⁹ Abu Abdullah, who was arrested from a shelter in Adra, recounted how his group of detainees was held in this Security Bureau facility for 25 days, during which time beatings and killings became "routine" and at least two fellow inmates (including a man from Deir al-Asafir and another from Hajar al-Aswad) died from torture. Afterwards, the group was transferred to Air Force Intelligence's Counter-Terrorism Branch at al-Mezzeh Military Airport.

⁷⁰ Abdullah Alghadawi, "[The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army](#)", Middle East Institute, 24 September 2021, accessed 4 October 2023.

Insiders interviewed as part of the study reported that Iranian operatives and Hezbollah are embedded in the Syrian security apparatus in at least three levels:

- **Branch level:** Iran/Hezbollah coordinates with the intelligence agency and/or security branch responsible for a specific geographic area (whether Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence or State Security). The exchange seems to follow a certain bureaucratic norm, although further information about the nature of this bureaucracy is unavailable.
- **Individual level:** According to sources, a Syrian liaison officer is required to attend interrogations of persons of interest to both sides. A liaison officer also supervises a detainee's transfer between the two custodies.
- **Branch 900:** The branch was established as a security bureau concerned with Syrian militiamen from Iranian-backed and/or Hezbollah militias. Its mandate covers breaches of conduct such as leaks, arms sales to opposition groups, and unjustified killings. The branch's interrogators are either Iranian or Lebanese. Individuals detained and interrogated by Branch 900 are then transferred to Military Intelligence, where they are re-interrogated before being processed through the Counter-Terrorism Court. So far, there is little evidence indicating that the branch has been used to detain, interrogate and torture Syrian civilians.

Finally, the Iranians and Hezbollah reportedly operate four informal detention facilities, located in hotels and public places, in coordination with the Fourth Division and its Security Bureau.

Conclusion

The case of Eastern Ghouta helps us understand the post-conflict experiences of former opposition-held areas that underwent reconciliation agreements, as well as towns and cities that remain under regime control after witnessing significant opposition activity in the early years of the uprising.

Recently, renewed settlement procedures in Qudsaya, al-Tal and Wadi Barada suggest the regime is continuing to pressure suspect locations (and community members living there) and reneging on previous guarantees not to persecute young men from these communities.⁷¹ In all cases, suspect populations are subjected to ongoing (and mounting) pressures from the security apparatus, years after local conflicts ended in and around the capital in 2018.

In both cases, the regime has subjected specific areas to the same forms of slow, deliberate post-reconciliation violence, applying pressure on communities through detentions and repeated raids that target wanted persons, military-age men, and other specific profiles designated as of interest by the security apparatus because of their familial, social or political affiliations.

Sometimes, these pressures can result in secondary conflict: continued detentions and acts of violence against local community members sparked violent clashes between the Fourth Division and residents of Zakia, south of Damascus, in August 2023.⁷² Detentions are also fuelling anger in south Syria: information on the fate of missing and disappeared detainees has been a central demand in the recent wave of protests in Daraa and, more specifically, Suwayda, since August 2023. A good part of the public anger against the regime in both provinces centres on the fact that the regime has reneged on promises not to target young men, although communities in

⁷¹ Sowt al-'Asmeh, "[The Regime Refuses To Make Settlements for Dozens of Young Men in Wadi Barada](#)" (Ar.), 27 September 2023, accessed 13 October 2023; Asharq al-Awsat, "[Removal of Large Security Checkpoint in Damascus...and a New Settlement Begins in Wadi Barada](#)" (Ar.), 19 September 2023, accessed 13 October 2023; SyriaTV, "[The Regime Begins Process of 'Settlement' in the City of al-Tal in the Damascus Countryside](#)" (Ar.), 23 March 2022, accessed 13 October 2023.

⁷² Mamoun al-Bustani, "[Siege of '4th Division' and Burning Down Headquarters...What Is Happening in the Town of Zakiya in the Damascus Countryside?](#)" (Ar.), *Orient News*, 31 August 2023, accessed 13 October 2023.

south Syria are still more capable of responding with their own military and political pressures on the regime and its local leaders compared with other areas of the country.

Detention therefore remains a defining experience for Syrians and post-2011 Syria: it shapes the future trajectories and return intentions of Syrian families inside and outside the country, as well as their interactions (or lack thereof) with the regime and state institutions, access to civil status documentation, freedom of movement, and fundamental human rights. Donors should streamline their programming to ensure the safety of victims and eyewitnesses to historic and ongoing regime abuses and help improve the living conditions of IDPs and refugees whose lives continue to be defined by those abuses, sometimes for years afterwards.

The team found no evidence that the security bureaucracy's work on processing the civilian population has been restricted during or since the regime took over Eastern Ghouta. External actors, such as the Russian Federation, were unwilling or unable to curb the security bureaucracy's worst practices against the civilian population. While Iran and Hezbollah appear to utilize the security services for their own objectives, and while there is no doubt they played a role in the release of some detainees in exchange for prisoners of war, bodies of fighters or information, they did not alter the main work of the apparatus. On the contrary, they appear to have fed the grievances that caused the mass detention, torture and killing of civilians and ex-fighters, and exasperated the fears among the population in post-conflict Eastern Ghouta.

In an attempt to respond to pressure and demands, including by external audiences, in recent years the regime has experimented with various ways to alter outcomes of detention, and to issue amnesties and death certificates for missing persons who died in detention. Yet, it has made no improvements and arguably no efforts in changing how the security apparatus initiates the detention process or how it progresses, which is where the real problem lies; the focus is instead on sending a message to the general population while affirming total control over the targeted population.



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