

URGENT ACTION

WOMEN, CHILDREN HELD HOSTAGE IN SYRIA

At least two armed opposition groups are holding hostage at least 105 civilians, who were reported recently to have been split between three locations in northern Syria. The hostages, mainly women and children, are at risk of being tortured or killed.

At least 41 women, 56 children, mostly under the age of 15, and two young men were abducted on 4 August when an alliance of armed opposition groups took control of at least 11 villages and farms in a northern, rural area of the governorate of Latakia. Most, if not all, of the hostages are Alawite Muslims. There are also reports of at least another 20 people being taken hostage during the same operation. President Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite Muslim, and other Alawite Muslims are perceived as pro-government.

The opposition alliance includes groups that advocate the killing of those they perceive as falling short of a strict interpretation of Islam. The language some of these armed groups use when referring to Alawite Muslims indicates that they perceive Alawite Muslims as falling short of observing Islamic teachings, which puts these hostages at even greater risk.

The hostages are believed to have been taken to the town of Salma, a stronghold for armed opposition groups in the Latakia governorate, after the Syrian army forced them to retreat in the third week of August. According to Amnesty International's information, they were initially held by the armed group Katibat al-Muhajireen, which is reported to be composed of Libyan and other foreign nationals. More recent information suggests that the hostages have been divided into three groups, with one reportedly handed over to Katibat Hassan Azhari, reportedly made up of local Syrian fighters in Salma who work in close co-ordination on the hostages with Katibat al-Muhajireen. A second group of hostages have been reportedly taken to the village of al-Jamiliyeh in the Idlib governorate, but it is unclear to which armed group they have been handed over. The remaining hostages have been moved to the village of al-Bernas near Jisr al-Shoghoor, also in Idlib governorate. The armed groups apparently intend to trade the hostages for captured Syrian and Libyan fighters detained by the government.

Amnesty International wrote on 13 September to the president of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) seeking his urgent intervention on this serious human rights abuse, which may amount to a war crime, and asking for responses to relevant questions: we have not yet received any response. The head of the SNC's Supreme Military Command (SMC) visited the area and praised the operation only days after the hostages had been taken.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Urging the SNC to condemn in the strongest possible terms the taking of civilian hostages in the Latakia governorate;
- Urging them to act swiftly to identify the armed groups responsible and the exact locations where they are holding the hostages;
- Urging them to take immediate action to secure their release.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 6 DECEMBER 2013 TO:

President of the Syrian National Coalition

Ahmed Al Assi Jarba

Email: info@socpresident.org

Salutation: Dear Mr Jarba

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

An alliance of armed opposition groups captured 11 villages and farms on 4 August in a battle they have called Ahfad 'Aisha Umm al-Mu'mineen (the Grandchildren of A'isha Mother of Believers). Among the groups were Katibat al-Muhajireen, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Jabhat al-Nusra, Suqoor al-'Izz and Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamia

These villages and farms are Bloota, Slayeb Bloota, Enbata, al-Hanboushiye, Barouda, Bramseh, al-Kharrata, Abu Makki, Aramo, Obeen, Esterbeh and Beit Shakouhi.

A video uploaded on YouTube on 15 August shows the women and children hostages sitting on the floor of what looked like a balcony; one woman says, "We are held by the mujahideen... and they will not release us unless their prisoners held by the Syrian regime are released. We are around 105 [hostages] and the treatment is good." A masked commander of Katibat al-Muhajireen referred to as Abu Suhaib al-Libi then says, "Our only demand is that we have people held [by the regime] in Latakia and elsewhere and we want an exchange of prisoners to take place, so that we free these women." The video can be seen, in Arabic, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPe7tu_3dpE

While Islamic groups that are independent of the SNC led this battle, the SNC's Supreme Military Command chief, General Salim Idriss, visited the northern Latakia governorate only days after the people had been taken hostage, and made public statements supporting the military campaign in the Latakia governorate. He failed to condemn or mention the women, children and young men held hostage by the armed groups.

On his visit, General Idriss praised what he called the successes achieved in the Latakia governorate by the armed opposition forces. He stated that the Free Syrian Army would continue to fight alongside other groups until the ousting of the regime, and pledged to provide every possible support to fighters in the Latakia governorate, including arms and ammunition. These may be given directly, or be diverted, to the armed groups that are holding the hostages or that have committed other grave human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, such as summary killings.

Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions prohibits the taking of hostages. Under the statute of the International Criminal Court, the "taking of hostages" constitutes a war crime in both international and non-international armed conflicts.

Although the vast majority of the human rights abuses documented by Amnesty International have been committed by the state's armed forces and pro-government *shabiha* militias, abuses have also been committed by armed opposition groups. This includes the torture and killing of captured members of the security forces and *shabiha* militia members as well as the abduction and killing of people known or suspected to support or work with the government and its forces, or the taking of civilians as hostages to try to negotiate prisoner swaps. Amnesty International condemns without reservation such abuses and has called on the leadership of all armed opposition groups in Syria to state publicly that such acts are prohibited and to do all in their power to ensure that opposition forces put an immediate stop to them. See *Syria: Summary killings and other abuses by armed opposition groups* (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/008/2013/en>).

Name: 125 Syrian nationals, mostly women and children
Gender m/f: both

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