

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham Was Most Likely Behind the Assassination of Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed in Kafranbel City

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



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I. Introduction and Methodology

In attempt to pre-emptively gain legitimacy through the use of terror and intimidation prior to the Turkish-Russian Agreement which came into force on September 17, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, whose main component is al Nusra Front the Qaida branch in Syria, carried out a number of raids on different villages, arresting dozens of individuals in the process, including local activists, humanitarian relief workers, and mosque preachers. This has created an atmosphere of fear and destabilized the security situation in areas where security and stability were desperately needed to enable citizens to secure their basic needs and repair some of the destruction to the buildings and facilities. We have shed light on Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's attempts to exploit the de-escalation agreement and escalate its violations in [a previous report](#), which outlined the most notable of these violations.

The Syrian people had hoped that the truce would contribute to completely eradicating the presence of extremist groups, most prominently Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and the self-appointed religious enforcers. This, however, requires significant support to moderate factions, local councils, local police, and civil society groups. In reality, however, the outcome of the truce was the direct opposite of this, with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham expanding at the expense of civil and moderate forces. Their ability to do so can be traced back to a chronic lack of any adequate support to strengthen civil society in north Syria that could enable the people there to effectively resist these terrorist groups' strength and influence, which was because of the absence of any form of strategy by the states that depict themselves as friends of



the Syrian people; despite these states' constant reiterations of their claim that they wish to fight extremist groups.

Without dwelling on the possibilities of these extremist groups being infiltrated and influenced by foreign states and intelligence apparatuses, the most important issue is the fact that eradicating the civil society movement which aspire to democracy is the shared goal of both the Syrian regime and these extremist groups since such movements pose an existential threat to the legitimacy of all such entities. When Syrian society is safe from the influence of the terrorism of both the Syrian regime's security bodies and extremist groups, it inevitably sides with the civil community movement.

This report is an attempt to investigate the assassination of the Syrian activist Raed Fares and his fellow activist Hamoud Jneed. Since we have been unable to visit the site of the incident since the assassination took place, this report is reliant on the analysis of evidence and information gathered from eyewitnesses, most significantly the only individual who survived the assassination who was in the backseat of the car in which Fares and Jneed were shot dead. We collected photos of the car and the site after they were targeted, as well as charting the route taken by the car that Raed Fares was driving. This report also includes three accounts of these events. Upon analyzing all the evidence, we have concluded that there is strong reason to believe that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham was most likely behind this terrorist assassination.

II. The Life of Prominent Activist Raed Fares, a Brief Narrative

Kafranbel city is one of the major cities of southern Idlib governorate, and was one of the first cities in the country to join the Syrian popular uprising for freedom in March 2011. Kafranbel managed to break free of Syrian regime forces' control in August 2012 when factions from the armed opposition seized control of the city. There was a very minor presence of al Nusra Front in Kafranbel until November 2014 when the group managed to take control of the city by brute force at the expense of armed opposition factions. The city's residents have suffered for the last five months from the group's violent practices in the form of arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances, as we have documented in our monthly reports on arrests. When Hay'at Tahrir al Sham is unable to intimidate an individual through terrorization and intimidation, it will send them subtle messages threatening arrest, abduction, or murder, which apparently was the case of Raed Fares.



Raed Mahmoud Fares was born in Kafranbel city in southern Idlib governorate in 1972. He studied medicine for one year at Aleppo University, before dropping out of school to support his family by working at a document facilitation office. He stayed at that job until the popular uprising for freedom broke out in 2011. Raed was married and a father of three children.

In the early stages of the popular uprising, Raed worked with fellow activists on creating ideas and writing anti-regime slogans on walls in the city. Raed also helped to arrange the first demonstration in his hometown after the Friday Prayer on April 1, 2011, which automatically made him a target for the Syrian regime's security services who raided his house on multiple occasions.



Raed Fares was one of the first to write the date and name of the city where the demonstration was taking place on all the banners that were carried by protesters at the demonstrations. Raed was particularly known for his banners, where he worked with painter Ahmad Jalal to create the concept of drawing caricatures displayed during demonstrations. The Syrian people used to impatiently await each Friday to see the latest banners from Kafranbel, thanks to their creativity and stylish nature, and reliable appearance every week. Kafranbel's banners became a tradition and an internationally renowned potent symbol of the popular uprising for freedom.

In 2012, Raed Fares founded Radio Fresh, the first radio station established in the areas liberated from the Syrian regime's control. He later established a website for the station, before founding the Union of Revolutionary Bureaus (URB), an umbrella organization for a number of media and service projects, such as Radio Fresh, al Mantara Magazine, Mazaya Women's Center, the Children's Office, the Women's Office, the Labor Office, and the 'Eeesh Campaign' (Live Campaign) and others. Additionally, Raed founded the group Lawyers for Freedom in 2014 under the leadership of the lawyer Yaser al Salim, and it was later led by another lawyer. It should be noted, incidentally, that the lawyer Yaser al Salim is still being detained at a prison run by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of this writing.



III. Assassination and Arrest Attempts

Raed Fares' activism, leadership, and contributions to a number of civil and awareness-raising projects, in addition to his belief in the demands for freedom and democracy and his repeated criticism of oppression and of all extremist groups, made him a prominent strategic target for terrorist groups. He was arrested and threatened on multiple occasions. A number of people close to Raed, whose identities are withheld due to well-justified concerns that they may potentially face retaliation by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, told us that he had received several death threats from leaders and security figures at Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. An assassination attempt targeted Raed at dawn on Wednesday, January 29, 2014 when masked men, whom we have been unable to positively identify, directly shot him at close range. Although three bullets penetrated his chest, injuring him and causing severe bleeding, he subsequently survived the assassination attempt.

On Monday, December 29, 2014, gunmen from the group then known as al Nusra Front arrested Raed Fares and his fellow activist Hamoud Jneed as they were returning from Saraqeb city to Kafranbel city, accusing them of publishing pamphlets critical of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and other Islamist factions. The two activists were released on December 31, 2014.

On Sunday, January 10, 2016, Raed was again taken hostage by gunmen from al Nusra Front, this time at the Radio Fresh office in Kafranbel city, along with his fellow media activist Hadi al Abdullah. The gunmen raided the radio station's office and confiscated its contents. Both activists were released on the same day after [an agreement](#) was reached with Hadi al Abdullah, which was undoubtedly obtained through the use of force and threats.

On Saturday, January 17, 2015, a number of masked individuals from al Nusra Front raided the office of the URB and Radio Fresh and assaulted Hadi al Abdullah, before local parties intervened to end the assault.

Despite the attacks and threats against him, Raed Fares consistently rejected any suggestion that he should flee his beloved hometown, asserting that this would leave it vulnerable to extremist groups. Although the threats and pressure against him had escalated sharply in recent months, particularly after Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested the lawyer Yaser al Salim on Sunday, September 21, 2018, Raed opted to stay despite the grave danger to his life.



IV. Initial Investigations Suggest that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham was Involved in the Assassination of Activist Raed Fares and Fellow Activist Hamoud Jneed

On Friday, November 23, 2018, at around 12:00 Damascus time/10:00 GMT, as people were performing the Friday Prayer, Raed Fares was in his car with his fellow activists Hamoud Jneed and Ali al Dandoush, driving from the URB towards the city's main market, on their way to a relative of Raed's house. Fearing pursuit and mindful of the threats against him, Raed used roundabout routes on his journeys and had recently taken to changing routes to avoid pursuit. When they had reached a point around 600 meters to the west of the office, their car was confronted by a grey-colored van with black-tinted windows which pursued Raed's car for 400 meters. When Raed stopped the car in front of his relative's house, the van pulled up alongside the vehicle on the driver's side where Raed was in the driver's seat with Hamoud in the passenger seat next to him, while their friend Ali sat in the back. A man sitting at the front of the van pulled out a machine gun out, while two others, also carrying machine guns, opened the backdoor the van. The three gunmen simultaneously opened heavy fire at the Raed's car, spraying it with bullets. Nearly ten of the bullets hit the car from the driver's side, with seven of them penetrated the bodywork. Others shattered the windows. It seems clear from the pattern of the shooting that this was an assassination operation intended primarily to kill Raed.

Immediately after they finished shooting, the men fled the scene. Residents rushed to the scene and desperately tried to save Raed and Hamoud who were wounded. Miraculously, Ali managed to survive unscathed, having dived into the footwell behind the car's front seats when he saw the gunmen.





[Hamoud](#) died on route to the Orient Hospital, while [Raed](#) passed away a few minutes after reaching the hospital.

Hamoud Jneed was a media activist from Kafranbel city in Idlib, who worked alongside Raed at Radio Fresh. Born in 1980, he was a married father of four children, including a daughter with special needs. He had been actively involved in filming the demonstrations with Raed from the earliest days, as well as documenting the Syrian regime's bombardment of the city with many photos and videos. He also produced a number of reports for Radio Fresh. He was frequently seen with Raed.



Hamoud Jneed





The funeral of Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed after they were assassinated by unknown gunmen in Kafranbel city in Idlib – November 23, 2018

Those behind the assassination operation clearly timed it to coincide with the Friday prayers, knowing that most residents would be at the mosques performing the weekly prayer, which facilitated their movement, and helped them to pull off their terrorist act without being identified or recognized by people.

Some of the city residents confirmed to us that they had seen the killers' vehicle heading east after the operation, first, adding that it was last seen heading towards the city center. It should be noted that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has set up its checkpoints at the northern and western exits to the city, while the group has no checkpoints at the eastern and southern roads leading out of Kafranbel.

Although Hay'at Tahrir al Sham now has almost complete control of Kafranbel and, as such, bears responsibility for the lives of its residents, the group has signally failed to condemn, investigate, or show the slightest concern for the terrorist assassination that horrified the city and killed one of its most prominent figures.

Extremist Islamic groups have become well known for following the type of operational strategy seen in the murder of Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed in many of their killings and assassinations. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has even dissolved the local police force, with members of the group now taking sole responsibility for police and security responsibilities. Moreover, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham stands to directly benefit from getting rid of an individual whose influence, symbolic importance and legitimacy exceeded their own. Raed Fares had the ability to directly influence the residents of his city, promoting a message of hope and democracy that explicitly rejected the group's extremist project. Accordingly, analysis of all the evidence we have studied and of the accounts of Ali Dandoush who survived the assassination, and of other city residents, strongly suggests that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham is most likely responsible for the assassination of Raed and Hamoud.



SNHR contacted the activist Ali Dandoush¹ from Kafranbel city, who survived the assassination. He told us his account:

“I was sleeping at the office that day. Raed woke me up and told me to change clothes because we needed to go out on a mission. After we moved about 100 meters from the office, Hamoud, may God bless his resting soul, saw a van with black-tinted windows at an intersection near the office, but we couldn’t see who was inside. We continued moving along an underpass, heading for a relative of Raed’s house. After approximately one kilometer, we saw the van again. We continued on our way and entered another underpass. Raed stopped in front of the house of one of his relatives.

“We heard a strong braking noise. I looked back, and we saw weapons coming out of the van, and its side door opening, and two on their knees directing their weapons at us, and they opened heavy fire.” Ali added that he was in the backseat and he immediately laid down between the seats, which led the gunmen to believe he was dead. **“Raed and Hamoud were hit with a number of bullets. A person came out of the van and shot them directly, before they fled the scene. I stood up immediately and found Hamoud on the ground as he was trying to leave the car. People gathered and helped them immediately. However, Hamoud died on their way, while Raed arrived at the hospital in a critical condition, and died a few minutes later.”** Ali confirmed that he couldn’t identify the party behind the killing, and couldn’t recognize any of the killers.

“About two months ago, after the lawyer Yaser al Salim was arrested, we started sleeping in different places, and maintained a low-profile as much as possible in fear of being targeted,” Ali added. **“Raed was certain Hay’at Tahrir al Sham were keen on killing him, rather than merely arresting him. He used to receive threats on a daily basis from unknown numbers threatening to kill him.”**

Mahmoud Fares², Raed’s son, told us that he heard shooting nearby as he was home directly after the Friday Prayers. He went to see what had happened, **“The scene of the shooting was about 400 meters from our home. As soon as I arrived, I found out that my father had been assassinated and he had been transferred with his colleagues to the hospital. People who saw the incident told me that a van was pursuing my father’s car, and they started shooting at the car as soon as it stopped. The [attackers’] car door opened and gunmen starting shooting at them, which led to the death of my father and his colleague.”**Mahmoud added that his father received multiple death threats

¹ We contacted him via WhatsApp on November 24, 2018

² Via WhatsApp on November 25, 2018



from Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, the most recent of which was a week ago, but he never thought twice about the matter. Mahmoud added that his father was certain that his activities would ultimately end in his own death, adding, **“My father had no enemies but the regime and its followers.”**

Activist Belal Bayyoush³ from Kafranebl gave us his account,

“At approximately 11:30, Raed and his two colleagues were at the URB office. They left the office and headed for the market in al Azizia hara [hara is a colloquial term referring to a long narrow alley filled with residential buildings next to each other]. Raed encountered a van that was following them, and in it were gunmen. The van followed him to the entrance of the same hara. There, the people in the car started shooting at Raed’s car. Afterwards, two gunmen got out of the van and started shooting at him and at Hamoud directly.” Belal added, **“I heard the shooting and left my house immediately. As soon as I arrived at the Kafranbel Circle area, I found out that they were injured. I immediately headed for the hospital. Hamoud had died, while Raed was in the operating room. However, the doctor came out five minutes later and told us that Raed had died. He told us that five bullets hit Raed and three bullets hit Hamoud. We waited for a while before their dead bodies came out, and we took their dead bodies to their homes.”**



The car in which Raed Fares was seated at the time of his assassination by unknown gunmen in Kafranbel city in Idlib – November 23, 2018

³ Via WhatsApp on November 25, 2018



V. Recommendations

United States and Western countries

- Support the local community through local council, local police, civil society groups, and local factions towards dismantling and removing Hay'at Tahrir al Sham.
- Work to urgently use the de-escalation agreement and assist the local community in Idlib and north Syria to get rid of extremist groups completely.

International community and influential states

- Work to provide financial and logistical support for the active local councils who are having either a public or concealed conflict with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham who is trying to dominate or disassemble these councils.
- Support vital civil society groups in north Syria who are standing in the face of extremist groups through raising awareness and providing services.
- Extremist groups thrive on wars and conflict. As such, the process of political acceleration towards democracy must be expedited, and the new Syrian state must be assisted in restoring security and stability.
- Support the formation of a robust and coherent local police force to defend the residents from abductions and assaults, which will pave the way for a state of relative stability and safety.

OHCHR

- Monitor the violations taking place in areas under Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's control and its damaging effect on civilian life in Idlib, and submit effective recommendations to the international community in this regard.

Armed opposition factions

- All the factions operating under Hay'at Tahrir al Sham must quickly detach themselves from its body, expose its practices, and arrange awareness campaigns on the ideologies of extremist groups, and how they infiltrate communities and recruit young men in tandem with workshops on the importance of respecting and defending basic human rights.

Acknowledgment

We wish to express our most sincere and heartfelt gratitude to the survivors and local activists who effectively contributed to this report. Some of them risked their lives to expose the truth and hold those involved accountable.





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