

## INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

# Under the Guise of Aid: The Far-Right French NGO Allegedly Supporting War Crimes in Syria





# Under the Guise of Aid: The Far-Right French NGO Allegedly Supporting War Crimes in Syria

By Inès Daif and Stéphane Kenech

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COVER: Photo illustration comprising photographs from various social media accounts. The main photo shows National Defense Forces militiamen alongside Alexandre Goodarzy, SOSCO's Syria mission leader (third from right). The photo on the left shows "lion cubs" – children trained to take part in combat.



## Executive Summary

For years, it has been an open secret that a French charity co-founded by far-right sympathizers has been in bed with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. The organization, SOS Chrétiens d'Orient (SOSCO, or SOS), was also an official "partner" of the French Defense Ministry at a time when the charity allegedly provided moral and material support to pro-Assad militias accused of committing war crimes. An investigation conducted by the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy and New Lines Magazine reveals new details about SOSCO's alleged relationship with pro-Assad militias, including potentially damning testimony from witnesses that the nongovernmental organization

might have directly funded one of the militias. This alleged support would have occurred during and after the militia is said to have committed rights abuses that targeted the very community SOSCO claimed to be helping.

According to France-based rights lawyer Laurence Greig, who worked pro bono to examine evidence gathered in the New Lines investigation, SOSCO's alleged support of pro-Assad militias appears to have violated French laws and regulations regarding anti-terrorism, anti-corruption, and complicity in war crimes. Greig adds that prosecuting SOSCO in French courts would also open one militia and its leader to prosecution in France, even if in absentia, as an extension of a SOSCO court case.

## Highlights of this report include:

- Details of SOSCO's partnership with the French Defense Ministry
- Testimony about SOSCO's close relationship with militia leader Simon al-Wakil, to whom the charity allegedly gave money directly
- Statements from survivors who found photos of loved ones among the Caesar Files that document victims of militia and regime violence
- Testimony regarding al-Wakil's and an associated militia leader's use of child soldiers
- An explanation of the mechanisms SOSCO allegedly used to transfer money to the pro-Assad militias



## Putting the Pieces Together

**A**n investigative report shared with New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy and New Lines Magazine documents the extent of the alleged relationship between SOSCO and pro-Assad militia forces. The report includes first-hand testimony by survivors who witnessed war crimes allegedly committed by the two pro-Assad militia groups before and during the period when the French charity allegedly provided the groups with monetary support.

These witnesses, who also spoke to New Lines, accuse the pro-Assad militias that allegedly received support from SOSCO of committing repeated violence against civilians, such as village massacres and the kidnapping and disappearance of opponents, including those who hailed from the Christian community that SOSCO claimed to be helping. The witnesses also allege that these militias recruited and deployed child soldiers. Some of these witnesses have also identified the remains of missing loved ones in photos that surfaced in the Caesar Files, photographs smuggled out of Syria that document the remains of tens of thousands of Syrians killed while in the custody of various intelligence branches of the Assad regime.

These pro-Assad militias apparently have also appropriated vast swaths of agricultural land whose owners have been displaced into refugee camps along Syria's northern borders and in other countries. New Lines combines first-hand testimony from displaced landowners with

**“ These witnesses . . . accuse the pro-Assad militias that allegedly received support from SOSCO of committing repeated violence against civilians. ”**

open-source information to construct a map that shows the appropriated areas, which remain under full control of the regime's troops, including the militias that are allegedly close to SOSCO. The charity, in the meantime, continues to raise money in France and from international donors through its social media accounts with the stated aim of “helping Christians of the East.”

These findings also raise new questions about the circumstances surrounding the kidnapping of three SOSCO employees and their Iraqi translator on Jan. 20, 2020, by Iran-backed militias in Iraq. One of the employees is Iranian French national Alexandre Goodarzy, who at the time was said to have been the NGO's main liaison with the pro-Assad militias in his capacity as chief of mission in Syria. New Lines has confirmed through its own sources in Iraq that the kidnappers were Iraq's Hezbollah and affiliates. The investigation further interrogates what appears to be a quid-pro-quo arrangement between the French government and the Iran-backed militia, which released the charity workers and their translator unharmed on March 26, the same day that France withdrew 200 troops from Iraq, where the French military had participated in training security forces as part of the U.S.-led international coalition.

(The French government has publicly said the withdrawal was due to COVID-19.)

### **The French NGO Supporting Pro-Assad Militias**

SOSCO was set up in France in October 2013. Two of SOSCO's co-founders, right-wing activists Charles de Meyer and Benjamin Blanchard, met in Paris in police custody after they were arrested at an anti-gay marriage protest in 2013. Damien Rieu, also a SOSCO co-founder, had previously co-founded Generation Identity, a European neo-Nazi youth movement that originated in France in 2012 but has since dissolved. (In April 2021, U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin, chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, asked U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to designate a list of overseas violent white supremacy groups,<sup>1</sup> including Generation Identity, that “meet the necessary criteria as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” The U.S. State Department has declined to comment about this request.) Moreover, SOSCO Director of Operations François-Xavier Gicquel was expelled from France's far-right Front National political party for making a Nazi salute in public.

The charity's stated purpose is to aid Christians in the Middle East



as parts of the region became increasingly embroiled in post-Arab Spring violence. The Assad regime positioned itself as a “protector of minorities” from the early days of Syria’s uprising-turned-war, when Assad labeled peaceful protesters as “Islamists” or “terrorists” and proceeded to escalate the use of lethal force against them.

As the war spread, regime propaganda pitted the dominant Sunni rural population, which openly opposed Assad, against the country’s religious minorities, whom he has claimed as his own staunch allies. Yet the regime has brutally imprisoned and tortured Christians and other religious minorities who opposed him.

Shortly after its founding, SOSCO carried out its first mission, dubbed “Christmas in Syria.” But early in its formative days, SOSCO veered away from providing Christian communities with humanitarian aid and moral support to peddling a right-wing political agenda and spreading misinformation, according to the organization’s original founder, Olivier Demeocq. In an interview with the authors of this report in early 2020, Demeocq – who is now estranged from SOSCO – lamented the use of “false advertising” by his top operatives as early as the “Christmas in Syria” days.

“Upon their return from Syria, they (falsely) claimed that Christians had been beheaded,” Demeocq said, adding that they knew this information to be false. “When I raised the issue, they told me it would help with the fundraising,” he said.

According to Demeocq, transparency about where the funds that were raised in France for the purported cause of saving Syria’s Christians were spent was, at best, murky even during those early days. “From then on, I did not see the money that we had committed to pay during Christmas in Syria, you can say that,” he said.

For example, in 2017 SOSCO organized a half-marathon in Paris to raise funds to build a sports field in Aleppo. The race raised 30,000 euros, which appear on the auditor’s report, but SOSCO never built the sports field. A former SOSCO employee explained that SOSCO was looking for free land in Aleppo, which it never found, so the project didn’t see the light of day. But SOSCO has not formally informed the runners of the 2017 half-marathon, and many of them might still think the project moved forward.

## SOSCO and the French Government

SOSCO was the only French NGO with operations in the Middle East to be formally listed as a defense partner of the French Ministry of Defense for the entirety of the period from October 2015 until the end of 2020. This status allows a given organization’s employees who are members of the military reserves to take part in training and internships organized by the Defense Ministry.

In February 2017, a ministerial decree on the defense partnership with SOSCO was published in the Official Journal (a government bulletin that gives updated details

about new laws and official announcements), and signed by then-Defense-Minister Jean-Yves le Drian, who is now France’s foreign affairs minister.

An email from the then-head of France’s National Guard, Gen. Anne Fourgerat, sent to New Lines researchers on March 10, 2020, gives the start date for the “defense partnership” between SOSCO and the Ministry of Defense and notes that the Ministry of Defense would end the partnership in 2020.

19:43 4 messages

TR: Re: Enquête journalistique

MINISTÈRE DES ARMÉES MINISTÈRE DE L'INTÉRIEUR

Secrétariat général de la garde nationale

Monsieur,

Pour répondre à votre demande, voici quelques éléments relatifs aux questions posées :

La qualité a été attribuée, comme le prévoit l'article L. 4211-1 du code de la défense, à la suite de l'engagement de l'association à favoriser la mise en œuvre des dispositions du code de la défense relatives à la disponibilité de ses réservistes opérationnels en signant une convention de soutien à la politique de la réserve militaire. Celle-ci date du 15 octobre 2015. Cette qualité est attribuée à l'ensemble des signataires de convention de soutien à la politique de réserve opérationnelle par arrêté publié au JO. Aujourd'hui plus de 800 signataires se sont vus attribuer cette qualité.

Pour votre information, le ministère des armées a par ailleurs décidé de ne pas renouveler ce partenariat avec SOS Chrétiens d'Orient. Ce dernier prendra fin en 2020.

Bonne journée.

The email translates into English as: “To answer your request, here are some elements related to the questions asked: The quality



was awarded, as provided for in Article L.4211-1 of the Defense Code, following the association's commitment to promote the implementation of the provisions of the Defense Code relating to the availability of its operational reservists by signing an agreement to support the military reserve policy. This agreement dates from October 15, 2015. This quality is attributed to all signatories of the agreement to support the operational reserve policy by order published in the JO. Today, more than 800 signatories have been granted this quality. For your information, the Ministry of the Armed Forces has decided not to renew this partnership with SOS Chrétiens d'Orient. This partnership will end in 2020. Have a nice day."

Among SOSCO's several reservists is the aforementioned Gicquel, the NGO's director of operations and a far-right sympathizer. (He was listed as a reservist in the Foreign Legion until Dec. 30, 2020.) He has publicly stated that he had completed training at the elite military academy Ecole Supérieure des Officiers de Réserve Spécialistes de l'Etat-Major. Gicquel was present in Mhardeh, the home of one of the pro-Assad militias SOSCO has allegedly supported, in January 2020.

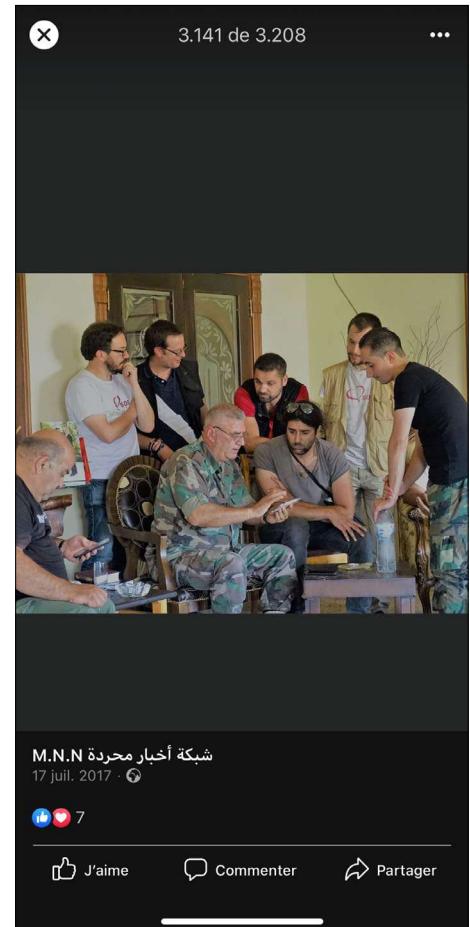
New Lines examined the French Defense Code in Article 4211-1, which governs defense partnerships between organizations and the Ministry of Defense, and found that the gathering of intelligence for the French state is within the purview of this agreement. According to the article: "Specialized intelligence services

listed in Article L. 811-2 of the Internal Security Code can call on members of the military reserve."

New Lines asked the Ministry of Defense whether SOSCO provided it with intelligence that might have been gathered during its time in Syria, as early as the "Christmas in Syria" mission, as one SOSCO whistleblower has alleged to New Lines. The ministry did not respond to New Lines' numerous attempts to get answers to these queries.

For its part, SOSCO has boasted publicly about its partnership with the Ministry. During an interview on the news channel France 24 that aired on Jan. 26, 2020, SOSCO's press officer Jeanne der Agopian said, "Many of our volunteers are members of the army as reservists ... the NGO has always worked closely with the Defense Ministry."

People believed to be among the French military reservists in SOSCO's ranks – along with other SOSCO volunteers – can be seen posing in open-source photographs with armed members of the pro-Assad militias. This raises the question of the extent of formal or informal military training, if any, the French charity's staff might have provided to militia members. For example, Gicquel has boasted publicly that he provided medical training to Kurdish and Iraqi forces. Additionally, in a photo posted July 17, 2017, on a Facebook page belonging to Simon al-Wakil's National Defense Force (NDF) militia, al-Wakil is showing his phone to SOSCO personnel with the following



**Clockwise from far left:** Gtas Awad, media manager and recruiter of al-Wakil's NDF in connection with minors like Abu Naim, seen here looking at his phone; Charles de Meyer (in white T-shirt holding his chin); Benjamin Blanchard (in black T-shirt), the head of SOSCO; Alexandre Goodarzy, the head of mission Syria at this time (in black and red); Salem Albarni (Syrian intelligence and close to Mhardeh's NDF, seen leaning on the far right dressed in military fatigue pants and a black t-shirt); and members of SOSCO surround and talk with Simon al-Wakil, seen here seated in military fatigues looking at his phone. (Credit: NDF Facebook page. Published on Facebook July 17, 2017.)



description of the post: "SOS visited the front line of the army and the NDF front line in Zalin and Zalakiat."

Each defense partner of the French Defense Ministry is assigned a National Guard point of contact within its organization, who liaises with the ministry. New Lines asked the Ministry of Defense if Gicquel, who is a member of the LinkedIn group Operational National Guard Point of Contact, was its National Guard point of contact with SOSCO. The Ministry did not respond to New Lines' numerous attempts to get an answer.

SOSCO appears to have further used its position as a French NGO to facilitate travel and meetings between French politicians and pro-Assad Syrian officials. These meetings appear to be in contravention of both the NGO's own assertion of being an apolitical charity – as it states on its website – and the French government's official policy of non-engagement with the Assad regime.

SOSCO also apparently leveraged its relationship with the French Defense Ministry to raise funds for the town of Mhardeh, which is in a predominantly Christian area of Syria, allegedly including funds for al-Wakil and his militia. In November 2019, for instance, SOSCO hosted a fundraiser in the prestigious Turenne Room of the Army Museum in Paris, a facility managed by the French Defense Ministry. This event occurred four months before the ministry sent an email to New Lines stating that the "partnership" with SOSCO was to be dissolved. The price for renting the room is 8,000 euros that goes

21:39

**Catherine Deroche**  @CDeroche\_Senat

Au groupe réflexion Chrétiens d'Orient échangés avec Mgr Nicolas Baalbaki, métropolite de **Hama** en Syrie

17:12 · 26/11/2019 · Twitter for iPhone

2 J'aime

Tweetez votre réponse.

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A tweet by Catherine Deroche, senator (The Republicans) and member of the interparliamentary friendship or liaison group for Eastern Christians. Translation: "At the Eastern Christians reflection group, discussions with Bishop Nicolas Baalbaki, Metropolitan of Hamah in Syria"

to the state. The ministry never answered New Lines' question of whether SOSCO was allowed to use the room for free or if the organization rented it.

The event also appears to have been an extension of the political right's rapprochement with the Assad regime during a time when France officially sought to hold the regime responsible for its crimes

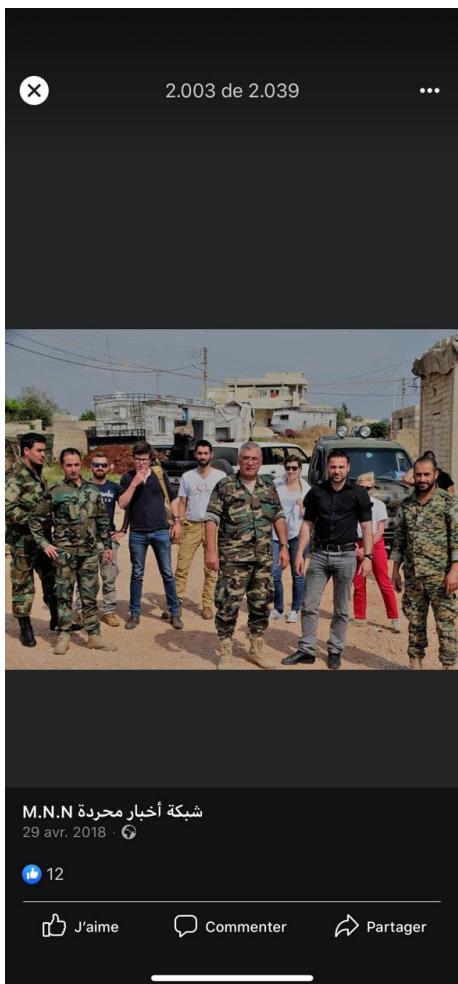
against humanity. In attendance at the Turenne Room fundraiser was Bishop Nicholas Baalbaki, the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan for Hamah, who maintains cordial relations with al-Wakil. Baalbaki had met with Gicquel in Mhardeh in January 2020 and was hosted at the French Senate on that trip.

In a separate incident, at a non-public hearing on managing the allocation of Foreign Ministry funds to NGOs, a senator tweeted a photo showing that Baalbaki was accompanied by Tala Massaad, who at that time was in charge of raising institutional funds for SOSCO. New Lines asked the Foreign Ministry about the appearance or actuality of a conflict of interest due to the presence of a NGO fundraiser at the committee's hearing but has received no answer to the query.

## SOSCO and the Assad Regime

Since March 2021, SOSCO has admitted openly on its social media accounts to its relationship with the Syria Trust for Development, an umbrella organization that operates under the auspices of Syria's first lady, Asma al-Assad. Both the trust and the first lady are sanctioned by the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

This partnership started in 2016, when SOSCO began transferring to Syria Trust for Development an estimated 200,000 euros "per contract renewal," according to a source who used to work for SOSCO who spoke to New Lines on condition of anonymity. "The partnership is a memorandum of understanding. They weren't



Salem Alabarni, Alexandre Goodarzy (SOSCO), Simon al-Wakil, and "Assad Abou Adlah" stand with SOSCO volunteers. (Mhardeh News Network Facebook page. Published on Facebook April 29, 2018.)

there to carry out projects, but to support the government," the source added. The last renewal was discussed and implemented after June 20, 2020, after the application of the Caesar Law, according to information given to New Lines.

Syria has strict laws that compel NGOs to work closely with the Assad regime. An organization called al-Karma, apparently created

**“Another connection to the Assad regime runs through Salem Alabarni . . . Alabarni is a Syrian army officer who, according to a leaked document with names of soldiers New Lines has in its possession, is working for Syrian Air Force Intelligence.”**

solely to facilitate SOSCO's dealings inside Syria and founded by Hala Chawi, who works closely with Syria's first lady, sponsored SOSCO and facilitated its operations and movement of money in the country.

"Hala Chawi and Alexandre Goodarzy were the holders of the bank account at Fransabank in Syria, which covered small-scale projects and salaries. Money was also coming through northern Iraq until 2019," a former SOSCO employee told New Lines.

Rami Makhlof, the president's cousin and former head of the al-Bustan association (now controlled by the first lady's organization), owned stocks in Syria's Fransabank and Byblosbank until the Assad regime seized his holdings in 2020. Fransabank appears on the list of banks sanctioned under the U.S. Caesar Act.<sup>3</sup>

According to people close to Chawi who spoke to New Lines on condition of anonymity, Chawi acted as a de facto ambassador of the Assad regime during her trips to France, attempting to bolster

ties between the two countries, especially with the French political right: "For a time, 'emissaries' would travel abroad to speak in the [Syrian] government's name. Chawi was among them. She was the intermediary, carrying information as to what the Syrian government wanted and what the French government wanted to hear," one source said.

Another connection to the Assad regime runs through Salem Alabarni, who regularly accompanies the militia leader al-Wakil's son and appears in photos with alleged SOSCO members, notably during gatherings at restaurants. Alabarni is a Syrian army officer who, according to a leaked document with names of soldiers New Lines has in its possession, is working for Syrian Air Force Intelligence. A leaflet sent to the organization's donors includes a photograph of Assad Abou Adlah, a senior figure in al-Wakil's militia who reportedly also appears in pictures with al-Wakil, Goodarzy (the NGO's former head of mission for Syria), and other SOSCO volunteers.



## The Alleged War Crimes of SOSCO Ally al-Wakil

Al-Wakil, a former water utility company employee, rose out of obscurity because he wanted to create a pro-Assad militia drawn mostly from the youth of his town: Mhardeh, a merchant town, located in a predominantly Christian enclave in Syria's Hamah Governorate. There was nothing unique about this endeavor. Local pro-Assad militias – the NDFs – began to sprout throughout Syria as early as 2012 in areas controlled by the regime. They paid their recruits a higher salary than that of Syrian Arab Army conscripts, and the Assad regime counted this recruitment in lieu of the mandatory military service for Syria's male citizens.

At first, young men eagerly joined these groups for the stated purpose of keeping law and order and protecting their local towns and villages. At that time, joining the NDF also appeared to be a good way to avoid the high risk that conscripts faced in the Syrian army as the war escalated and the Assad regime was accused of using conscripts as cannon fodder. (While statistics are difficult to come by, there was a time during Syria's war when soldiers were expected to be killed in action within weeks of conscription, and even staunch Assad loyalists eschewed sending their sons into the mandatory army service.)

But the illusion that joining an NDF brought safety quickly dissipated as NDFs began to take part in military offensives alongside the Syrian army, often with the promise

**“ They farm the land like it’s their own and sell the produce to the Assad regime. ”**

Faisal al-Hassan, *activist*

of looting property in defeated areas that had been held by rebels or Sunni civilians who were automatically perceived as hostile to Assad. Acting as the regime's shabiha (goons or henchmen), many NDFs stand accused of committing war crimes,<sup>4</sup> according to international rights organizations<sup>5</sup> and thousands of victim testimonies.

From their early days, these NDFs received funding, training, and materiel from Iran, and later they received additional support from Russia. But al-Wakil and his NDF from Mhardeh, as well as an affiliate militia known as the NDF of Suqaylabiyah, led by Nabeul al-Abdullah, stand out from the rest because they formed a close relationship with SOSCO. The French charity's relationship with the militias predates 2016: "SOS was present in Mhardeh and Suqaylabiyah, in the Hamah area, as early as 2014," Syrian lawyer and activist Abdel Nasser Hoshan told New Lines, echoing other sources who lived in the area at that time.

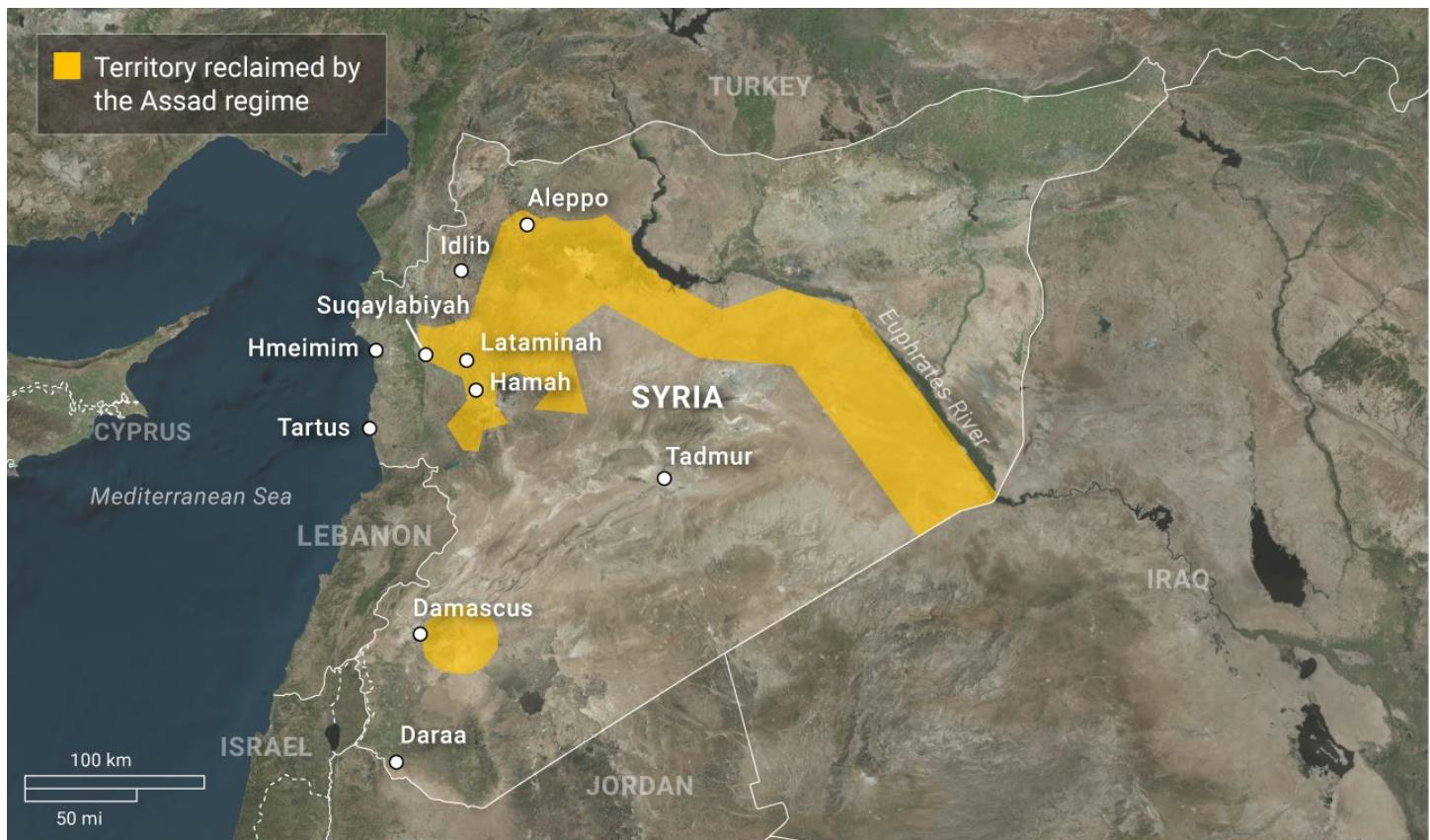
New Lines gathered further testimony and open source information to highlight some of the most egregious crimes committed by Assad forces and militias, including the Mhardeh and Suqaylabiyah NDFs, during a period that overlaps with the militias' well-documented relationship

with SOSCO and at least the Mhardeh NDF's alleged financial relationship with the NGO.

### **Seizing Land, Displacing Landowners**

The agricultural town of Lataminah sits 4 kilometers (about 2.5 miles) as the crow flies from Mhardeh – 10 kilometers by car. On the eve of Syria's civil war, Lataminah was home to 6,500 inhabitants, most of them land-owning farmers. Today, all of Lataminah's surviving inhabitants, along with the inhabitants of surrounding villages, have been displaced, many into refugee camps in northern Syria or as refugees in Turkey and elsewhere. A similar dynamic has unfolded in the villages surrounding Suqaylabiyah. The farms belonging to the displaced Syrians – over 90,000 hectares (over 222,000 acres) of agricultural land – have been appropriated by Assad regime forces and militias, allegedly including the NDFs from Mhardeh and Suqaylabiyah.

"They farm the land like it's their own and sell the produce to the Assad regime," Faisal al-Hassan told New Lines during a call over the internet. Al-Hassan, an activist who fought against Assad's forces and militias when he joined the armed rebellion early in the conflict, hails from the village of Alkareem,



Source: Abdel Nasser Hoshan

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located 4 kilometers from Suqaylabiyah. He currently lives in Idlib province.

He further recalled: "When the regime attacked our village, their forces would send the Suqaylabiyah militia first, men we all knew personally, as if to tell us that these people whom we had always known were now going to kill us – like a deliberate attempt at ensuring sectarian tensions."

As this report was being written, New Lines learned that the Assad regime had announced a public auction to harvest pistachios from 50,000 dunum (12,355 acres) of appropriated farmland in the Ghab region, where al-Wakil and his militia played a significant role over the years in displacing

the private farmers. The official document announcing the auction, which New Lines acquired, was issued on July 5 by the governor of Hamah, Mohammad Tareq Kreishati. According to Hoshan, the local authorities have issued a preliminary list of the farm plots (and the names of the corresponding displaced owners) designated for appropriation in the harvest scheduled to begin after July 20. The harvest was widely expected to benefit about a dozen local pistachio traders who had curried favor with the Assad regime during the war, including contributing to the funding of NDFs. The displaced pistachio farm owners will receive no compensation. Last year and 2019 saw a similar appropriation of pistachio and other harvests.

The timeline that led up to the displacement of tens of thousands of Syrians from these areas mirrors the war tactics employed elsewhere in Syria since the uprising began in 2011.

Months into the initial protests against the Assad regime in March 2011, government forces placed missile batteries and guns inside areas that it firmly held – often in places situated on higher ground. Regime forces aimed the weaponry at areas that had become controlled by rebels or that the regime considered "hospitable" to the rebellion. The way this tactic unfolded in Mhardeh had an added layer of complexity because the regime placed its guns and missile batteries on the grounds of a religious landmark,



“ Local sources told New Lines that dissent against NDF commanders like al-Wakil was akin to openly opposing the Assad regime, which during the war meant an automatic designation by the regime and its pawns as a ‘terrorist.’ ”

St. George’s Monastery, in effect transforming a place of worship to an artillery position. This is a violation of international law (Article 53, Protocol I of the Geneva Convention) and of norms on the protection of cultural property and places of worship. The systemic militarization of religious symbols and property has also had a chilling effect on religious and sectarian relations within the Syrian population.

From its artillery position at St. George’s Monastery, the regime

continually shelled the Sunni villages that sit slightly below the gun’s horizon. Hoshan, the Syrian activist and lawyer, told New Lines that shelling from the monastery grounds was constant. He listed the villages and towns in that area that were targeted by artillery and missiles: Lataminah, Kafr Zita, Hamamiyat, Zakat, Karnaz, Kafr Nabudah, al-Habit, Kafr Ein, and Abdeen.

Rifaat Khaled Abbas (also known as Abu Hamzah) is an activist from Lataminah currently displaced in Turkey. He told New Lines that the weapons fire from St. George’s resulted in at least 200 documented civilian deaths in and around Lataminah. (Abbas and his fellow activists have documented an additional 1,800 deaths of civilians that resulted from regime air raids.) He added that al-Wakil’s militia from Mhardeh came “many times” to Lataminah and other villages nearby to “loot, intimidate and kill.”

Local sources told New Lines that dissent against NDF commanders like al-Wakil was akin to openly opposing the Assad regime, which during the war meant an automatic designation by the regime and its pawns as a “terrorist.” This meant risking immediate imprisonment, torture, death, disappearance, exile, and/or the appropriation of property and land.

Christians and members of other religious minorities make up a sizable portion of political prisoners in Assad’s prisons, despite Assad’s assertion of being the protector of minorities. In Mhardeh, members of the Christian community for whom SOSCO claimed to be

raising funds in France remain reticent to voice any dissent, as al-Wakil allegedly has targeted his opponents for retribution.

“At least two Christians (in Mhardeh) have been reported missing. They were arrested, and their fate remains unknown to this day,” Hoshan told New Lines. “It struck terror among the population.”

Shortly before this report was written, Hoshan gathered new testimony from another Christian family from Suqaylabiyah who tried to escape but were arrested by Air Force intelligence in Aleppo. They were released after 20 days and sent back to Suqaylabiyah. They had been subject to a campaign of harassment from Nabeul al-Abdullah and his men.

## The IRGC Connection

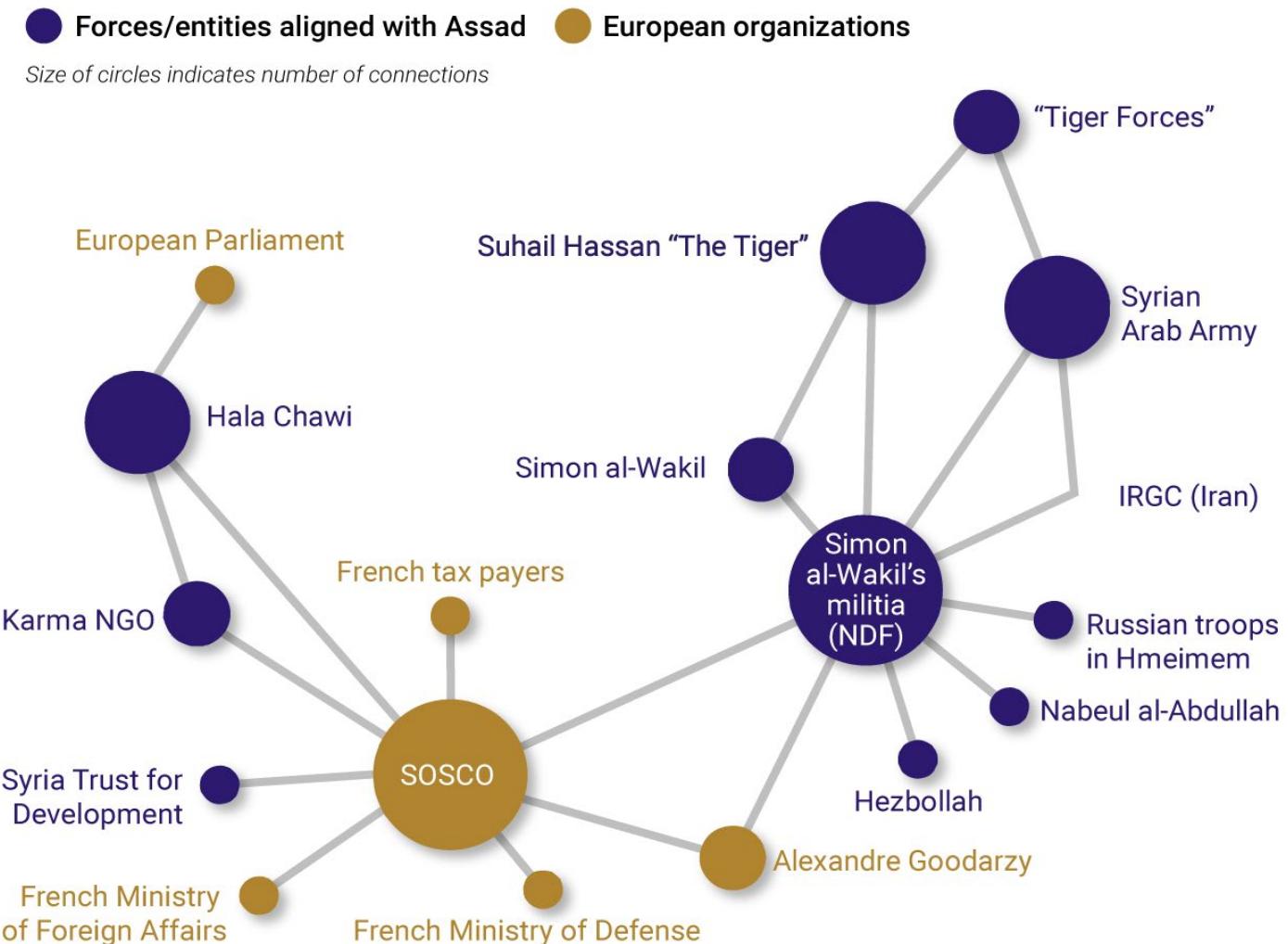
During his rise as a militia commander, al-Wakil allegedly received training and patronage from Brig. Gen. Suhail al-Hassan, a notorious pro-Assad warlord known by his nom de guerre “The Tiger.”

The Tiger fought under the command of Jamil Hassan (no relation), head of Syria’s Air Force Intelligence Branch, until July 2019. In 2018, France and Germany issued an arrest warrant for Hassan for his alleged crimes against humanity, including the killing, persecution, torture, and acts of sexual violence allegedly committed between September 2011 and June 2014 inside five Syrian Air Force Intelligence branches located in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hamah. Both The Tiger and Hassan have been sanctioned



# SOSCO's Social Network

How the NGO is linked to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad militias and to the French government



Sources: Open sources and social media

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by the United States' June 2019 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.

The Tiger and Hassan both have strong ties to Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on behalf of the Assad regime. Al-Wakil – who has maintained his relationship with The Tiger, according to sources in Syria – can be seen in at least one photograph with IRGC Quds Force

leader Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in January 2020.

The Tiger led a militia called the Tiger Forces, in which al-Wakil's son served as an officer, Hoshan told New Lines. "We can see him in photographs posing with his father, his family, and volunteers from the French NGO SOS Chrétiens d'Orient," he said.

## The Russian Connection

In August 2019, Assad incorporated the Tiger Forces into the Syrian Arab Army. The Tiger remained in place, while the group was renamed the 25th (Special) Forces Division. Concurrent with increasing Russian military activity in the country, this move marked a decline in independence for these



militias, some of which grew closer to the Russians.

In early 2020, al-Wakil and al-Abdullah, head of the NDF of Suqaylabiyah, both received a new “Loyalty Medal” from the Russian troops garrisoned at the Khmeimim air base.

Al-Wakil and al-Abdullah are close to Milad Jadid, head of the regime’s Military and Security Committee for Idlib from the fifth army corps (25th division), affiliated with the Russians. Jadid has been targeted for sanctions under the U.S. Caesar Act. The 16th brigade of Saleh al-Abdullah – who was head of the Mhardeh Military Committee at the St. George’s Monastery and has connections to al-Wakil – and the 25th brigade under The Tiger (both integrated into the fifth army corps), and the National Defense Forces of Mhardeh are all “affiliated with the Russians,” Hoshan told New Lines. He said that al-Wakil’s militia was affiliated with the Tiger Forces until 2019, and in early 2020 the militia joined the Russian forces garrisoned at Khmeimim. Hoshan confirmed that the militia “has links with the fifth army corps, which is supported by the Russians, and it is taking part in the Idlib campaign.”

## Al-Wakil’s Child Soldiers

For 50 years under the Assad regime, school children in Syria have undergone some form of light military training as part of their curriculum. This training usually involved physical calisthenics in the schoolyard, the assembly and disassembly of a rifle (usually a decommissioned weapon), and a primer on military history and



Waled (R, face blurred for security reasons) and NDF leader Simon al-Wakil in 2015. (Waled’s social media.)

ideological indoctrination into the Baath Party. But what has transpired in some townships during the war in Syria’s regime-controlled areas went above and beyond schoolyard pushups, as NDF commanders began in earnest recruiting and training middle and high school students with live

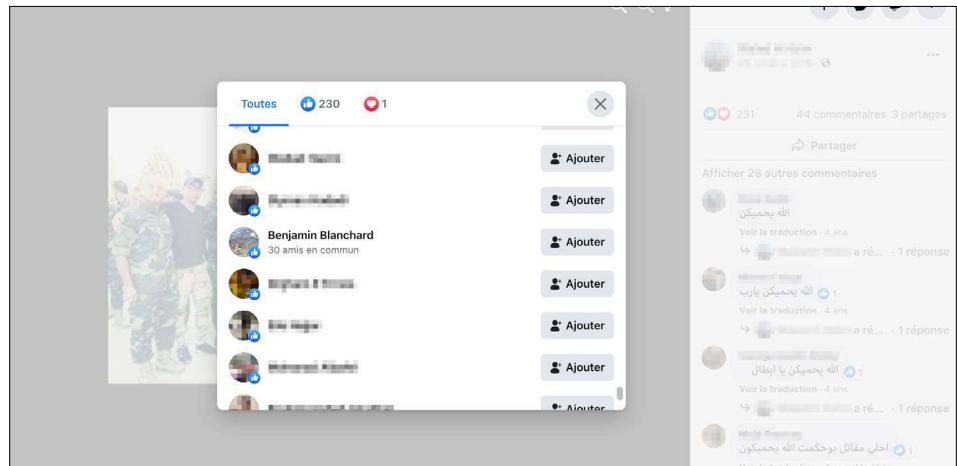
ammunition and introducing the very real possibility of their being sent to fight on the front line.

While identifying underage recruits can be difficult – especially since the age of combatants in Syria is not always accurately recorded – New Lines identified



recruits in photographs posted on social media accounts that belong to al-Wakil's group or its militia affiliates. Some of these recruits, boys and girls, appear to be pre-pubescent, donning military fatigues and engaging in military training with firearms. Hoshan said these recruits have "taken part in the fighting in Homs, Aleppo, Ghouta, Palmyra, and Idlib."

New Lines further identified recruits who survived fighting in battle as minors and reached out to them for comment. Abu Naim, from the village of Khnazier near Mhardeh, joined al-Wakil's militia at the age of 15, according to his family members who spoke to



Waled poses with NDF members. SOSCO's Benjamin Blanchard "liked" the photo. (Waled's social media. Posted Oct. 29, 2016.)

these authors. He was featured like other apparent child soldiers on the Facebook account of Gtas Awad, the "media and recruitment manager" of al-Wakil's NDF in Mhardeh. Abu Naim is Muslim, like nearly 15% of al-Wakil militia's youngest members, according to sources.

New Lines identified Abu Naim's social media account and reached out for comment. "I was 17 when I fought with al-Wakil's militia," he said through an online interview. He can be seen injured in a photo he uploaded to social media in 2018, and another photo of himself in military fatigues. He added that he had attended a one-month training course with al-Wakil prior to fighting in "the Salamiyah and Tadmur deserts and in the Sukhni mountains."

Al-Wakil and Awad did not respond to repeated attempts to reach them for comment.

During numerous interviews, Hoshan, who collects evidence

for the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, provided New Lines with testimony that sheds light on the workings of al-Wakil, including what has been known as "Lion Cub" training – a play on words, as Assad means "lion" in Arabic.

"There are several centers for military training in Mhardeh. The instructors are all from the National Defense Forces and supervised by al-Wakil, who is assisted by Colonel Adwan Mustafa," says Hoshan.

Waled – last name withheld by New Lines to protect his privacy, since he was a minor during these alleged events – was also part of al-Wakil's sphere. In 2014, he described himself on Facebook as a student at Mhardeh's Industrial School. "He was born in 2001," one of his former classmates confirmed. That same year, Waled posted the National Defense Forces' insignia on social media. The following year, in 2015, he can be seen standing next to al-Wakil in a photograph,



Teenagers at an open-air shooting range near St. George's Monastery in Mhardeh, 2015. (Mhardeh News Network's Facebook page. Published on Facebook July 12, 2015.)

while in 2016 and 2017 he is seen wearing a military outfit and bearing weapons. Waled can also be seen in the photographs at the age of 14 with other "lion cubs," boys and girls alike, at a 2015 ceremony in front of al-Wakil as well as Baath party member and commander of the Baath brigades Mustafa al-Sukari.

In photos, these underage recruits practice reloading weapons. Young girls in combat fatigues are training to become "lionesses of the National Defense Forces militia." Some of the photographs show the teenagers in an open-air shooting range, located south of St. George's monastery (Waled is also present), according to Hoshan. At this stage of the conflict, recruitment into the National Defense Forces was accepted by the Syrian government as an alternative to compulsory military service in the Syrian

Arab Army (SAA), which was less financially attractive.

Two witnesses from the area have identified several training camps in Mhardeh, such as that of the "thermal station." In the neighboring village of Suqaylabiyah, where the local head of the National Defense Forces, Nabeul al-Abdullah, is said to have perpetrated abuses alongside al-Wakil, one can see a training camp on photographs gathered from the Facebook accounts of combatants, identified through a list of National Defense Forces fighters. One of the instructors is Azzam Neemah, from Latakia, posing with the "lion cubs" in some of the photographs. By cross-referencing pictures, videos, and satellite imagery, New Lines was able to identify a building between the Martyr Yunis al-Ajj school and

the Muhammad al-Sheikh school. The photographs, branded with the logo of the National Defense Forces, feature child soldiers duck-walking while carrying artillery shells at arm's length.

According to Hoshan, "there are several centers for military training in Mhardeh." He continues: "The instructors are all from the National Defense Forces and supervised by al-Wakil, who is assisted by Colonel Adwan Mustafa." Another witness confirmed to these authors: "There are military trainings at the school of Arab Unity, where I was enrolled. I know Christian students who took part in these, but they won't discuss it with you because they fear al-Wakeel. Because of the intelligence services, I don't dare speak with my Christian friends anymore, for fear I might put their lives in danger."



Hoshan told New Lines that he has found the names of youths recruited when underage on “martyr lists” circulated among al-Wakil’s and Nabeul al-Abdullah’s NDF circles, which included teenagers as young as 14 killed in action during battles with the Islamic State in Palmyra. Among the “martyrs” were two minors from Mhardeh – the community that SOSCO claims to support – whom Hoshan identified as Shadi Dabaan and Rami Bassam Dergham, both killed in 2014 at the age of 15 while fighting at front lines hundreds of kilometers away from Mhardeh.

## ‘Horrible’ Photographic Evidence

New Lines has gathered detailed testimony from Syrians who have identified the remains of loved ones in the Caesar Files – leaked photographs delivered to the U.N.-created International Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria. These photographs came from a former military photographer code-named Caesar,<sup>6</sup> who fled Syria in 2013 with an archive of over 55,000 photographs.

France, ironically, delivered the original Caesar report<sup>7</sup> to the U.N. Security Council on April 4, 2014, as evidence against the brutality of the Assad regime before Russia and China vetoed a resolution to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court. “The authenticity of the photographic images obtained from ‘Caesar’ has been confirmed through in-depth expert analysis. These horrific photos suggest that some 11,000 Syrians have been tortured and executed in the regime’s prisons since the start

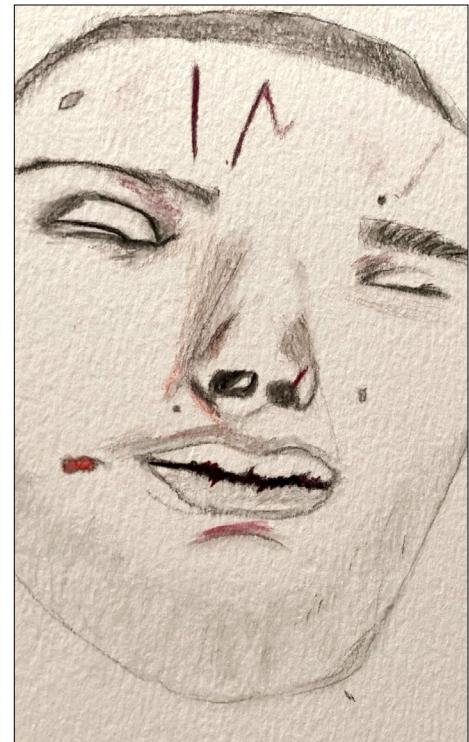
of the conflict,” France’s letter to the council states.

The Caesar documents could be a trove of material evidence in any future international effort to prosecute the war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Assad government. In Germany, they are being used, for the first time, as part of a historic trial in which one of the defendants has already been sentenced to four and a half years in prison.

New Lines reached out to witnesses who allege that their loved ones were killed or disappeared on orders given by al-Wakil and/or members of his militia. Some of these witnesses have asked that their names be withheld for security reasons.

### Testimonial #1: Said al-Baroudi (28, from Halfaya, northwest of Hamah)

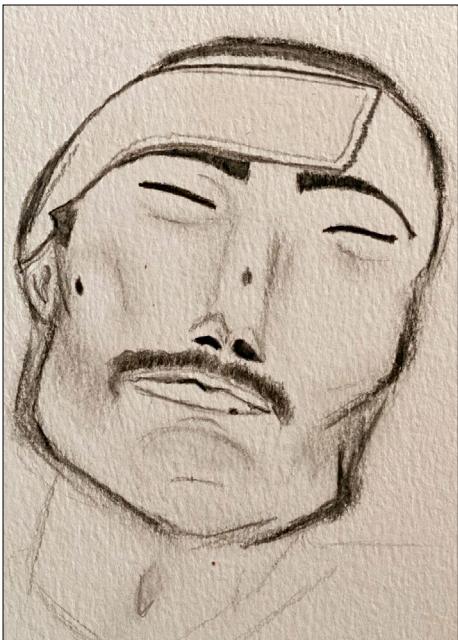
*I want you to quote me – after what I have been through, I am no longer afraid. I have lost everything because of al-Wakil and the war. After seven years of waiting, I recognized my father Nayef al-Baroudi and my uncle in the “Caesar” photographs published on the Internet (Said’s father and uncle disappeared in 2013). They were abducted by al-Wakil’s militia – I received confirmation of their kidnapping from some of the residents in Mhardeh, where the militia has its headquarters. They described his arrest at the “Ghada Shuaa” checkpoint (named after the former Syrian Olympic champion who was born in Mhardeh). My father was a civilian who worked as a humanitarian with the Red*



Sketch of Said al-Baroudi’s uncle from the “Caesar” documents/website of the Syrian Association For Missing And Conscience Detainees.

*Crescent. He knew that al-Wakil looted and extorted the inhabitants of our village, Halfaya, a few kilometers away from Mhardeh.*

*My father confronted him, and that led to his arrest. Al-Wakil’s men first threatened him, then organized a “raid,” shooting at his car on al-Wakil’s order. Later, my father received an invitation from him, to discuss his work. Al-Wakil said he would offer humanitarian assistance to those affected by the Syrian regime’s oppression. He went to the meeting thinking he could help, with his car loaded with humanitarian aid for the needy and the poor. We never saw him again after that. Since my father worked for the Red Crescent, I reached out to ask them for help, but they did nothing. Nine members*



Sketch of Said al-Baroudi's father from the "Caesar" documents/website of the Syrian Association For Missing And Conscience Detainees.

*of my family have been killed in total by al-Wakil's militia. I had to exile myself in Turkey.*

Al-Baroudi's father was assigned the number "186713 – 248, military investigation services." He also found the remains of his uncle, Abdul al-Mu'in al-Baroudi.

Al-Baroudi's father and uncle are not isolated cases. Al-Baroudi shared with New Lines the stories of other people he recognized in the Caesar Files, all civilians, whose disappearances have been attributed to al-Wakil's militia.

### **Testimonial #2: Al-Rabeeh al-Hamwi (another young man from Halfaya)**

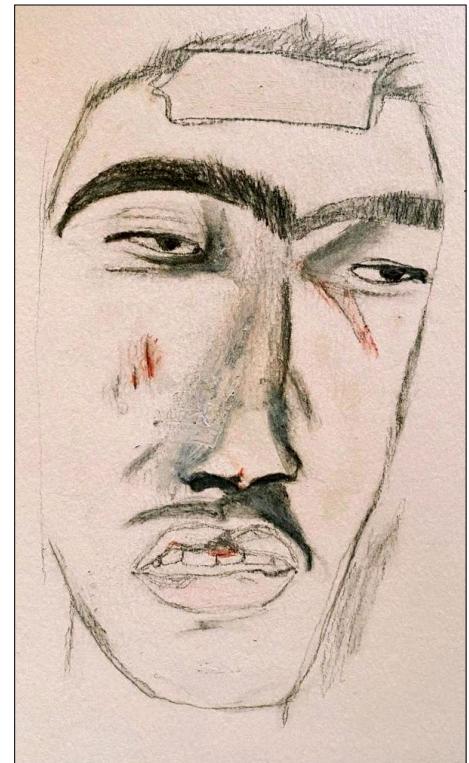
*I discovered the "Caesar" photographs on social networks and in the media. I looked at each group*

*of pictures. With every click of the mouse, I was expecting to stumble upon one of my relatives or friends who had been arrested – many of them have landed in Assad's prisons. It is hard to describe how I felt: I flicked through the pictures apprehensively, expecting to recognize someone I knew, until I did. It was my uncle, a construction worker. He disappeared in 2012. Al-Wakil played a central role in the arrest of a large number of people, including three of my relatives and numerous friends who went missing in Mhardeh and the surrounding area because of his armed group. His militia operates outside the authority of the state. The only law they follow is that of chaos, theft, and looting – all with the backing of the Russians. I was there when his militia entered my village Halfaya more than four times to steal and loot everything they could find from our houses and stores.*

Al-Hamwi's uncle Tariq al-Jubaili appears in the Caesar Files with the identifier "807008-215 raid and assault company."

### **Testimonial #3: Abdel Nasser Hoshan**

*I deal with documents and investigations that may one day contribute to a Syrian-led transitional justice process in the country, when Syria transitions toward a democratic system. My office was sacked in 2011 and destroyed in 2012. I was documenting the Syrian revolution. A large number of incriminatory documents went up in smoke, especially those relating to the city of Mhardeh. Then they went straight to my home – they burnt my brothers' motorcycles and*



Sketch of Al-Rabeeh al-Hamwi's uncle from the "Caesar" documents/website of the Syrian Association For Missing And Conscience Detainees.

*threatened to kill me and set me on fire. Witnesses think those responsible were al-Wakil's men. They could tell by the dialect they spoke. I regularly travelled to Mhardeh for my work because of the courts there. As early as the 1980s, some of Mhardeh's inhabitants were known for carrying out "mafia work" on the regime's order. These shabiha were the ones doing the "dirty work." At that time, I was working as an investigator for the military courts. Some militia leaders were tried for murder, kidnappings, prostitution, and drug trafficking. Current militia leaders were part of all this. I also found 11 people kidnapped by al-Wakil in the "Caesar" files, like Tariq Muhammad Jubayli and Ahmed*



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Abdel Kafi Daaboul. For the most part, they were civilian construction workers or farmers.

#### Testimonial #4: Fouad, who withheld his last name for security reasons, a former resident of Halfaya

*I recognized three people kidnapped by al-Wakil's militia thanks to the "Caesar" files. Since 2017, my village has been under the control of al-Wakil's militia. I survived two massacres that they perpetrated in 2012.*

He added that, based on his firsthand account, SOSCO "is raising funds for the militia under the guise of aid."

#### Further Testimonies Detailing al-Wakil's Alleged Massacres

Syrians who have been displaced from villages around Mhardeh recalled to New Lines that among the more infamous massacres in that area was one that unfolded on Dec. 16, 2012, in the township of Halfaya, and another that occurred on March 15, 2013, in the township of Kfarhod. These massacres were allegedly carried out by al-Wakil and his men and, in the case of Halfaya, by al-Wakil and his associate Saleh al-Abdullah, according to witnesses who spoke on the record with New Lines.

"They cut the power off at 8 p.m., and the shabiha attacked our houses. They killed four of my relatives," said Sayyid Ahad Mehdi, a former resident of Kfarhod currently living in a refugee camp in northern Syria.

**“ It [record of mission orders] proves the shabiha operated in areas such as Halfaya and Suran, where there were murders, destruction, looting, and massacres. ”**

**Abdel Nasser Hoshan**  
*Syrian lawyer and activist*

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"They had rifles and AK-47s. My younger brother heard al-Wakil's voice, and then recognized the militia leader. In the past, al-Wakil had separated my brother from our father to arrest him. People in the area know al-Wakil because of the crimes he has committed," said Ali Khaled al-Ali, also a former resident of Kfarhod who now lives in a refugee camp in northern Syria.

Hoshan, the Syrian lawyer, contextualized the events in Kfarhod by saying, "The operation was launched in retaliation to an attack by the rebels on government forces 10 days prior."

Among his growing collection of documents and records, Hoshan keeps records of mission orders. He has one dated Feb. 2, 2014, stamped and signed by the NDF commanders. The document lists, for example, the names of al-Wakil's militiamen participating in the attacks.

Hoshan said, "It proves the shabiha operated in areas such as Halfaya and Suran, where there were murders, destruction, looting, and massacres. Combatants affiliated to al-Wakil participated in the Suran

massacre on Feb. 8, 2014. There was another one in 2012. Through my research, I've identified some 1,365 fighters linked to al-Wakil. Two hundred and fifty people from Halfaya have disappeared. In addition to Kafr Hood, there are 13 additional massacres that al-Wakil's militia took part in, such as in Lataminah and al-Qubair." An official report dated June 6, 2012, and acquired by New Lines researchers describes the post-mortem carried out on civilians from al-Qubair, a massacre acknowledged by the U.N.

"The witnesses who brought the bodies to the hospitals accused al-Wakil's militia," said Hoshan. "The coroner's and prosecutor's reports which I read mention women and a 3-year-old girl, murdered at point-blank range. I have a record of over 350 deaths, and the militia's influence spreads further out than Mhardeh's area," he continued.

#### How SOSCO Funneled Money to al-Wakil

The relationship between SOSCO and al-Wakil was so intimate that the French charity gave money



directly to the militia commander, according to former SOSCO employees who spoke with New Lines on condition of anonymity.

A SOSCO whistleblower added, "It has happened that Alexandre Goodarzy brought cash directly to Simon al-Wakil." But with the other militia leader, Nabeul al-Abdullah, "SOSCO didn't have the same relationship."

Several other sources (former SOSCO employees and non-SOSCO-affiliated witnesses) confirmed to New Lines that SOSCO directly funneled money to al-Wakil. A SOSCO whistleblower who spoke to New Lines on condition of anonymity said the organization's invoices show that between 2016 and 2019 it had given an estimated 46,000 euros (almost \$55,000 U.S.) "to Mhardeh." The whistleblower spoke of a "system" in which "the cash came from outside Syria."

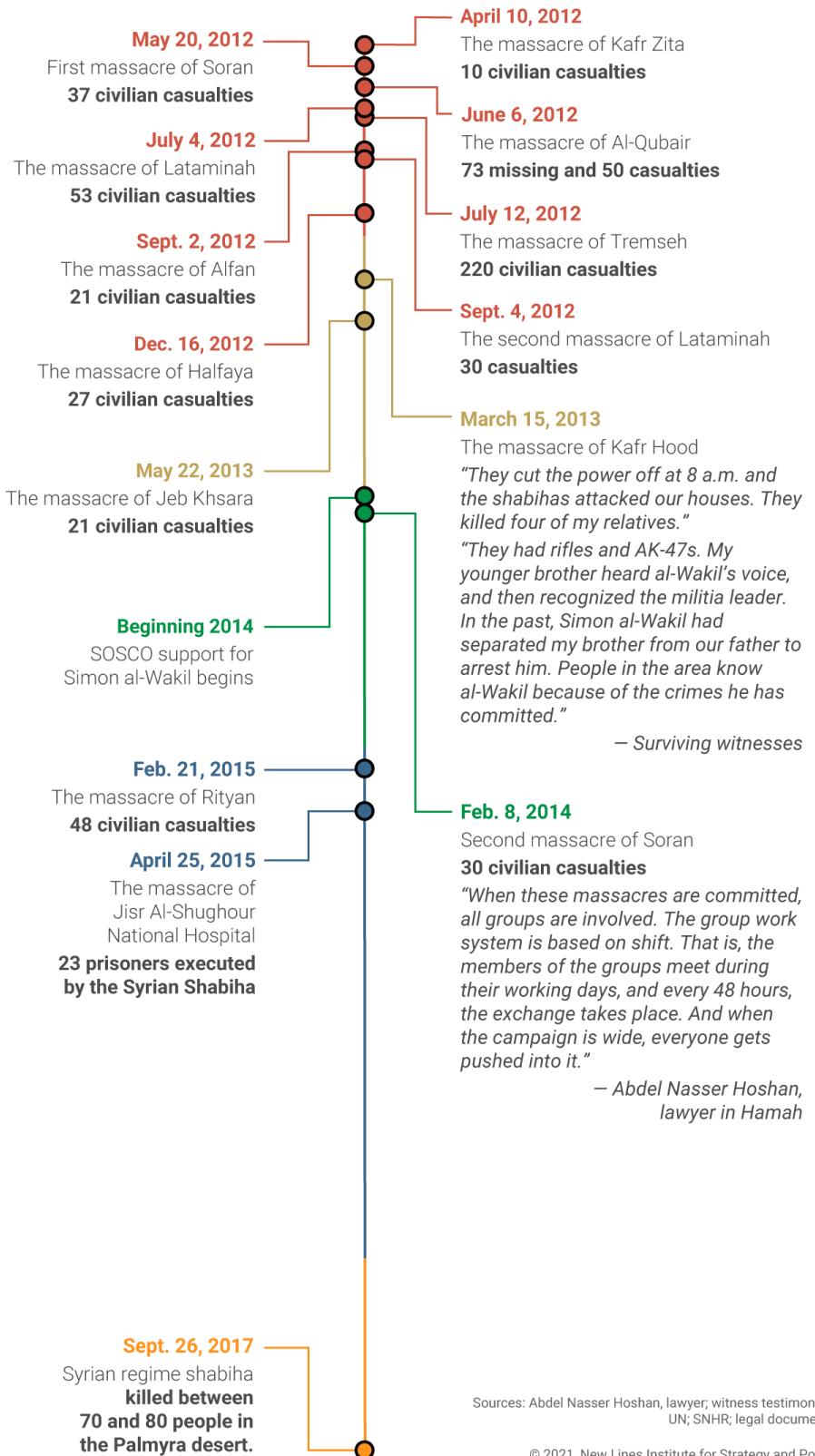
"In Mhardeh, it happened that Alexandre Goodarzy would give money to Simon al-Wakil. He would sometimes have employees make invoices for car maintenance, for example, to account for the money he gave al-Wakil," the whistleblower continued.

"Alexandre Goodarzy was a free spirit; his agenda was not humanitarian," a former SOSCO employee said.

Later in the report, the auditor lists five foreign countries where SOSCO keeps some of its funds, including Syria.

"In Mhardeh, it was like a bribing system. SOSCO was not there to work on projects, or very little

## Massacres Linked to al-Wakil





“SOSCO ‘volunteers’ allegedly acted as cash mules, stuffing cash into envelopes and carrying them on their person across the border into Syria from Lebanon or Iraq or bringing the cash directly from France.”

– they were there so they could say they were in Mhardeh, they paid for the NGO’s public relations and communications, because campaigns focused on Mhardeh raised a lot of money during fundraising in France,” a former employee said, adding that SOSCO “falsified invoices” to cover up the funneling of money into Syria between 2018 and 2019.

According to the whistleblower and other former SOSCO staff inside Syria, SOSCO stopped paying them around January 2020, with some staff members owed up to six months of wages. Moreover, SOSCO’s Syria mission

has been reshuffled, and the current head of SOSCO there is Syrian national Wael Kasouha, a known regime insider.

In order to funnel money into Syria, where the international financial system no longer operates due to sanctions, SOSCO apparently had to transit its funds in financial institutions in other countries, namely Iraq and Lebanon, where it had established a local presence. A former SOSCO employee confirmed that “money for Syria would go through Lebanon and Iraq.”

From there, SOSCO “volunteers” allegedly acted as cash mules, stuffing cash into envelopes and carrying them on their person across the border into Syria from Lebanon or Iraq or bringing the cash directly from France, according to testimony gathered by New Lines from whistleblowers. (The use of cash mules to circumvent international sanctions and transport money into Syria is a widely used practice that individuals and many organizations who operate inside Syria still rely upon.)

It is not clear if the SOSCO “volunteers” were able to use what is known as the “VIP” or “military road” that links Lebanon and Syria by circumventing the border crossing, but witnesses inside Syria have told New Lines that SOSCO personnel “traveled with Syrian military and intelligence escorts once they were inside Syria,” especially during their numerous trips on the highway from Damascus to Hamah province, where they met with al-Wakil

and Nabeul al-Abdullah, the NDF commander in Suqaylabiyah.

A former SOSCO employee who spoke with New Lines explained: “SOSCO needed Mhardeh more than Mhardeh needed them. Al-Wakil did not need SOSCO. The NGO’s fundraising campaigns for Mhardeh were its most successful. That’s why everyone turned a blind eye despite knowing this was contrary to humanitarian law.” In 2019, al-Wakil stood in a video next to Goodarzy, SOSCO’s Head of Mission in Syria. Carrying a child in his arms, al-Wakil said, “Hello dear people from Lyon, and greetings to our French friends, I thank them for their help here in Mhardeh, this peaceful Christian city,” a few days before a fundraising event organized by the French NGO.

In 2016, another former SOSCO employee who spoke with New Lines raised concerns with SOSCO’s directors regarding the lack of traceability of funds sent to Lebanon to the tune of “20,000 to 30,000 euros” monthly. The email, which New Lines has acquired, mentions the potential “risk” run by volunteers bringing the cash into the country in “envelopes.” According to a source formerly part of the NGO, only a share of these funds was intended for the office in Lebanon. In order to circumvent international sanctions on Syria, money moved through Lebanon and Iraq, according to witnesses. SOSCO’s auditor noted in his 2016 report that the NGO’s “growth and the context of their operations in the field made it difficult” to reconcile with certain documentation. “The documents provided did not allow us to verify



the reality of the balance of six accounts, including five abroad (342,486.07 euros)," the auditor continued. The same problem was noted in the NGO's auditor report made public in 2017 in the Official Journal: "The documents provided did not allow us to verify the reality of the balance of six accounts, including five abroad, with a value of 468,286.13 euros (six sworn statements were submitted to explain the balance)."

According to a former SOSCO employee who spoke with New Lines, "SOSCO has a bank account in Syria so that their financial operations in the country are legal."

A Syrian researcher close to the international coalition, Mzahem al-Saloum, estimated al-Wakil's war booty to be \$6 million.

Al-Saloum provided New Lines with an uncirculated report that he put together based on detailed interviews with sources in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The report paints a damning picture of SOSCO funneling money from international donors, mainly in France, to Assad regime militias with impunity. The report alleges this was something of an open secret.

According to al-Saloum's report, "There is a close relationship between Simon al-Wakil (in Syria) and SOSCO – Alexandre Goodarzy, in particular – considered to spearhead money delivery operations to al-Wakil, and secure banks in Iraq to receive money from France and other EU countries. Alexandre Goodarzy secures the arrival of money into Syria." Another segment says that: "Several countries send financial support



Waled (front left) and other "lion cubs" take part in firearms activities during a ceremony. (MNN's Facebook)

to the city of Mhardeh, which all gets funneled to Simon al-Wakil. Simon al-Wakil has sent reports to the foreign affairs ministries of the following countries (France, United Kingdom, Sweden, United States, Switzerland) on the situation of Christians and of the region in general. But these countries know that this support goes to armed groups. The country al-Wakil's militia draws the most money from is France, followed by the United Kingdom. The money comes from Christian charities, who are aware it goes to military operations."

In the United Kingdom, Lord Hylton raised the issue of Mhardeh as early as September 2014,<sup>8</sup> asking "Her Majesty's Government what measures they and their allies are taking to prevent the Syrian town of Mhardeh from falling to

attacks by Islamist militants." Baroness Anelay of St. Johns, the Minister of State of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, answered: "We are extremely concerned about the activities of Islamist extremists in Syria and the threat they pose to Christian communities in Mhardeh and elsewhere. Our response is to support the moderate opposition who are fighting both extremism and Assad's tyranny. We are acting in close coordination with our international allies. We are also pushing for an inclusive political process, which is the only long term way to protect Syria's minority communities."

France's Foreign Ministry did not respond to New Lines' queries about SOSCO despite numerous attempts to get a response.



## A Kidnapping in Iraq

On Jan. 20, 2020, three SOSCO employees and their Iraqi translator disappeared in Baghdad: Antoine Brochon (former head of mission for Iraq), Julien Dittmar, Goodarzy (SOSCO's head of mission in Syria at the time), and translator Tariq Mattoka. According to a source who spoke to New Lines on condition of anonymity, the four men had been on their way to meet with then-French diplomat Jean-Noël Baléo.

Blanchard, the head of SOSCO, later declared on the NGO's website that they had come to Baghdad to "renew their visa and register the NGO with the Iraqi authorities." Goodarzy had joined Brochon in Iraq. Then the SOSCO employees and their translator were declared missing from the area "near the French Embassy," according to SOSCO's director.

New Lines researchers learned from sources close to local intelligence and the international coalition forces that the SOSCO four were kidnapped in their car by armed men in a 4x4 in the Karrada area.

"The abductors, close to Shia militias, brought the four members of the NGO to the 'Canal army'/al-Jaish Channel Road," explained al-Saloum, who investigated the kidnapping in his report.

This location was also confirmed by the late Husham al-Hashimi, a respected terrorism analyst. "They were brought to Zayouna, and then east of the Canal," he told these authors. He added that a

man known as Abu Alaa al-Wala'i, who heads the Sayed al-Shuhada brigades, had been in charge of the operation. Al-Hashimi as well as al-Saloum's report and other confidential sources reached by New Lines confirmed the alleged identity of the kidnappers being "a faction called 'Ashab al-Kahf' (the People of the Cave)."

Katyusha cells – small, nimble militias funded by the pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization Forces, also called the Hashd al-Shaabi – have grown in number and been integrated into the Iraqi security apparatus following the death of Soleimani. The Hashd al-Shaabi is an influential paramilitary organization, multi-sectarian but with a Shiite majority, which features a wide range of sub-groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah or the Iranian Hezbollah. These Katyusha cells, like the "People of the Cave," count among their fighters from Abu Alaa Al-Wala's Sayed al-Shuhada faction, which al-Hashimi referred to. This faction is also known in the Mosul area.

Al-Saloum's report said that information showed a member of the Hashd al-Shaabi "called 'Murtada al-Husseini' was among the kidnappers. At the time, there were contacts between France and Iraqi PM Adel Abdul-Mahdi's government. The PM immediately contacted the head of the Badr Hadi Al-Amiri group to intervene on the issue, as well as Faleh al-Fayyad, inside the al-Hashd ash-Sha'bī."

At the time, al-Fayyad was the head of the Iraqi National Security Council. He is known for his close

relationship with Iran. "He in turn entrusted the case to a person known as 'Abu Fadak,' an influential man in militia circles," the report continued. He is today the head of the Hashd al-Shaabi, after succeeding Abu Muhandis, who was killed alongside Soleimani. "Abu Fadak," who was close to Soleimani, was the Secretary-General of Kata'ib Hezbollah.

"A meeting was held in Hadi al-Amiri's house in the Jadriya neighborhood to solve the situation. The withdrawal of French forces from Iraq was given as a condition for their release, and soon after, the militias obtained a commitment to withdraw. This is what happened in March 2020," concluded the report.

In northern Iraq, a major from Kurdish intelligence services who works around the Qaraqosh-Bartella area, the hometown of SOSCO's Iraqi translator Mattoka, corroborated this version. "The incident stemmed from political reasons which indirectly concern French forces. According to the information we currently have available, the four NGO members were kidnapped by the 'intelligence wing' of the al-Hashd ash-Sha'bī, who have authority in Baghdad, under the pretext that the four individuals were 'missionaries supporting demonstrators in Tahrir square' but who in secret were used to pressure the French embassy. They targeted French citizens to demand the withdrawal of French forces from Taji camp (25 kilometers north of Baghdad), and this is what happened."

Between March 11 and March 14, 2020, the Iran-backed Kata'ib



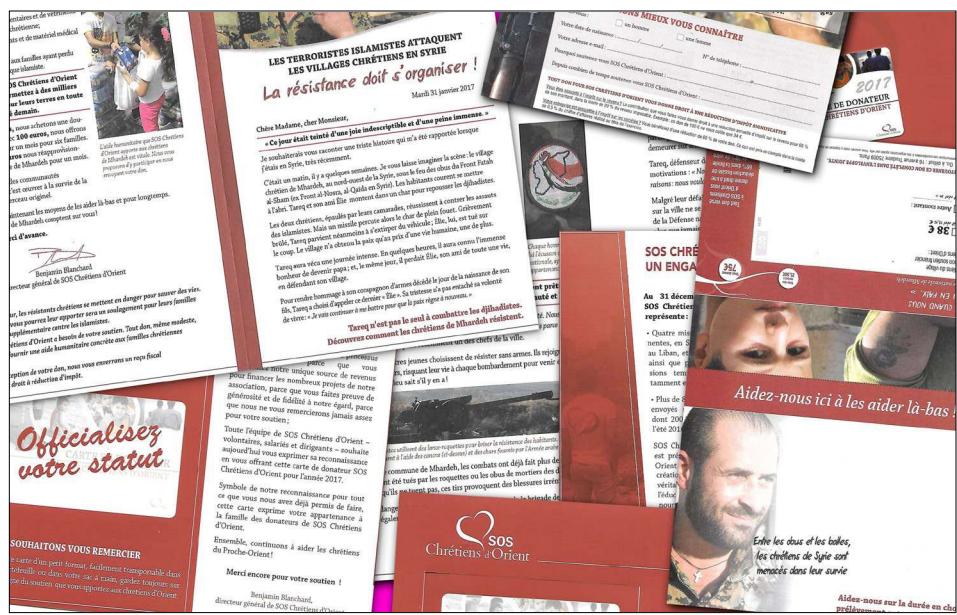
Hezbollah militias attacked Taji camp with rockets twice. "What put us on the trail of the al-Hashd ash-Sha`bī was that, to pull off a kidnapping in the 'secure zone' near the French embassy, they needed to have good access and authority. They used these Frenchmen as bait to make French forces leave Iraq," explained the Kurdish intelligence officer.

On March 26, after 66 days in captivity, the four NGO members were released. On the same day, France withdrew close to 200 troops, stating it had "decided to withdraw personnel from Operation Chammal (the French component of the international operation Inherent Resolve) until further order, notably in view of the (COVID) health crisis." The withdrawal is "temporary, in principle," the statement added.

The move came in contradiction with the statement that France made<sup>9</sup> after Soleimani's death in which it said it was committed to maintain its presence in the country despite Iraq's parliament voting to "put an end to the presence of foreign troops."

New Lines asked the French Foreign Ministry for further comment numerous times but has received no response.

Al-Saloum's report stated: "SOSCO had (a head office) in the Bashiqa area, northeast of Mosul, from 2017 to late 2019" and concluded that SOSCO had some level of ties with armed groups there. For example, according to the report, SOSCO received as guests Shiite militias in Bashiqa with close



A SOSCO tract includes a letter from Benjamin Blanchard soliciting donors in January 2017. The tract has photos from the ongoing Syrian war, as well as images of a soldier's NDF patch (the pro-government National Defense Forces) and Assad Abou Adlah, a leader in al-Wakil's militia. International law requires that humanitarian objectives be independent of military and political objectives.

links to the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces, including Saraya Achoura brigade, which has a presence in Syria.

For its part, the French government did not qualify the SOSCO kidnapping as an "act of terrorism," which under French law would make the victims of such an act eligible for compensation by the French government. The Guarantee Fund for Victims of Acts of Terrorism and Other Crimes, which is attached to the French Foreign Ministry and oversees the designation of victims of terrorism and compensation, did not respond to New Lines' numerous queries.

The incident raises the question of whether the French government and the Iran-backed militia reached a quid-pro-quo arrangement. Did the French government

withdraw 200 troops from Iraq in exchange for the release of the charity workers, which occurred on the same day?

New Lines posed this question to France's defense and foreign ministries but has not received a response, despite numerous attempts.

## The Effects of SOSCO's Operations

During its almost half decade of partnership with the French Ministry of Defense, and based on testimonies gathered by the authors of this report, SOSCO appears to have been actively supporting al-Wakil and his militia both morally and materially. In doing so, the French organization appears to have spread pro-Assad



propaganda during a time when France itself was bringing evidence of crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime before the international community. By featuring the militia's work on its fundraising pamphlets in France, SOSCO also appears to have normalized the militias to French donors while continuing to raise money under the guise of helping the Christian communities of Syria.

Perhaps most egregiously, based on the testimonies gathered, SOSCO appears to have funneled money raised in France (and internationally) directly to al-Wakil and his militia by circumventing international sanctions on the Assad regime.

SOSCO has made no secret of its close relationship with al-Wakil and his militia, which remains accused of committing grievous human

rights violations and war crimes. During or after the commission of these alleged crimes, SOSCO also apparently leveraged its relationship with the French Defense Ministry to fundraise for Mhardeh, including for al-Wakil and his militia, despite years of reporting in French media about a seemingly inappropriate relationship between SOSCO and the Assad regime.

The New Lines investigation also raises questions about the possibility of SOSCO, which boasted having French military reservists within its ranks, having provided – inadvertently or otherwise – any form of military counsel, advice, training, or weapons expertise to al-Wakil and his militia.

Al-Wakil and top members of his militia did not respond to New Lines' requests for comment, and neither did SOSCO or Goodarzy.

New Lines has also made repeated attempts by email as well as solicitations through personal contacts for a response from both the French Defense Ministry and Foreign Affairs Ministry to the findings in this report, but has received no answer.

Around the publication date of this report, SOSCO began advertising on its website a six-day tour of Syria for 1,995 euros per person with roundtrip flights to Paris. "This exceptional trip is accompanied by Benjamin Blanchard, Managing Director of SOS Chrétiens d'Orient; since 2013, he has not stopped carrying projects to keep Eastern Christians in Syria and has never hesitated to go and comfort them at the height of the war in Aleppo, Damascus," the ad says. □



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## Endnotes

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