

162 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest Documented and Tens of Thousands Deprived of Liberty for Hours to Force Them to Vote in May 2021

Tens of Thousands of Students and Workers in State Institutions Were Deprived of Liberty to Force Them to Vote for Bashar al Assad

Wednesday 2 June 2021

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.

Content

I. Background and Methodology.....	2
II. Summary of the Most Notable Events Related to the Detainees Issue in May.....	4
III. Tens of Thousands of School and University Students and State Institutions Workers Detained for Hours to Force Them to Vote for Bashar al Assad.....	6
IV. Record of Cases of Arbitrary Arrests by the Parties to the Conflict in May.....	7
V. Most Notable Cases and Incidents of Arbitrary Arrest in May.....	9
VI. The Most Notable Work Carried Out by SNHR on the Detainees Issue.....	13
VII. Many Face Multiple Charges Following False Confessions Extorted Via Torture and Intimidation, Before Being Referred to 'Courts' More Like Security Branches, With the Regime Issuing Decrees and Laws That Violate the Principles of Law.....	14
VIII. The Syrian Regime Is Responsible for Threatening the Lives of Thousands of Detainees Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	17
IX. Conclusions and Recommendations.....	18

I. Background and Methodology:

Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances have been amongst the most widespread violations since the earliest days of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011.

These criminal acts, which are considered to be the most common and pervasive regime violations against Syrian citizens, affecting hundreds of thousands of Syrians, are carried out by the Syrian regime's security services and army forces, as well as its affiliated militias, as part of a deliberate and planned strategy, often in a sweeping indiscriminate manner, in order to instill terror and fear into the largest possible number of Syrian people. Approximately eight months after the start of the popular uprising, other parties began to emerge in Syria, also carrying out arrests and kidnappings. The process of documenting the cases of detention and cataloguing whether detainees are released or join the ranks of the forcibly disappeared has been one of the greatest challenges and difficulties faced by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), as is clarified in our methodology¹.

Most of the arrests in Syria are carried out without any judicial warrant while the victims are passing through regime checkpoints or during raids, with the security forces of the regime's four main intelligence services often responsible for extra-judicial detentions. Every detainee is tortured from the very first moment of his or her arrest and denied any opportunity to contact his or her family or to have access to a lawyer. The authorities also flatly deny the arbitrary arrests they have carried out and most of the detainees are subsequently forcibly disappeared.

The Syrian regime is responsible for nearly 88 percent of all the arbitrary arrests that we have documented, and is the first and most prominent of all the parties to the conflict in systematically perpetrating this violation. In most cases, victims' families are unable to accurately identify the body responsible for making the arrest, given the vast array of forces affiliated with the Syrian regime (including Iranian militias, the Lebanese group Hezbollah, and others), in addition to the four main regime security agencies and their many branches, all of which are authorized to arrest and torture detainees, and to commit the crime of enforced disappearance.

The other parties to the conflict and the controlling non-regime forces in Syria, such as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, extremist Islamist groups, and various Armed Opposition factions, use similar strategies and practices to those of the Syrian regime, albeit at a lower rate and in a less systematic manner than those practiced by Syrian Regime forces; these constitute violations of International Human Rights Law, and, if they took place on the basis of the armed conflict, they constitute violations of International Humanitarian Law.

None of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces provide any public record for the community showing the whereabouts of the arrested/ detainees and the reasons for their arrest, nor do they provide any documentation of the judicial sentences issued against them, including the death penalty, with the vast majority of the families not knowing the fate of their loved ones, since the vast majority, as we've indicated in all the reports we've issued about the detainees, have been forcibly disappeared. We have talked in detail about the phenomenon of enforced disappearance and the suffering of the families, especially the children, in [many reports](#).

¹ "Syrian Network for Human Rights Methodology", Syrian Network for Human Rights, <http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/SNHR_Methodology_en.pdf>

Methodology

This report outlines the record of arbitrary arrests by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria documented in May 2021. In addition, it sheds light on the most notable individual cases and incidents of arbitrary arrest and detention that the SNHR's team documented during the last month, as well as categorizing cases and incidents of arrest according to the place where the incident took place.

On the SNHR's database, we can categorize cases of arrest according to the governorate in which the incident occurred, and according to the governorate from which the detainee originally came. In this report and in most of our reports, we categorize the record of arrests according to the place where the arrest took place, not according to the governorate from which the detainee originally came. It should also be noted that sometimes we categorize the cases of arrest according to the governorate from which the detainee originally came in order to show the magnitude of loss and violence suffered by the people of that governorate compared to other governorates, in which case we refer to this in the report.

The record of the cases and incidents of arrests documented by the SNHR, which are included in this report, do not include those kidnappings and abductions in which we were unable to identify the responsible party.

The report also documents arbitrary arrests that subsequently turned into enforced disappearances. A number of criteria must be met before SNHR will classify a case as an enforced disappearance: the individual must have been detained for at least 20 days without his or her family being able to obtain any information from the relevant authorities about their status or location, with those responsible for the disappearance denying any knowledge of the individual's arrest or whereabouts.

The SNHR team implements strict standards in evaluating and assessing any incident of arbitrary arrest under the principles of international laws and the set of principles on arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance. The SNHR's Detainee and Forcibly-Disappeared Department daily:

- Records cases of arrest/ detention/ torture which departmental personnel collect from various sources, such as victims' families, SNHR members in Syrian governorates, cooperating local activists, and former detainees (survivors of detention), conducting daily updates of data on cases of arrest/ detention, enforced disappearance and release, according to verified information on the person's condition, before diligently working to contact the families of the detainees and forcibly disappeared persons, and those close to them, for the purpose of collecting as much information and data as possible, in light of the extraordinary and extremely complex challenges.
- This information, once received, is then registered on the database after being cross-checked with several sources. The Detainee Department also constantly works to pursue any new leads or information about each detainee, the place of detention, and his or her current conditions via continuous interaction with the detainees' families and those close to them, as well as meeting with survivors of arrest/ detention and documenting their testimonies about the circumstances and experience of their detention and the violations they were subject to, along with those whom they saw within the detention centers.

The Detainee Department team constantly updates the database of detainees who were released as and when information becomes available; this data is added to the SNHR's databases which are retained securely, with several backup copies being stored in different locations. We have created on our website a special form [to document a detainee](#) to facilitate access and contact with victims' families.

The detainee figures included in this report don't include prisoners with a criminal background, but do include cases of arrest that are based on the internal armed conflict, mainly due to opposition activity against the ruling authorities, as well as cases of detention intended to suppress freedom of opinion and expression.

The ongoing daily process of documenting detainees also comes with other additional challenges for SNHR, which has been documenting detainees' cases since 2011. The most notable challenges amongst these are:

- The reluctance of victims' families to cooperate and reveal or provide details of any information on their family members' arrest, even confidentially, more especially if the arrested individual is female, due to a well-founded fear still prevalent in Syrian society that being discovered doing so would result in more torture and further danger for their loved ones and themselves. Instead, families try to negotiate with security forces which usually blackmail these families and demand cash payments for help with securing their loved ones' release, effectively ransoms, that can amount to thousands of dollars in some cases.
- The failure of the international community and of all the organs of the United Nations to apply pressure on the Syrian regime authorities to release even one individual (including those whose sentences are completed), has affirmed the conviction of many within Syrian society that it is useless to cooperate in the documentation process.

II. Summary of the Most Notable Events Related to the Detainees Issue in May:

Among the points which we wish to emphasize in this report is that Syrian regime forces have continued to persecute and target Syrian citizens in areas under regime control in connection with their political dissent and expression of opinions, despite the right to both being guaranteed by the Syrian constitution and international law. This proves once again the truth of the crucial point which we have reiterated several times previously, namely that no Syrian citizen can feel safe from arrest since these are carried out without any basis in law or any oversight by any independent judiciary, and are perpetrated by the security services with no involvement by the judiciary. Following these arrests, detainees are routinely classified as forcibly disappeared persons, and therefore the areas under the control of the Syrian regime cannot be considered to constitute any sort of safe haven for residents there, with a large percentage of those we talked with during our documentation of violations expressing a strong desire to emigrate, flee and seek refuge in other countries; all this underlines that regime-controlled areas of Syria are very definitely not a safe haven for the return of refugees or IDPs. There will be no stability or safety in light of the survival of the regime's brutal security services, who have committed crimes against humanity since 2011 and are still continuing to do so up to the current date. Among the arrests and detentions that we recorded in May are the following:

First: Syrian regime forces² continued in May to persecute and arrest individuals who had concluded settlements of their security status with the Syrian regime in areas that had previously concluded settlement agreements with the regime; these arrests have been concentrated in Damascus Suburbs and Daraa governorates, with most occurring during campaigns of mass raids and arrests and at checkpoints.

Second: We documented random arrests against citizens in Hama governorate, most of which occurred during campaigns of mass raids and arrests, which we believe were based on malicious security reports issued due to the targeted individuals' opposition to the Syrian regime. We also documented arrests of civilians in Damascus governorate, in connection with chanting anti-regime phrases, and tearing up pictures of the Syrian regime president, Bashar al Assad.

Third: We documented at least 32 cases of arrests of civilians, including children and women, in Tartus governorate on the Syrian coast, from where they had been trying to emigrate illegally to Cyprus, including people who had previously settled their security status, 28 of whom were released, while the rest have been forcibly disappeared.

Fourth: We documented arrests targeting civilians on the grounds that they did not participate in the 'presidential elections' held on May 26, while they were passing through the Syrian regime checkpoints, mainly those adjacent to areas that had previously seen settlements. These arrests were concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo, Hama and Damascus Suburbs, where civilians were detained at checkpoints and in some cases were taken to security branches. We documented the release of most of these detainees hours after their arrest, when they had been subjected to beatings and humiliation.

In terms of releases from prisons and detention centers in May, we documented the release of at least 76 detainees held by the Syrian regime, 17 of them women, including civilians, government employees, media workers, university students and politicians, who had criticized corruption and the poor living conditions in areas controlled by the Syrian regime; these detainees were released under Legislative Decree No. 13 of 2021 issued on May 2, with the period of detention for most ranging between two and six months. Those released had been arrested during raids or after they'd been summoned to the headquarters of the Criminal Security Branch in Damascus city, with no sentences issued against them, with most of them known for their support for the Syrian regime, especially the media workers among them.

We also recorded in May that Syrian regime forces released 54 detainees, including three children and one woman, mostly from the governorates of Damascus Suburbs and Daraa, who were released from regime detention centers in Damascus governorate after the end of their arbitrarily imposed sentences, with their release not being linked to Amnesty Decree No. 13 of 2021. According to the released individuals' families, relatives and friends, and to the information recorded on our database, the former detainees spent an average period of one to nine years in the Syrian regime's detention centers, in extremely poor conditions which included being subjected to torture, and enduring an almost complete lack of healthcare and medical care, and severe overcrowding, while all had been arrested without receiving any explanation of the reasons for their detention and without any arrest warrants being provided.

In May, we also documented a number of releases in the context of exchanges between Syrian National Army and Syrian regime forces. We also recorded many cases of detainees being released a few days or months after their arrest, without being subject to trial, with most of these detained in connection with attempting to migrate illegally by sea from Tartus governorate.

² We generally use the term 'the Syrian regime' rather than 'the Syrian government', because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is a totalitarian dictatorship based on ruling the nation in an authoritarian fashion through a very limited group of individuals, primarily the President of the Republic and his selected leaders of the security services, while the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, without any decision-making power or active role; this means that the government's role is wholly subordinate and limited to serving the regime, with all the main powers being concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic and the security services. Governance in Syria is wholly decided by the autocratic authority of the ruling family and there is no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade there for show: the Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he nominally presides which are in turn under the command of the President, while the Minister of Justice cannot summon a civilian-level security agent other than the head of a security branch; the security branches, along with the president, are the true power and the governing regime in Syria. Although we acknowledge that the United Nations and its agencies use the term 'the Syrian government' in general, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

Meanwhile, Syrian Democratic Forces continued enforcing the group's policies of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in May, with the number increasing this month as SDF continue carrying out campaigns of mass raids and arrests, and targeting civilians, including children, on the supposed pretext of fighting ISIS cells, with some of these campaigns backed by US-led coalition helicopters. We also documented arrests targeting members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party's Area Committee, with these arrests concentrated in Hasaka governorate.

May also saw Hay'at Tahrir al Sham³ detaining civilians, with the targets of these arrests, which were concentrated in Idlib governorate, including media activists and politicians; most of these arrests occurred due to the detainees expressing opinions critical of the HTS's management of areas under its control. These detentions were carried out arbitrarily in the form of raids in which HTS members stormed their victims' homes, often breaking down the doors, by kidnapping their victims while they were traveling or passing through temporary checkpoints. We also recorded summonses being issued by the Media Directorate of the Salvation Government against media activists, after they published posts on their personal Facebook pages on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day.

The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army also continued carrying out arbitrary detentions and kidnappings in May, most of which were carried out on a mass scale, targeting individuals coming from areas controlled by the Syrian regime. In addition, we documented detentions carried out under an ethnic pretext, with these incidents being concentrated in areas under the Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army's control in Aleppo governorate. Most of these arrests occurred without judicial authorization and without the participation of the police force, which is the legitimate administrative authority responsible for arrests and detentions through the judiciary, as well as being carried out without presenting any clear charges against those being detained.

III. Tens of Thousands of School and University Students and State Institutions Workers Detained for Hours to Force Them to Vote for Bashar al Assad:

The concept of elections in political and legal sciences is based on the principle of freedom of choice. In stark contrast to this, the security services in Syria control every detail of citizens' lives, including their voting, and monitor their movements, issuing direct instructions to state institutions, schools and universities ordering personnel and students to elect one candidate exclusively, namely Bashar al Assad, and creating a state of intimidation and terror that coerces people into voting for him, justifiably fearing arrest, humiliation, torture, imprisonment and death if they dare to disobey. Based on all of these facts, we cannot truthfully describe the grotesque periodic performances that have taken place in Syria during the reign of Hafez and Bashar al Assad as elections, rather they are more like forced enactments of electoral rituals.

According to dozens of university and school students, and state employees, whose statements are substantiated by the numerous photos and videos we received, the regime's security forces carried out operations in universities, schools, and state institutions depriving staff and students of their liberty in order to force them to vote; it should be noted that the actual commander of the state security services is Bashar al Assad, not the Minister of Interior. This means that voters are subjected to a state of terror and intimidation to force them into voting for Bashar al Assad. Each university students who refused to comply with these orders were threatened with administrative penalties with the possibility of being summoned for interrogation within the security branches, forcing the vast majority of students to vote for Bashar al Assad. Many of them told us that after they finished voting, they were taken, along with

³ The United Nations has designated it as a terrorist organization

state employees, in groups supervised by the university guards or other students with influence with the state security authorities, who are themselves an extension of the security services, to participate in pro-Bashar al Assad rallies.

In addition, the SNHR team documented at least 34 incidents of arrest/ detention that targeted civilians over their non-participation in the sham election or failure to vote for Bashar al Assad; these incidents occurred either through interrogation of civilians at regime checkpoints, especially those checkpoints located in areas that have undergone settlements and reconciliations, where we recorded detentions of people who did not participate in the elections, who were, as a result, accused of 'supporting terrorism'. We also documented that most of these detentions took place at the checkpoint, meaning that the citizens were not transferred to a detention center or interrogation branch - which is usually the local security branch with which the checkpoint is affiliated. These detentions were accompanied by confiscation of personal IDs, beatings and humiliation of the civilians by the checkpoint personnel, in addition to threatening to detain them permanently unless they go to vote for Bashar al Assad. We recorded the release of most of these detainees a few hours after they were arrested. A number of those we contacted, who were subjected to detention, told us that they had to then go to vote for fear of further persecution by security services, especially since the checkpoint personnel had registered their names, and assured them that they would check at the polling centers to see whether they had voted or not.

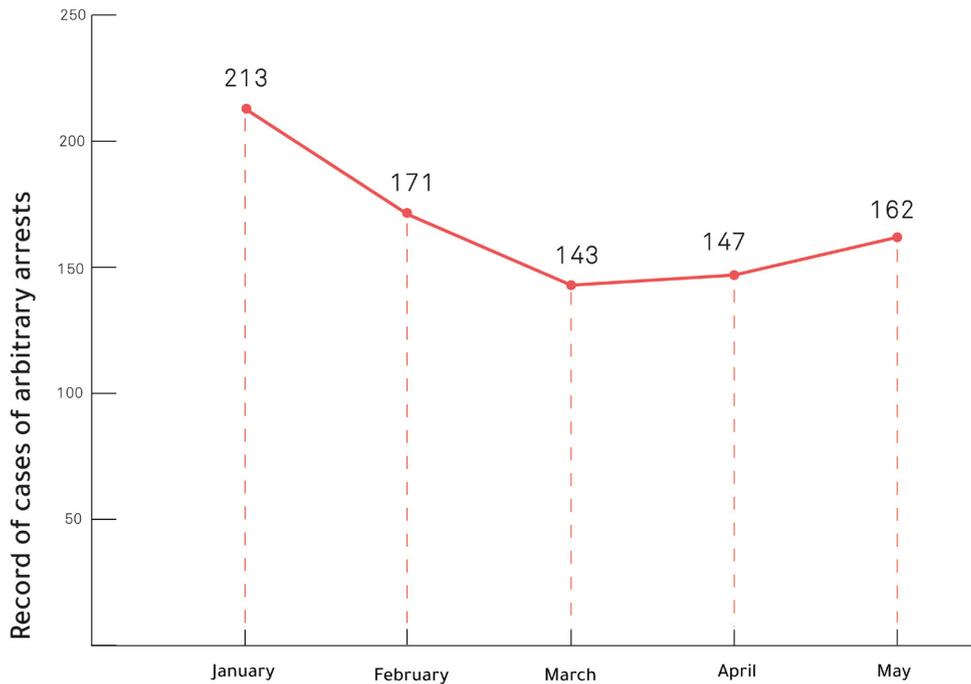
We also documented raids in many areas and neighborhoods, where citizens, some from the same families, were detained based on intelligence reports about their criticism of the sham elections or mockery of their predetermined results. These raids were accompanied by regime forces destroying the contents of homes, encircling neighborhoods/areas, and directing curses and insults at detainees and civilians residing in these area generally. We have not documented the releases of any of the detainees in this category up until issuing this report.

IV. Record of Cases of Arbitrary Arrests by the Parties to the Conflict in May:

A. Record of cases of arbitrary arrests since the start of 2021:

SNHR documented at least 836 cases of arbitrary arrest/ detention between the beginning of 2021 and June 2021, including 43 children and 41 women (adult female), 632 of whom have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

The record of cases of arbitrary arrest/ detention at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria since the beginning of 2021 were distributed as follows:

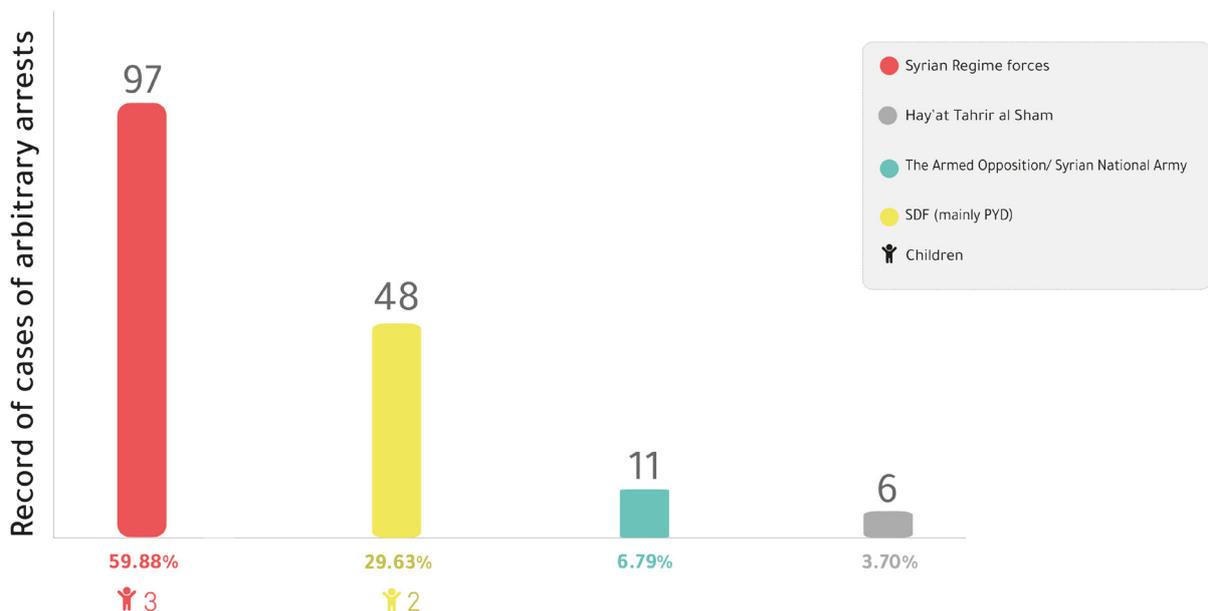


The chart above shows the increasing rates of cases of arbitrary arrest/ detention in January 2021. This was due to widespread arrests carried out by both Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian National Army forces, some of which occurred on a mass scale in areas under their control.

B. Record of cases of arbitrary arrests in May:

In May 2021, SNHR documented at least 162 cases of arbitrary arrest/ detention, including five children, at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria, 111 of which have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

The record of cases of arrest/ detention were distributed according to the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces, as follows:



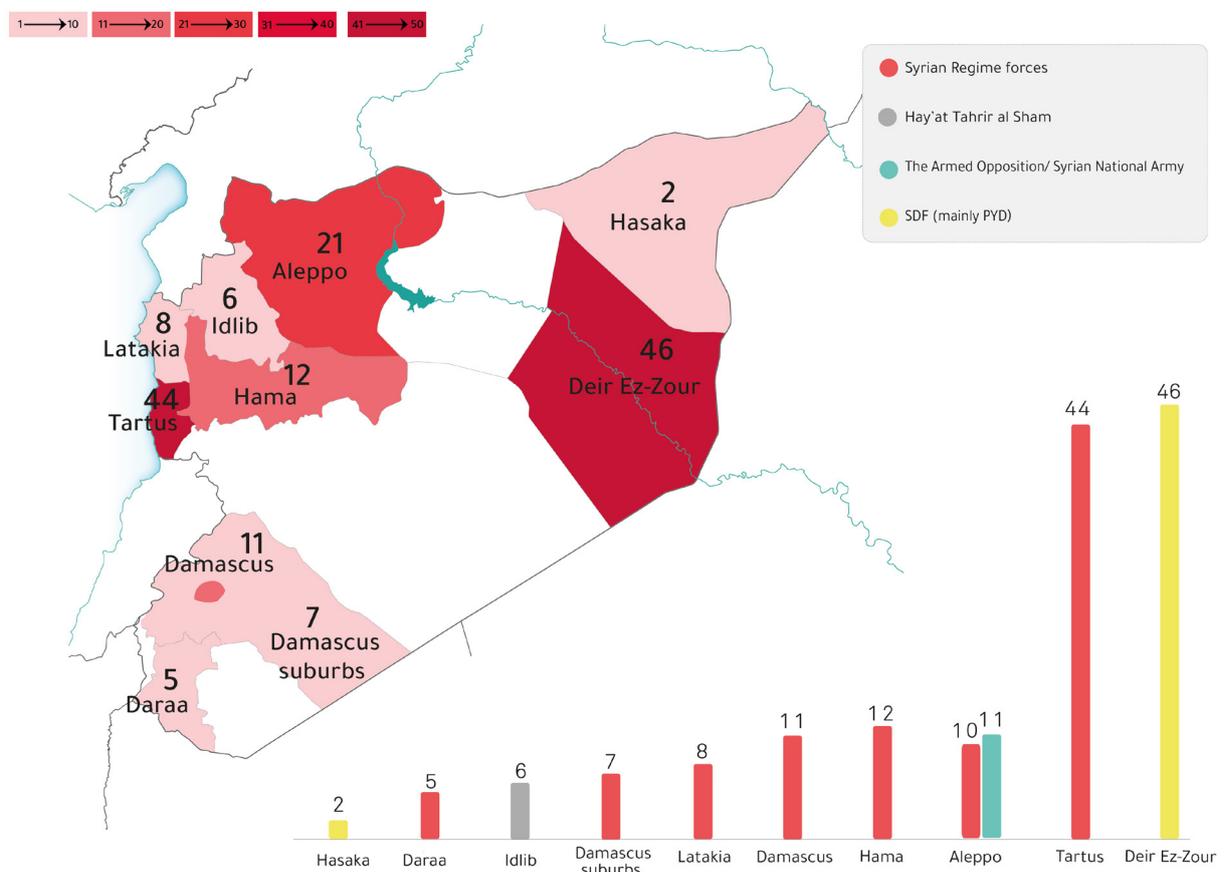
A. Syrian Regime forces: 97 individuals, including three children. 31 of these have been released, while 66 individuals have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

B. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: Six individuals. Four of these have been released, while two individuals have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

C. The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army: 11 individuals. One of these has been released, while 10 individuals have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

D. Syrian Democratic Forces: 48 individuals, including two children. 15 of these have been released, while 33 individuals have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

The cases of arbitrary arrests/ detention documented in May at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces were distributed across all the Syrian governorates as follows:



The map above shows that the highest rates of cases of arbitrary arrests/ detention during this period were seen in Deir Ez-Zour and Tartus governorates, followed by the governorates of Aleppo, Hama, then Damascus.

V. Most Notable Cases and Incidents of Arbitrary Arrest in May:

A. Syrian Regime forces:

- Most notable incidents:

On Saturday, May 1, 2021, Syrian regime forces personnel arrested 32 civilians, from Kanaker village, southwest of Damascus Suburbs governorate, including three children and two women, in Tartus city on the Syrian coast, from where they had been trying to emigrate illegally to Cyprus; we documented that 10 of them were released on May 19, 2021, and 18 others on May 26, 2021.

On Monday, May 3, 2021, personnel affiliated with Syrian regime forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in Eqerbat town in the eastern suburbs of Hama governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of four civilians from the same family, including a retired colonel, who were taken to an undisclosed location.

On Wednesday, May 5, 2021, the Syrian regime's Military Security Force personnel arrested six civilians from the same family from Ein Terma town in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, in a raid on their place of residence in Wadi Ein Tarma, on charges of possessing weapons, and took them to the Region Branch in Damascus city.

On Saturday, May 22, 2021, personnel affiliated with Syrian regime forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in al Dweil'a neighborhood and Kashkoul area in Damascus city. SNHR documented the arrest of six civilians, on charges of tearing up pictures of the President of the Syrian regime, Bashar al Assad, in al Dweil'a neighborhood and Kashkoul area, with all taken to an undisclosed location.

On Wednesday, May 26, 2021, personnel affiliated with Syrian regime forces detained seven civilians at the checkpoint at al Shiha village in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate, on charges of not participating in the presidential elections and not having the ink on their fingers as evidence of participation. We documented their subsequent release after several hours of detention, beating and humiliation.

On Thursday, May 27, 2021, the Syrian regime's Air Security Force and State Security Force personnel carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in the neighborhoods of Bustan al Qasr and al Kallasa in Aleppo city. SNHR documented the arrest of 14 civilians over their opposition and refusal to participate in the 'presidential elections' that took place on May 26, with all being taken to an undisclosed location. The raid was accompanied by regime forces destroying shops in the neighborhoods.

- **Most notable cases:**

Mamoun Qasem Oweir, from Dael city in the northern suburbs of Daraa governorate, was arrested on Friday, May 7, 2021, by Syrian regime forces as he was passing through one of the regime's checkpoint in Damascus city, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Haitham Salah al Ghazawi, from Tafas city, west of Daraa governorate, was arrested on Friday, May 7, 2021, by Syrian regime forces as he was passing through one of the regime's checkpoint in Menket al Hatab in the northern suburbs of Daraa governorate, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Muhammad Mahmoud Khalil, a 30-year-old man from Mu'adamiyet al Sham city, west of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by personnel affiliated with Syrian regime forces on Tuesday, May 11, 2021, in front of the local council building in the city center over claims that he had shouted insulting phrases about the Syrian regime and was taken to an undisclosed location. We documented that he was released on Sunday, May 16, 2021, from the Security Office of the Syrian regime's Fourth Division in Mu'adamiyet al Sham city.

B. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham

- Most notable cases:

Omar Haj Kadour, a French Press Agency correspondent, from Binnesh city in the suburbs of Idlib governorate, was summoned by the Information Directorate of the Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's Salvation Government in Idlib city, on Tuesday, May 4, 2021, in connection with a post on his personal Facebook page, on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, with the post including a photo of him taken whilst he was being subjected to a violation months ago by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham personnel; the Directorate officials punctured his press card issued by them as a preliminary penalty, and he was warned that publishing the same photo in the future would expose him to greater penalties up to preventing him from engaging in any media coverage and work permanently, and he was asked to pledge not to re-publish it.

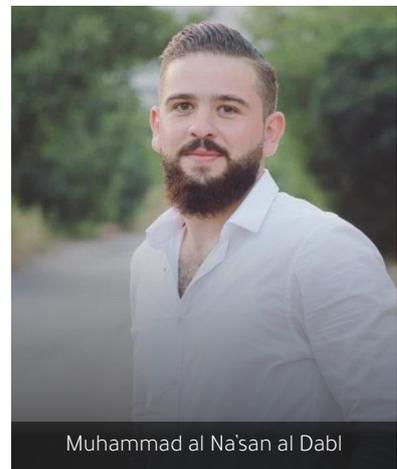


Omar Haj Kadour



Photo of the post that Omar Haj Kadour published on his page

Muhammad al Na'san al Dabl, a media activist from Darkoush town in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, who also works as a photographer for the Orient News Channel, was arrested/ detained, along with his brother, Omar, by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham personnel on Friday, May 7, 2021, in front of the town's al Rahma Hospital over an argument with HTS personnel in the same location. We documented their release the next day.



Muhammad al Na'san al Dabl

C. The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army

- Most notable cases:

Two brothers, Ismail and Izz al Din Jammou Haidar, from Kabashin village, which is administratively a part of al Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, were arrested/ detained by the Syrian National Army forces on Saturday, May 1, 2021, in a raid on their homes in the village, and taken to one of the SNA's detention centers in the village. We documented the release of Izz al Din on the same day, while the fate of Ismail is still unknown.

Farhadin Hasan Ibrahim and Yaser Saeed Ali, from Sheikh al Hadid town, which is administratively a part of al Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, were arrested/ detained by the Syrian National Army forces on Tuesday, May 18, 2021, in a raid on their homes in the town, and taken to an undisclosed location.

D. Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic forces (mainly PYD)

- Most notable incidents:

On Saturday, May 8, 2021, Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by a US-led Coalition helicopter, carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in al Rez village, which is administratively a part of al Bseira district in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate. SNHR documented the arrest/ detention of four civilians, who were taken to an undisclosed location.

On Sunday, May 16, 2021, Syrian Democratic Forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests/ detentions in al Hawayej village in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of nine civilians, on charges of belonging to ISIS, and were taken to an undisclosed location.

On Thursday, May 20, 2021, Syrian Democratic Forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests/ detentions in al Sh-heil city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of 16 civilians who were taken to an undisclosed location. SDF had imposed a curfew on the city during the arrest/ detention campaign.

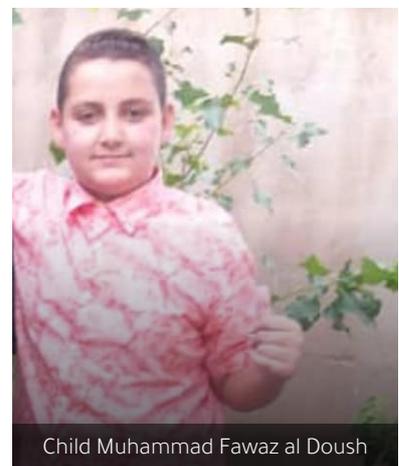
- Most notable cases:

Abdul Rahman Mahal al Mheisen, a 15-year-old child from al Hajna village in the northern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was arrested/ detained by Syrian Democratic Forces in a raid on his home in the village on Wednesday, May 5, 2021, and taken to an undisclosed location.



Child Abdul Rahman Mahal al Mheisen

Muhammad Fawaz al Doush, an 11-year-old child from al Sh-heil city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was arrested/ detained by Syrian Democratic Forces in a raid on his home in al Hasya neighborhood in the city on Tuesday, May 11, 2021. We documented his release on May 14, 2021.



Child Muhammad Fawaz al Doush

Hafez Rajab al Doush, an English teacher from al Sh-heil city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was arrested/ detained by Syrian Democratic Forces in a raid on his home in the city on Tuesday, May 11, 2021. We documented his release on May 14, 2021. We note that he was in poor health prior to his arrest.



Abdul Ghaffar Abdul Aziz Muhammad, a member of the Area Committee of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, from al Jawadiya town in the north-western suburbs of Hasaka governorate, was arrested/ detained on Saturday, May 22, 2021, by Syrian Democratic Forces as he was passing through an SDF checkpoint in Shabak village in the northwestern suburbs of Hasaka governorate, and taken to an undisclosed location.



VI. The Most Notable Work Carried Out by SNHR on the Detainees Issue:

Since 2011, the SNHR has created complex electronic programs to archive and categorize the detainees' data, which the team collects and verifies; this enables us to catalogue the detainees according to gender, the location where each was arrested, the governorate from which each detainee originally came, and the party responsible for their arrest. These programs also enable us to make comparisons between these parties, as well as identifying the governorates from which the largest proportion of residents have been arrested and disappeared.

Over the years, we have published periodic [news](#) reports on arrest incidents, as well as publishing a [monthly report](#) that monitors the record of cases of arrest, enforced disappearance, or release that occurred in the past month, as well as semi-annual and annual reports, in addition to dozens of additional reports that provide information on the various detention centers of the parties to the conflict, and other [special reports](#) related to detainees. We also periodically submit special forms to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Special Rapporteur on Arbitrary Detention and the Special Rapporteur on Torture.

VII. Many Face Multiple Charges Following False Confessions Extorted Via Torture and Intimidation, Before Being Referred to 'Courts' More Like Security Branches, With the Regime Issuing Decrees and Laws That Violate the Principles of Law:

We at the SNHR wish to emphasize that the vast majority of detainees involved in the popular uprising for democracy in Syria, including political and human rights activists, media workers, and relief activists, and similar prisoners of conscience, have been falsely accused by the regime's security branches of several charges based on testimonies taken from detainees by regime forces under coercion, intimidation and torture. The most prominent of these charges are: provoking sectarian strife, threatening the system of governance, weakening national sentiment, collusion with external agents and the enemy, supporting and financing terrorism, and weakening the nation's morale, all of which are broad and wide-ranging charges, which are documented within regime security authorities' reports; these detainees may be transferred to another security branch if they are wanted by more than one branch. The detainees are forced to place their fingerprint on these coerced report under threats, torture and general intimidation; it should be noted here that the security branches rarely allow detainees to read and sign these false confessions, instead of ordering them to use a fingerprint in place of a signature, with the detainees in most cases doing so while blindfolded with a piece of cloth; these security reports are then referred to the Public Prosecution Service, after which the majority of these cases are referred to either the Counter-Terrorism Court or the Military Field Court (The stages mentioned here may take months and possibly years, during which the detainees are subjected to the worst forms of torture, which often prove lethal.).

Regarding the [Counter-Terrorism Court](#) in short, this was established in accordance with Presidential Decree No. 22 of 2012 to serve as a substitute for the exceptional Supreme State Security Court, and examines detainees' cases according to the Counter-Terrorism Law No. 19 of 2012, an article of legislation similar to the legislation on 'counter-revolutionary goals' issued in 1964, which violates the most basic principles and rules of law and human rights, under which a person can be arrested simply because he or she is suspected of not supporting the Syrian regime, with the court ruling on most cases of arrest carried out by Syrian Regime forces. The Counter-Terrorism Court consists of three judges appointed by the President of the Republic, according to the proposal submitted by the Supreme Judicial Council, which is also chaired by the President of the Republic, who try civilians, military personnel and juveniles, and issue sentences in absentia. In addition, these sentences may not be appealed except in the case of those who surrender themselves voluntarily. Although the body's official name is the Counter-Terrorism Court, it tries all types of crimes and can therefore be called an exceptional court; it is, in fact, part of the regime's security apparatus.

As for the Military Field Court, again briefly, this was established by Decree No. 109 of August 17, 1968, with its jurisdiction originally specified as being only for crimes committed in wartime; its remit was expanded in 1980, however, to allow it to operate in both war and peace times and to try civilians, military personnel and juveniles. This court is also formed by the executive authority through the Minister of Defense, and consists of a president and two members who are not required to be law graduates. The rulings issued by this court are not open to appeal, being endorsed by the Minister of Defense. Regarding the death sentences issued by this court, they are ratified by the President of the Republic, with both the Minister of Defense and the President of the Republic able to manipulate the rulings issued according to their personal whims. The Military Field Court is wholly managed by the executive authority that dominates the judicial authority, and therefore the most fundamental conditions of fair trial are not met in this court, which is also closer to a military-security branch than to a court of law.

According to the SNHR's database, the vast majority of detainees were arrested in connection with their participation in activities opposed to the Syrian regime, no matter how innocuous, such as attending demonstrations, being involved in media or humanitarian relief activism, or even as a result of their kinship ties with an activist; this means that the vast majority of detainees are arrested in connection with their political activism, meaning that they are political detainees.

The Syrian regime also legalized the crime of torture, despite the fact that the current Syrian constitution, issued in 2012 by Decree No. 94, prohibits arbitrary arrest and torture according to Article 53, and the General Penal Code in accordance with Article 391 which imposes a penalty of from three months to three years in prison for anyone who beats a person with a degree of severity during the investigation of crimes, and prohibits torture during investigation in accordance with Article 391; however, there are legal texts that explicitly oppose previous constitutional articles and Article 391, giving almost complete immunity to the security services and legalizing impunity, with the most prominent of these being the following:

1. Legislative Decree No. 14 of January 25, 1969, stating that: "It is impermissible to pursue any workers in the State Security Administrations for crimes they have committed during the execution of the specified duties they were authorized to carry out, except by virtue of an order to pursue issued by the director."
2. Article / 74 / of the Internal Security Law of the State Security Department and the rules of service for its employees issued by Legislative Decree No. 549 of May 25, 1969, states that: "No legal action may be taken against any General Intelligence Department employees, those assigned or detailed to the department, or those contracted with it for crimes incurred on the job or in the course of performing the job before referral to a department disciplinary board and before an order is obtained from the director."
3. Legislative Decree No. 69 of 2008, by which an amendment to the Military Penal Code gave immunity to police and political security personnel, who were previously amongst those who could be tried before the ordinary judiciary, and limited the ability to take action against them or against the army and the armed forces. Paragraph (a) of Article 1 of this decree stipulated: "Crimes committed by each of the officers, warrant officers and members of the Internal Security forces, members of the Political Security Division, and members of Customs Brigade, due to performing the tasks entrusted to them." Paragraph (b) of the same article states, "Prosecution orders for officers, warrant officers, members of the Internal Security forces, members of the Political Security Division, and members of Customs Brigade are issued in a decision by the General Command of the Army and the armed forces, in accordance with the provisions of Article / 53 / of Penal Code and the Military Trial Procedure and its amendments." This prosecution is issued in wartime, according to the Penal Code and the Military Trial Procedure by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and the Armed Forces, who is at the same time the President of the Republic. Consequently, such prosecution was banned - if it had ever taken place - for officials at any level of leadership and limited to the senior leadership.
4. Decree No. (55) issued on April 21, 2011, related to counter-terrorism, of which Article 1 states: "Added to Article 17 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, the following paragraph: responsible for law enforcement or authorized tasks investigate the crimes stipulated in Articles 260 up to 339 articles 221 and 388 and 392 and 393 of the Penal Code and collection of evidence and surveillance of the suspects, which should not exceed the reservation for them for seven days subject to renewal from the Attorney-General and in accordance with the data of each file on the unit should not exceed this period of sixty days."

These three decrees and Article 74, which are supposed to be legal texts but in reality constitute a violation of the law, are decrees and texts that legitimize crimes, violate even the 2012 constitution, and violate fundamental tenets of human rights. For this reason, Syria under the current Syrian regime suffers from two problems; the first in terms of the legal texts themselves, and the second in terms of applying the law which is far graver: without a doubt, these legal texts, which express a commitment to ensuring impunity, along with the Syrian regime's failure to carry out any investigation or accountability for any member of the regime's security forces, no matter how low-ranking, against the background of acts of torture, have all contributed to increasing the rate of torture. Indeed, the regime's security services, in coordination with some doctors in military hospitals, are so sure of their impunity that they have invented new and horrific methods of torture that are even more brutal and savage than their usual methods. We have noted the use of new methods of torture in the past two years that were not used in previous years, which have caused deaths due to torture to continue up to this day. The laws established by the Syrian regime do not justify committing or concealing crimes, because they are not laws but rather pseudo-legal provisions that violate the law.

Other parties to the conflict have also established courts to try their detainees in accordance with procedures that are, to a great extent, similar to the courts affiliated with the Syrian regime. Extremist Islamist groups have established Sharia courts made up of sharia judges or security personnel and issued sentences according to their extremist ideology. As for the areas under opposition control, these have established courts which operate according to amended forms of existing Syrian laws. Syrian Democratic Forces, meanwhile, have established the 'people's courts' and established their own laws and legislation derived from the Syrian laws, with all these courts following the policy of exceptional courts by holding brief proceedings, essentially amounting to kangaroo trials, to try the cases before them without any considerations of the fundamental standards of fair trials, and relying mainly on the jurisprudence of judges, most of whom are unqualified or illegal.

Over the past nine years, the Syrian regime has issued nearly 17 amnesty decrees, many of which are similar to one another and focus on securing the release of perpetrators of crimes, felonies and offences, while including only a very small number of detainees referred to exceptional courts such as the Counter-Terrorism Court and the military field courts, and excluding the largest proportion of detainees who were not subjected to any trial during the years of their detention, who have been classified as forcibly disappeared. We previously [issued a report](#) in which we monitored the detention and torture incidents that we recorded since the issuance of the last two amnesty decrees, Decree No. 20 of 2019, and Decree No. 6 of 2020. We also issued [a special report](#) in which we outlined our follow-up work regarding the implementation of the latest decree No. 6, nearly two months after its issuance, and the record of arrests, torture and releases recorded by the SNHR between the issuance of Decree No. 6 on March 22, 2020, and May 15, 2020. Despite all the amnesty decrees issued, at least 130,000 citizens in the categories of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons are still detained by the Syrian regime.

VIII. The Syrian Regime Is Responsible for Threatening the Lives of Thousands of Detainees Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Detainees and individuals forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces are subjected to exceptionally brutal and sadistic methods of torture, which have assumed a particularly vengeful character since the popular uprising for democracy began in March 2011. In a detailed report published by SNHR previously, we recorded [at least 72 methods of torture](#) practiced in the Syrian regime's detention centers and military hospitals.

As well as inflicting these horrendous methods of torture on detainees, the Syrian regime also deliberately subjects the imprisoned detainees to unimaginably squalid, unsanitary and massively overcrowded conditions in its detention centers which lack even the bare minimum of hygiene or sanitation to protect against illness and disease. These conditions are especially horrific in the headquarters of the four main security branches and military prisons, where large numbers of detainees are packed into cells of various sizes, with an average cell area measuring 4 x 6 square meters containing approximately 50 detainees; this means that each detainee barely has an area of 70 cm² for sitting and sleeping, with detainees usually taking turns to attempt to sit or lie down to sleep when their numbers exceed the holding capacity of the cell, as they routinely do. These cells also lack ventilation and the most basic standards of sanitation and cleanliness, with the conditions being even more squalid in the solitary confinement cells located on the detention centers' lower floors which lack even light. Throughout the duration of their detention in the security branches, detainees are also prevented from going outside to get any exercise, or exposure to fresh air or sunlight.

In addition to these congested unsanitary conditions, detainees are able to shower or wash only very rarely throughout the period of their detention, which often lasts for many years, with all these factors contributing to and exacerbating the spread of diseases, epidemics and infectious conditions, especially respiratory and skin diseases, which are further aggravated due to the lack of fresh air and the lack of exposure to sunlight and light. The narrowness of the cells and the cramped, overcrowded conditions also lead to suffocation and shortness of breath amongst many detainees due to inhaling the putrid smells of bodily waste, sweat, pus, and blood from wounds. The conditions of detention in security branches and military prisons are somewhat similar to the civilian central prisons in terms of overcrowding, human stacking, and lack of cleanness and ventilation.

Syrian Regime forces deliberately withhold sufficient quantities of pillows and blankets from detainees in detention centers, with those which are issued usually being filthy, threadbare, soiled and encrusted with blood, pus or other bodily waste and fluids, and lousy with parasites. In addition, detainees are denied adequate clothing and often left only in their underwear since their clothing is worn, soiled or torn during torture or forcibly removed during inspections; all these practices expose detainees to severe cold in winter, when temperatures fall below freezing.

All these practices make each of the days, months, and years that detainees spend in detention into a never-ending hell, with these brutal conditions being a very deliberately imposed and widespread strategy on the part of the Syrian regime inflicted with the aim of degrading and further torturing detainees. Subjecting detainees to conditions that foster disease and infection and leaving them to suffer without medical help or treatment is another deliberate and conscious part of this strategy, forcing already physically and emotionally traumatized detainees to endure an additional layer of torment and debasement often leading to death. With the recent global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Syrian regime's admission that it has already documented cases of infection, the already grave

situation facing prisoners in regime jails is now critical, particularly in light of the detention conditions that are, as explained above, favorable for the spread of infectious diseases such as the COVID-19 coronavirus; this now threatens the lives of approximately 130,000 people who are still documented as being detained or forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces, according to the SNHR database, including [nearly 3,329 health care personnel](#) who are still arrested or forcibly disappeared, despite its being a year since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in Syria, with new strains emerging since then, and the many subsequent calls for the urgent immediate release of all medical personnel due to Syrian society's desperate need of their expertise.

Instead of releasing prisoners of conscience and other detainees, including detainees whose sentences' periods have ended, in order to contribute to alleviating the terrible overcrowding suffered by detainees and threatening their lives due to the spread of the coronavirus, we have documented the Syrian regime arresting even more citizens, which means additional overcrowding in detention centers. This behavior completely conflicts with the demands of some countries allied with the Syrian regime and prominent figures and organizations affiliated with them to ease or freeze the sanctions imposed by other countries on this regime, under the pretext of helping it to overcome the coronavirus. The Syrian regime's policy towards the issue of detainees clearly reveals the inconsistency of this request, clarifying precisely how the Syrian regime deals with citizens in light of the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus and how indifferent it is to their wellbeing.

IX. Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons is one of the most crucial human rights issues in Syria which there has been no progress in resolving despite its inclusion in several resolutions of the UN Security Council, as well as in UN General Assembly resolutions, in Kofi Annan's plan, and finally in the statement of cessation of hostilities issued in February 2016, which states that "all parties undertake to work for an early release of any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children", and in Security Council resolution 2254 of December 2015, article 12, which states that all detainees, especially women and children, must be released immediately. Despite all these resolutions and other official statements, no progress has been made on the issue of securing the release of detainees in any of the rounds of negotiations sponsored by international parties regarding the conflict in Syria. The International Committee of the Red Cross has been unable to conduct any periodic visits to any of these detention centers, constituting a violation of International Humanitarian Law.
- The SNHR believes that the Syrian regime has not fulfilled any of its obligations under any of the international treaties and conventions which it has ratified. We refer specifically to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The regime has also violated several articles of the Syrian Constitution itself, with thousands of detainees detained without any arrest warrant, held for many years, without charges, and prevented from appointing a lawyer and from receiving family visits. 65.08 percent of all detentions documented have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance, with detainees' families being denied any information on their loved ones' whereabouts, while anyone making inquiries about the detainees faces the risk of being arrested themselves for doing so. The Syrian regime has also violated the right to liberty enshrined in article 9 of the ICCPR through the widespread practice of arbitrary and unlawful detentions.
- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham imposes absolute authority over the large areas it controls and the residents there. The group which has a political entity, and has developed a highly hierarchical structure, is therefore obliged to implement the provisions of international human rights law. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has committed widespread violations through arrests and enforced disappearances.

- The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army have carried out arrests and torture against a number of residents in areas under their control.
- Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have violated many basic rights and practiced numerous violations such as torture and enforced disappearance. They also have a political entity with a largely hierarchical structure and are, therefore, also obliged to apply the provisions of international human rights law.
- It is impossible to hold elections under the absolute control of the security services working for a presidential candidate such as Bashar al Assad. Before there can be any discussion of a constitution and elections, the conflict must be ended, the killings must be stopped, a political transition must have taken place and a safe environment must have been achieved.

Recommendations:

UN Security Council

- The Security Council should monitor the implementation of Resolution 2042, adopted on April 14, 2012, Resolution 2043, adopted on April 21, 2012, and Resolution 2139, adopted on February 22, 2014, all of which demand the immediate cessation of the crime of enforced disappearance.
- In light of the spread of the coronavirus, it is vital to put pressure on the Syrian regime to release tens of thousands of arbitrarily detained persons, primarily medical personnel whose professional skills and services the Syrian people are in dire need of.

Human Rights Council

- Follow up on the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria and highlight this issue in all annual meetings.
- Cooperate and coordinate with all active local human rights groups in Syria.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

- Launch investigations into the cases included in this report and previous reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide more evidence and data.

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

- Address the cases mentioned in this report and previous reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide more evidence and data.

United Nations, the international community, and the guarantors of the Astana talks

- An impartial special committee should be formed to monitor cases of enforced disappearance, and to make progress in revealing the fate of the nearly 99,000 documented missing persons in Syria, approximately 85 percent of whom are detained by the Syrian regime.
- Immediately begin applying pressure on all parties to ensure that they immediately reveal their detention records according to a timetable. In the meantime, detention places should be revealed immediately, and humanitarian organizations and the International Committee of the Red Cross should be allowed to visit them directly.
- We call on the official appointed to take charge of the detainee file at the UN Special Envoy's office to include the issue of the detainees during the upcoming round of Geneva talks, as this issue is of far greater importance to the Syrian people than other longer-term issues which can be jointly addressed later by the parties after a political settlement is reached, such as the constitution.

- Support organizations working to document cases of arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, and torture, support the course of accountability and its mechanisms, and support organizations working in victim rehabilitation programs.

The Russian regime:

- Must demand that its ally, the Syrian regime, disclose the fate of nearly 99,000 forcibly disappeared persons and immediately release tens of thousands of arbitrarily detained persons and detainees whose sentences ended, before demanding that those states which imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime lift them.
- Must provide the Syrian regime with the necessary medical supplies and equipment to examine tens of thousands of detainees and ensure that they are not infected with the COVID-19.

All parties to the conflict and the controlling forces:

- The arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, which are still ongoing, as detailed in this SNHR monthly report, must be ended immediately, the fate of all detainees and the forcibly disappeared persons must be revealed, their families should be allowed to visit them immediately, and the bodies of detainees who were killed as a result of torture should be handed over to their families.
- Unconditionally release all detainees who have been imprisoned merely for exercising their political and civil rights, release women and children, people with special needs, the sick, and the elderly, and stop using any detainees as prisoners of war.
- Allow the independent international monitors of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry and the International Committee of the Red Cross to access all official and unofficial detention centers without establishing any prior arrangements or any restrictions or conditions, and improve the conditions of places of detention to meet the legal standards of detention centers.
- A UN committee should be formed to monitor and periodically assess the release of the detainees according to a timetable that must be presented by all the detaining parties, primarily the Syrian regime forces that are responsible for 89 percent of all detentions.
- Publish a register containing the detainees' data together with the reasons, locations, and sentences issued.
- All sentences issued by the regime's field military courts and Counter-Terrorism courts should be suspended or repealed, since they are non-compliant with domestic and international legislation, as well as failing to provide guarantees of a fair trial.
- End the policy of carrying out arrests without legal warrants, release all detainees imprisoned by them without judicial charges, and emphasizes that individuals should also be detained only briefly before being presented in a court of law, and that such trials do not take weeks or months.

Acknowledgments

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to victims' family members and friends, as well as to eyewitnesses and local activists, all of whom have contributed effectively to the collection and verification of data, and to extend our sincere solidarity to the detainees and the forcibly disappeared persons and their families.



www.snhr.org - info@sn4hr.org