



## SNHR Condemns Syrian Regime's Arrest of Activist Abdul Rahman al Saleh's Relatives Solely for Expressing His Opinion on Al Jazeera's 'Opposite Direction' Programme

At Least 20,842 Individuals Are Still Detained or Forcibly Disappeared by the Syrian Regime Due to Kinship with Participants in the Popular Uprising against the Syrian Regime

Thursday 24 December 2020

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.

**SNHR**  
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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## I. Activist's Relatives Arrested and Tortured Solely for His Expression of a Political Opinion Opposed to the Syrian Regime:

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has learnt that Syrian Regime forces arrested activist Abdul Rahman Al-Saleh's brother, uncle and two aunts solely to punish him for voicing criticism of the regime on a TV show. Al Saleh told SNHR that on December 10, 2020, two days after his appearance on Al Jazeera's weekly 'Opposite Direction' current affairs debate programme, broadcast on Al Jazeera Channel on December 8, personnel from the Syrian regime's Political Security Branch in Latakia city launched an official investigation into him. The day after opening the investigation, December 11, Syrian Regime forces<sup>1</sup> arrested his brother at his home in Damascus city, as well as detaining two of his aunts and one uncle from their homes in Tartous city the same day. During his appearance on the programme, al Saleh had criticized the deterioration of the living conditions in areas of Syria under the Syrian regime's control, holding the regime responsible for this deterioration since it is the party controlling and dominating those areas and their resources, as well as accusing the regime of corruption and of using the assets and resources of the Syrian state to preserve the rule of the Assad family, no matter what suffering this causes to Syrian citizens.

As is the norm with the vast majority of arrests carried out by regime security and army personnel in raids or at checkpoints, al Saleh's relatives were detained without justification and with no judicial warrant being presented. As is also the 'norm' for the regime, those arrested were not informed of the charges against them, and were prevented from communicating with any of their family members during their detention. One of al Saleh's aunts was released after several hours of interrogation, while the second of his aunts to be arrested was released on December 13, two days after being detained, also following interrogation. We believe that his aunts were released due to their background and their being from a staunchly loyalist pro-regime area; had they been suspected of opposing the regime or come from an area known for dissent or opposition to the regime, it's probable that they would have been detained for months or possibly years, with imprisonment in the Syrian regime's detention centers being always accompanied by one or more forms of torture.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Al-Saleh's brother and uncle were released on December 22, 2020, and we have been unable to obtain information about the conditions of their detention due to the ban on our work in Syria and to the Syrian regime's failure to offer citizens any possible recourse for wrongful arrest. Meanwhile, it is almost impossible for the regime-controlled judiciary to intervene in any way on behalf of detainees or to play any role in challenging the arrests and torture carried out by the regime's security services, which are deemed to be more important than the judiciary and have the highest authority of all ministries or other state bodies, including the Ministries of Justice and Interior.

Abdul Rahman told the SNHR that he had previously been persecuted by the regime's security services in 2012 following his defection from the regime forces, forcing him to remain in hiding in Latakia city for a whole year before he was able to leave the city and travel to Latakia suburbs outside the control of Syrian regime forces. He told us that his mother had been subjected to frequent security harassment due to his defection until she too was able to leave Latakia city and join him to its suburbs, though only after paying huge sums of money in bribes to officials of Syrian regime's checkpoints. In August 2013, Abdul Rahman was seriously injured when Syrian Regime forces bombed Salma town in the suburbs of Latakia governorate using tank shells, and he is still receiving treatment for the effects of those injuries to this day.

The SNHR has retained copies of the search warrant issued by the regime's Ministry of Defense whilst it was hunting for Abdul Rahman, as well as other photos showing the injuries and physical harm he suffered as a result of the bombing.

Born in 1991, political activist and Syrian National Bloc member Abdul Rahman Ahmad Deeb Al Saleh, whose father is a Damascene of Tunisian origin and whose mother is from Latakia city, had lived most of his life in Latakia city. He was serving as an enlisted sergeant in the army when he defected from the Syrian regime's forces and has been living in exile as a refugee in Germany since 2014.

## **II. The Record of Arbitrary Arrest or Enforced Disappearance and Torture on the Grounds of Kinship in Syrian Regime Forces' Detention Centers, According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights Database:**

Through the SNHR's daily monitoring of arrests, which target civilians on the basis of their kinship with individuals wanted by the Syrian regime for their participation in the popular uprising<sup>2</sup>, we have noticed that in most of these cases Syrian Regime forces resort to raiding the family homes of the wanted activists and dissidents, arresting the most vulnerable family members they can find, such as women, children and elderly people. In arrests carried out at checkpoints, meanwhile, if the checkpoint personnel find out that an individual's last name and some of their personal details correspond with that of a wanted activist or dissident, the relative will be arrested purely

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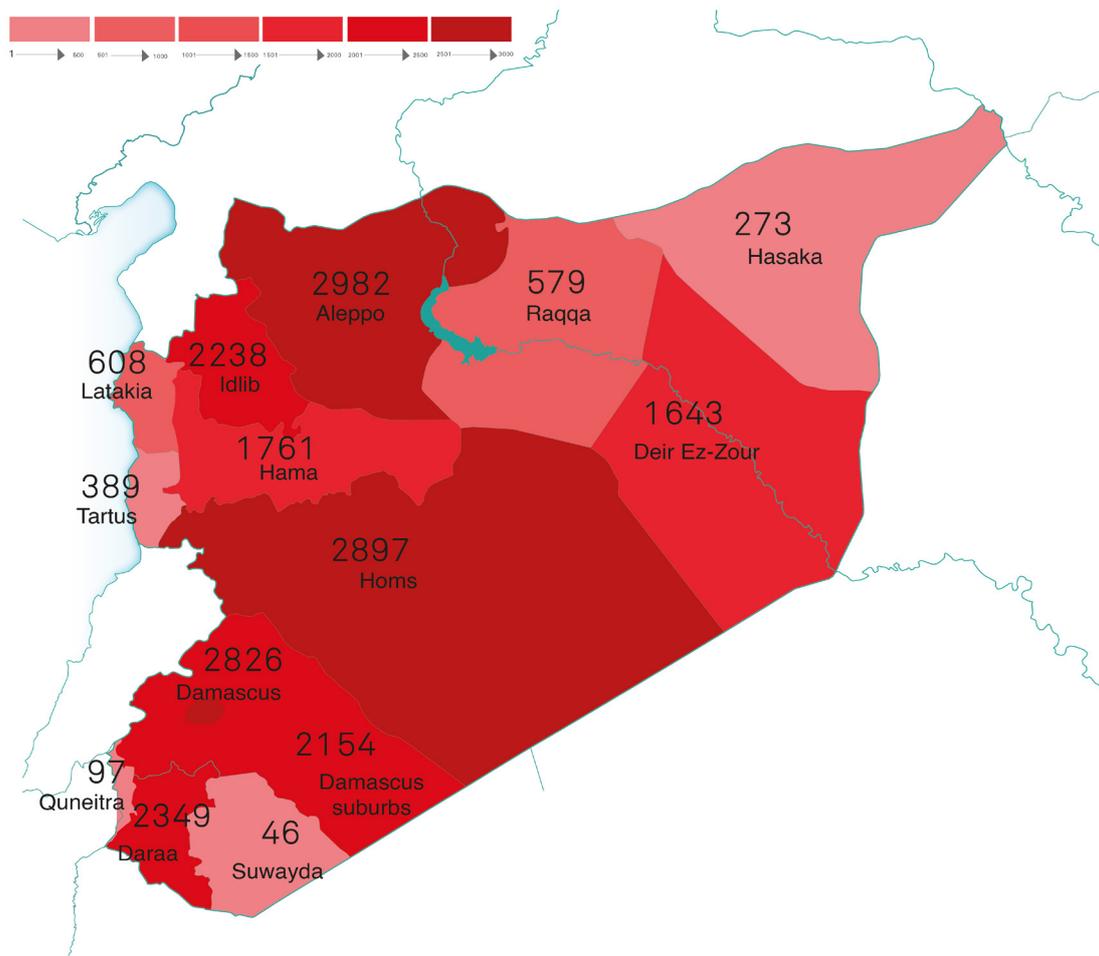
<sup>2</sup> In referring to 'participants' in the popular uprising, in this report, we mean activists involved in all aspects of the civil uprising, such as human rights, media and humanitarian activists, and all those who participated in activities against the Syrian regime, in addition to those who engaged in military actions or who defected from Syrian Regime forces.

on that basis; often, such arrests are not conducted to extract information but simply to retaliate and put additional pressure on the wanted individuals to force them to surrender. In many cases, we have documented that the wanted person has succumbed to this pressure and surrendered to Syrian Regime forces in order to protect their loved ones; in most cases, however, even after the wanted individuals' surrender, the regime does not release their detained family members or relatives after using them as 'bait', and they are eventually documented as forcibly disappeared along with the wanted individuals. In some cases, we have recorded the release of a number of the family members as part of prisoner exchange deals.

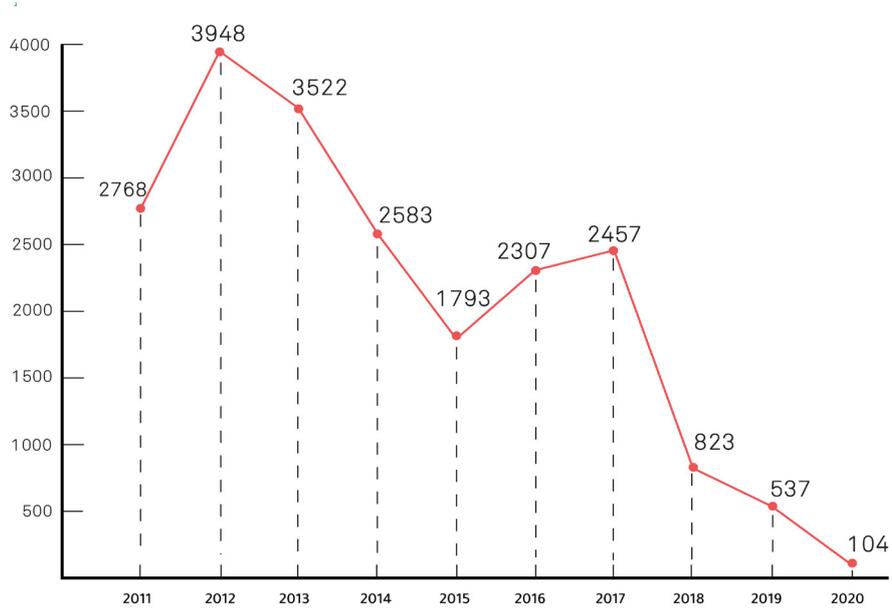
### **A: The Record of Arrest or Enforced Disappearance:**

The SNHR's database shows that at least 20,842 of the individuals arrested by the Syrian regime since March 2011, including 13 children and 27 women, are still detained or forcibly disappeared in regime detention centers over their kinship with activists in the popular uprising or opponents to the Syrian regime, as of December 21, 2020. These constitute approximately 15% of the total documented number of those detained or forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces. Among those detained in this category are at least 137 individuals over the age of 70, with at least 7,926 other individuals, including 147 children and 179 women, being arrested and later released.

The record of those arrested or forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces over their kinship to participants in the popular uprising is distributed across the Syrian governorates as follows:

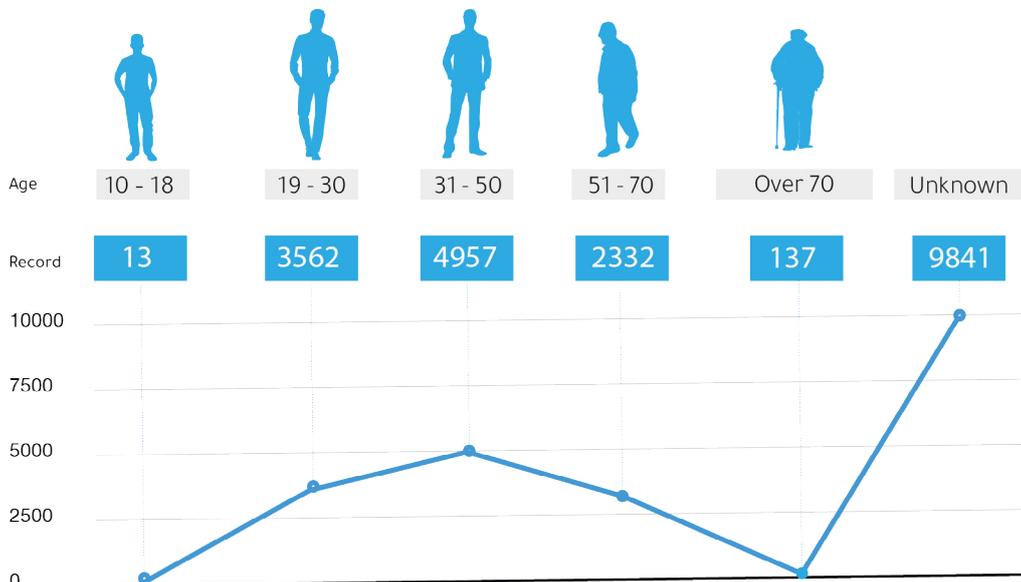


The record of those arrested or forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces over their kinship to participants in the popular uprising was distributed by years since March 2011 until December 21, 2020, as follows:



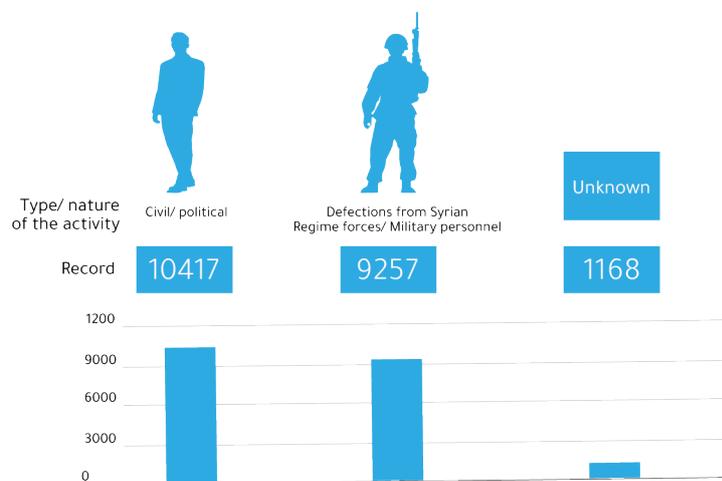
The chart shows that the year 2012 witnessed the highest wave of arrests that targeted civilians due to their kinship to activists and opponents, followed by 2013 and 2011.

Those arrested or forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces over their kinship to participants in the popular uprising was distributed according to age groups as follows:



The previous chart shows the diversity of the age groups of individuals who have been targeted with arrests or enforced disappearances due to kinship with activists in the popular uprising, dissidents and opponents of the Syrian regime, or defectors from it. Even children, adolescents and the elderly are not excluded from these operations by the Syrian Regime forces; on the contrary, members of these vulnerable groups are deliberately arrested in order to inflict the greatest possible harm on the wanted persons' families.

Meanwhile, the record of those arrested or forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces over their kinship to participants in the popular uprising is distributed according to the civil or military nature of the activities of the wanted individuals, as follows:



We note from the previous chart that nearly 50% of all the arrests carried out due to detainees' kinship with individuals wanted by Syrian Regime forces has targeted relatives and families of civilian activists, while nearly 44% of these arrests targeted relatives and families of individuals who defected from Syrian Regime forces.

#### **The most notable cases of arrest or enforced disappearance by Syrian Regime forces:**

Child Belal Hassoun, from Binnesh city in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Tuesday, August 9, 2011, in Binnesh city, with the aim of pressuring his father to turn himself in, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Child Ayman Osamah al Baqouni, from Irbeen city in the northeast of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Friday, August 12, 2011, in Irbeen city, with the aim of pressuring his father to turn himself in, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Child Khaldoun Omar al Dbeibi, from Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib, was 10 years old when he was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Monday, August 29, 2011, in Ma'aret al Numan city, with the aim of pressuring his father to turn himself in, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Wael Salah al Zain, from Me'arata village in Jabal al Zaweya in the suburbs of Idlib governorate, aged 20, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Sunday, December 4, 2011, while he was passing through one of the regime's checkpoints in the village, with the aim of pressuring one of his relatives to turn himself in, and taken to an undisclosed location.

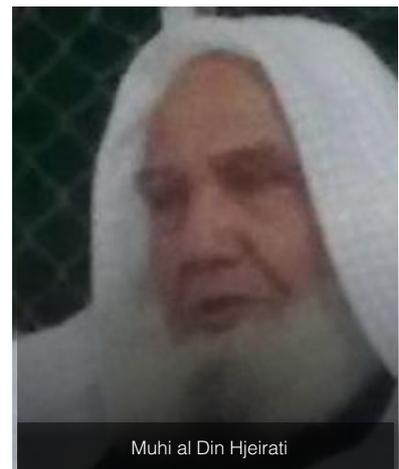
Awwad Jasem Sbeih al Abbas, from al Dmair city, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Saturday, May 14, 2011, in al Dmair city, with the aim of pressuring his brother to turn himself in, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Ms. Sarah Feras Qasem, from al Dimas town in Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Tuesday, December 24, 2013, in al Assad village in al Dimas area, with the aim of pressuring her father to turn himself in, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Yasin Tawfiq Emeirah, from the Jobar neighborhood, east of Damascus city, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Wednesday, May 16, 2012, in a raid on his home in the Jobar neighborhood, with the aim of pressuring his conscripted son, who had defected from Syrian Regime forces, to turn himself in, and taken to an undisclosed location.

### **Releases:**

Muhi al Din Hjeirati, from Hatetet al Turkman village in Damascus Suburbs governorate, aged 91, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Sunday, February 26, 2012, in the village, with the aim of pressuring his son, Omar, to turn himself in. We recorded his release on Thursday, March 1, 2012.



Jawaher Muhammad Deeb al Tounesi, from Jaramana city in Damascus Suburbs governorate, born in 1965, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Sunday, September 14, 2014, along with her twin sons, Abdul Rahman and Abdul Rahim Ahmad al Qaddah, aged 10, with the aim of pressuring her older son to turn himself in. We recorded that she was released on Tuesday, February 12, 2019, as part of an exchange deal that took place between the Syrian National

Army and Syrian Regime forces. The exchange process took place in the area of Abu al Zenda crossing near al Bab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, with 20 individuals detained by the Syrian National Army being handed over to the Syrian regime, in exchange for 20 of those detained by the Syrian regime who were handed over to the Syrian National Army.

On Wednesday, August 12, 2020, Syrian regime forces released six women and a female child, all of whom had been arrested in 2015, with some of them having been arrested due to kinship with participants in the popular uprising; they were released as part of exchange deals conducted between the regime and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in Ma'aret al Na'san area in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate; in exchange, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham handed over three Syrian regime forces personnel who they had previously captured, including a captain. We have retained information about these former detainees and the conditions of their arrest in our archives.

We spoke with Ms. A.L.<sup>3</sup>, one of the women released in the exchange deal, who related how she was arrested while she was passing through a Syrian regime checkpoint in Homs city in 2015, saying, **"They took me from the checkpoint to the Military Security branch, where I stayed for 20 days in a solitary cell without anyone speaking to me. I used to hear the sounds of torture and crying on a daily basis. One time, I banged hard on the door and screamed, telling them to stop beating a young man whom they were torturing in front of my cell, so an officer entered and hit me with the stick and said: "I will put you next to him if you make a sound again". The next day, they took me out for interrogation, and I learned that I'd been detained because of my father who works in Idlib, who I visited there several times in previous years, in secret. The interrogator told me that I would not get out of prison and would be executed, then he returned me to the cell, where I stayed for five months, during which they put women detainees with me and then transferred them to undisclosed locations. After that, I was transferred to Damascus and then to Adra Central Prison, and I was to be tried at the Field Court, 'al Midan'. I remained in prison until I was released as part of the exchange deal, and I haven't yet found out what the ruling was under which I was detained, because I didn't appear before any court."**

Ms. A.L. said that she was transferred ten days before her release to the State Security branch with other women, some of whom had been with her in Adra Prison, while some of them were brought from other security branches.

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<sup>3</sup> Via phone on September 6, 2020

### **B: Death toll of victims due to torture:**

The SNHR team has documented the deaths of at least 13 individuals due to torture and medical negligence in the Syrian regime's detention centers between March 2011 and December 21, 2020, all of whom had been arrested due to their kinship with activists in the popular uprising or opponents of the Syrian regime. The bodies of these victims were not handed over to their families, and accordingly, they are still classified as being among those forcibly disappeared.

#### **Victims killed by torture:**

Ammar Omar al Sawsaw, from Deir Atteya city, north of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Thursday, June 20, 2013, with the aim of pressuring his conscripted brother, who had defected from the Syrian regime's forces, to turn himself in. On Saturday, September 7, 2013, Syrian Regime forces informed his family of his death, with his family receiving his personal ID card and papers.



Ammar Omar al Sawsaw

Saleh al Qallab from Zemrin town in the northern suburbs of Daraa governorate, a member of the Syrian regime's Criminal Security division, who had defected from Syrian Regime forces, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces in 2012 when he surrendered himself after the regime pressured him into doing so by arresting his mother. He was tortured to death in one of the Syrian regime's detention centers in Daraa city, with his body being handed over to his family on Tuesday, April 3, 2012, bearing signs of torture.

### **III. The Lack of Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Light of the Absolute Encroachment by the Syrian Regime's Security Services on Every Aspect of Citizens' Daily Lives:**

Abdul Rahman al Saleh did not commit any crime except to peacefully express his opinion about what is happening in his country, just like hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens who held peaceful demonstrations to condemn the regime security services' brutality and corruption, and the control of one family over power in Syria since 1971, committing no violation of international human rights law. Rather, he and his fellow citizens exercised simple, fundamental rights guaranteed by international human rights law, and stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Syria, as a state signatory, is bound to protect and uphold. Instead of doing so, over the past ten years (though a large part of this also applies to

the Syrian regime's practices pre-2011), as we have documented, the Syrian regime has introduced laws (more accurately described as security articles since they violate the spirit of the law) and built a brutal system of exceptional / security / political courts based on these whose objective is rationalizing and legitimizing the liquidation of dissidents and political opponents, through the use of deliberately vaguely phrased legislation that can be subject to various interpretations, so that nobody charged under these articles can escape prosecution if the security services and subordinate judiciary want to ensure a guilty verdict, for example using Orwellian language such as:

“Undermining the dignity of the state, national unity, the morale of the army and the armed forces, disturbing the public comfort, threatening the unity of society, inciting sectarian strife” and other opaque, extremely general charges, with no definition given for any of the broad terms included in the articles used by the regime (through its absolute control throughout the period of its rule over the People's Assembly through the al Ba'ath Party); these terms are intended solely to provide the executive authority with unlimited discretionary power, and thus enable it to impose comprehensive restrictions on all freedom of opinion and expression, and various political freedoms, as it is possible to accuse the author of any article, media feature or social media post critical of the Syrian regime with any one of these exceptionally broad charges.

The vast majority of laws (security articles) issued by the Syrian regime (through decrees, or via the People's Assembly which is wholly subservient to the regime) explicitly contradict international human rights law, and frighteningly restrict freedom of opinion and expression; these include Demonstration Law No. 54 issued in April 2011, whereby any party wishing to organize a demonstration is required to inform the authorities of its objectives, location, and slogans, as well as the security law regarding the formation of the [Counter-Terrorism Court in 2012](#), in addition to the Military Field Court, which is much worse than the barbaric Counter-Terrorism Court. Indeed, for over half a century to date, the Syrian regime has been operating according to legislation that one can only call barbaric, namely the Revolution Protection Law promulgated in January 1965, which provides for the execution of perpetrators of any acts that violate the socialist system in the country, whether these acts are verbal or written, and for permanent hard labor for anyone demonstrating or calling for demonstrations; rather than issuing any bills to cancel the application of this regressive legislation, the regime has retained it up to the present day.

As for the constitution issued unilaterally by the Syrian regime in 2012, this contains clauses which directly contradict each other. Despite the text of this constitution claiming that the state guarantees freedom and independence of the press, printing and mass media, we can confirm that no independent television or press media outlet are allowed to function in Syria, due to the tyrannical restrictions practically applied by the regime authorities (the Supreme Constitutional Court is merely a tool in the hands of the executive authority which has not opposed any of the laws introduced throughout the rule of the al Ba'ath Party in Syria), with the most prominent of these laws being:

1. Media Law No. 108 of 2012, which prohibits dealing with the cases that we referred to previously, “undermining national unity, inciting sectarian strife, and other unlimited expressions under which anyone can be tried.”
2. Cybercrime Law 17 of 2012, which penalizes Internet service providers in the event of them or their users opposing the Syrian regime, with the penalties increasing in the event of “undermining the state security and public security.” This was amended in March 2018 under Presidential Decree No. 9, under which a court was established specifically for the prosecution of cybercrime. It is noteworthy that the SNHR website is one of the sites banned in Syria by the Syrian regime, with any effort by internet providers or users to break this ban being a crime.
3. The Revolution Protection Law, and exceptional court laws.

In addition to all of this, we at the Syrian Network for Human Rights affirm that enforced disappearance is still the prevailing pattern in Syria, with less than a third of the detainees held without charge being referred to the exceptional courts even after years of detention, as we detailed in a previous report on Counter-Terrorism / Security / the Political Court.

#### **IV. Conclusions and Recommendations:**

- The SNHR believes that the Syrian regime has failed to fulfill any of its obligations under any of the international treaties and conventions which it has ratified. We refer specifically here 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 imprisoned 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 by the security services and authorities, while anyone making inquiries about the detainees faces the risk of being arrested themselves for doing so.
- The Syrian regime has flagrantly violated the right to freedom of opinion and expression stipulated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- The Syrian regime has violated many of the basic and fundamental rights of Syrian citizens, most notably freedom of opinion and expression, and imposed exceptionally violent and authoritarian punishments in order to eliminate freedom of opinion and expression, which it views as exposing its practices before the people and threatening its absolute authority. We can clearly see an example of this in the arrest of Abdul Rahman al Saleh's family members solely in retaliation for his expressing his opinion on Al Jazeera channel.

- There is no legitimacy to any of the constitutional or legal texts issued by the dictatorial regime and its brutal security services in Syria, which should be classified as mafiosi operating outside the law and receiving their orders directly from the Presidency of the Republic, and which have been involved in thousands of violations against the Syrian people since 2011.
- The Syrian regime has followed the tactic of arresting, torturing and disappearing the families of persons active in the popular uprising in a widespread and deliberate manner, in order to deter and punish these individuals for their activism against the regime, and to terrorize other segments of society, silencing any expression of dissent or similar actions for fear of what might befall their family members.

### **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, which demand the immediate cessation of the crime of enforced disappearance.
- Demand the immediate release of nearly 21,000 Syrian citizens who have been detained or forcibly disappeared due to the participation of their relatives in the popular uprising against the Syrian regime.
- Accelerate the implementation of the political transition towards a democratic government that respects human rights in Syria, because every delay means more encroachment and brutality by the Syrian regime and its security services over the most basic rights of the Syrian citizen.

#### **The Russian regime:**

- Must demand that its ally, the Syrian regime, release the 21,000 Syrian citizens, and stop threatening and persecuting activists' families.
- Stop supporting the factional system in Syria, in view of its lack of any credibility by the Syrian people and the international community, and its steady progression towards further decline and absolute contempt for human rights in a way unimaginable in the modern world.

#### **The Syrian regime:**

- Release the relatives of Abdul Rahman al Saleh and 21,000 other Syrian citizens who have been detained or forcibly disappeared solely for the activities of their relatives.
- Repeal all barbaric laws and inflexible expressions included in these that can be interpreted without limits in order to arrest and torture any political opponent.
- Reveal of the fate of nearly 99,000 forcibly disappeared persons, and immediately release tens of thousands of arbitrary detainees and detained persons whose sentences have ended.
- Publish a register that includes detainees' data, along with the reasons for detention, their locations, and the sentences issued.

- Suspend and annul the judgments issued by the field military courts and counter-terrorism courts for contravening domestic and international legislation and fair trial guarantees.

## Thanks

The Syrian Network for Human Rights extends its sincere thanks to everyone who has shared news and information, especially surviving victims, eyewitnesses, and local activists, whose information has contributed to substantiating and strengthening the available data and evidence in documenting the various incidents included in this report.



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