

The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in April 2020

The Lowest Monthly Death Toll This Year Due to the Decrease in Military Operations Over Fears of the Coronavirus Outbreak

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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

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I. Introduction and Methodology

Syria has seen an unprecedented number of violations since the start of the popular uprising for democracy in March 2011. Extrajudicial killings, arrests, torture and enforced disappearances are the violations most frequently perpetrated against Syrian citizens. While the Syrian regime and its affiliated militias were the sole perpetrators of these violations for the first seven months or so of the uprising, other parties subsequently joined in, also violating the rights of Syrian citizens. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has continued to document every incident that its team members are able to verify, with these violations escalating very dramatically in 2012 and 2013, prompting us to expand our publication of periodic monthly reports recording and highlighting the continued suffering of the Syrian people, which subsequently grew to eight reports on different issues issued at the beginning of each month. In the course of our work, SNHR has compiled a massive database cataloguing hundreds of thousands of incidents, each of which involves a pattern of violations that we have been able to document.

By the end of 2018, with a reduction in the level of violence compared to previous years, we changed our previous strategy and now compile our reports into a single monthly report featuring the most prominent violations in Syria which we have been able to document in the preceding month.

This month's report focuses on the human rights situation in Syria in April 2020, and catalogues the record of civilian victims whom we documented killed by the main perpetrator parties during this period, as well as the record of cases of arrests and enforced disappearance. The report also highlights indiscriminate attacks and the use of outlawed weapons (cluster munitions, chemical weapons, barrel bombs, incendiary weapons) and attacks on civilian objects.



The report also includes documentation of violations distributed according to the perpetrator parties responsible for each one. Accurately ascribing responsibility sometimes requires more time and investigation than usual, especially in the case of joint attacks. On some occasions, when we are unable to definitively assign responsibility for specific attacks to one particular party, as in the case of air strikes by Syrian or Russian warplanes, Syrian-Iranian attacks, or attacks by Syrian Democratic Forces and the US-led coalition, we indicate that responsibility for these attacks is held jointly by the parties in question until we are able to likely establish which one of the parties was likely responsible, or it's proved that the attack was a joint initiative carried out in coordination between the two parties.

This report draws upon the ongoing daily monitoring of news and developments by SNHR's team, and on information from our extensive network of relations with various sources that have been built up over the course of our work since 2011. When we receive information or learn some news about violations via the internet or media outlets, our team works to follow up these reports and attempts to verify information and collect evidence and data. In some cases, researchers are able to visit the incident location promptly, although this is a rarity in light of the incredibly high security risks involved, and given the frequency of daily incidents and the scarcity of human and material resources to carry out this work. Therefore, the opportunities available to access evidence vary between one case and another, and consequently the level of certainty in classification of each incident varies. SNHR's customary policy in such cases is to rely on accounts from survivors who experienced the violation firsthand, in addition to analyzing available materials from open sources such as the Internet and media outlets. We also talk with medical personnel who treated the injured in these incidents and examined the deceased victims' bodies and identified the cause of death. SNHR also analyzes videos and photographs that our team has documented, or which were posted online, or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media platforms. These videos and photos show, amongst other things, sites of attacks, and the bodies of the deceased victims and the injured, the scale of destruction, and the remnants of the incendiary and cluster munitions and other munitions used, whilst other photos may show victims killed under torture, and victims amongst medical and media personnel who died in attacks carried out by parties to the conflict. We also retain copies of all the videos and photographs included in these reports, which are also reviewed in this report, in a confidential electronic database, as well as keeping hard disk backup copies, and we ensure always that all these data are stored with their original source. We do not claim, however, that we have documented all cases, given the severe prohibitions, restrictions and persecution by the Syrian Regime forces and some other armed groups. Readers are welcome to find out more about our methodology¹.

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>



This report only represents the bare minimum of the actual severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

II. April Outline

April 2020 saw an extensive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, including in Syria, whose authorities acknowledged the 'first' case of infection in the country on March 22, 2020; As of April 28, the number of cases announced by the Syrian regime had reached 43, of whom 21 had reportedly recovered, while three died; however, the Syrian regime has for decades been accustomed to a total lack of transparency, and we believe that the real number of cases is far higher than the number acknowledged by the regime; we've received a number of reports stating that the regime's security forces have also threatened staff at medical centers, preventing them from announcing any cases of infection or death due to COVID-19 and severely restricting all data announced by the Ministry of Health. Instead, medical personnel are reportedly forced to issue misleading reports to victims and their families ascribing deaths believed to result from the COVID-19 coronavirus to other causes. While we have seen the Syrian regime's Minister of Health casually [using the language of fighting](#) disease to describe the regime's murder of dissidents, who it describes as 'germs' with phrases like: "Thank God, the Syrian Arab Army has cleared many of the germs from the soil of Syria, and I thank it for that", the regime is indifferent to the effect of actual lethal viruses on the population. It should be emphasized that such chillingly dehumanizing reference to the regime's victims from the Minister of Health, not the head of a security branch, are not unusual, again indicating the inhumanity and reckless disregard for Syrians' lives shown by the regime authorities, as well as the regime's complete dependency on the military and security establishment.

As for the precautionary measures implemented, these are shockingly poor, with this negligence threatening to increase the spread of the virus and to result in high rates of deaths and infections among citizens. There is no regard at all for social distancing, with the SNHR documenting crowds of Syrian citizens gathering [in front](#) of [official departments](#) and at points of sale of consumables; after only a brief break, the Syrian regime took a decision, on April 28, to allow the resumption of all activities, reopening commercial and industrial shops and services and encouraging the people to return to work, with markets witnessed [unprecedented overcrowding](#) as a result in gross violation of the most basic precautionary measures.



In addition to the aforementioned threats from the COVID-19 pandemic, detention centers, especially those under the control of Syrian Regime forces, are suffering from an almost complete absence of healthcare, in addition to being overcrowded with detainees; as the SNHR has already confirmed, most of the detainees, especially those in the four main security branches and military prisons, have an average area for each person not exceeding 70 cm² in cells that lack ventilation and the most basic standards of sanitation and cleanliness. In light of the detainees' contact with the security personnel who mix with people in the outside world and particularly with members of Iranian and Iraqi militias coming to Syria from pandemic-afflicted areas, there are increasing fears of the runaway spread of COVID-19 within these centers, with the Syrian regime demonstrating its continued complete indifference to the wellbeing, fate and lives of detainees through its failure to initiate the release of any of the tens of thousands of those arbitrarily arrested as a result of their participation in demonstrations for political change. We note that the record of arrest incidents documented by SNHR in April exceeds the numbers of detainees released.

As for the areas outside the control of Syrian Regime forces in northwest Syria, especially in the IDP camps and shelter centers, the congested conditions there encourage the spread of the pandemic in the event of its emergence there, with these massively overcrowded camps lacking the most basic means for residents to follow the essential precautionary measures, as these areas are crammed with civilians, hindering the achievement of any social distancing (which requires a space of 1 - 1.5 m between people). The camps also lack adequate water and hygiene resources, in addition to residents being forced to share sanitary facilities for each sector in the camp, which lack the necessary hygiene measures to limit the spread of the pandemic. Northwest Syria also suffers from inadequate medical capabilities due to the lack of beds and equipment that could contribute to meeting the needs of all citizens there. With the advent of the holy month of Ramadan, the situation has worsened. We monitored crowds in the markets and [mosques](#) to perform the prayers, indicating a lack of awareness and societal commitment to the threat of the pandemic.

On April 30, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham opened a commercial crossing linking areas under its control with the areas controlled by Syrian Regime forces in Ma'aret al Na'san village in the northern suburbs of Idlib, in violation of the precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic; however, it suspended work on this crossing following civilian protests in the area. HTS used live bullets to disperse these protests, killing one civilian.



As a result of the ceasefire which came into effect on March 6, following consultations between the Turkish and Russian Presidents, the SNHR documented the cessation of air strikes by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces for the second month in a row, while recording some ground attacks at a lower rate compared to previous months, with most of these taking place in areas whose inhabitants had previously been displaced. It seems that the pandemic is apparently affecting the military capabilities of the Syrian regime's army and affiliated Iranian militias, another factor which has contributed to a reduction in the rate of their killing of Syrian civilians.

We have also documented the continuation of the Syrian Regime forces and [affiliated militias'](#) [pillaging](#) and looting of civilians' property in the areas the regime has taken control of in the Idlib region in northwest Syria

April saw the continuation of explosions in areas outside the control of Syrian Regime forces in northern and eastern Syria, in particular in the Afrin region, Raqqa and Hasaka suburbs, some of which resulted in civilian casualties. In Daraa governorate, in southern Syria, assassinations continued against civilians and military personnel, due to security instability in the region.

In April, Syrian Regime forces continued to pursue and arrest individuals who had settled their security situation in areas that have signed settlement agreements with the Syrian regime; these arrests have been concentrated in the governorates of Damascus Suburbs and Daraa. We also recorded arrests targeting those who illegally returned from Lebanon to their cities, who have been charged with 'terrorism'. We also recorded arrests of civilians, including women, in connection with travelling to areas outside the Syrian regime's control.

Meanwhile, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces continued enforcing the group's policies of arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance throughout the month of April, targeting activists and members of civil society groups who oppose their policies. These arrests were concentrated in the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa. Also in April, SNHR documented Syrian Democratic Forces carrying out arrests targeting civilians with the aim of forced conscription, during which the detainees' family members were beaten.

In addition to these incidents, April also saw Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arresting activists working with civil society groups, as well as other civilians, with most of these arrests occurring due to the publication of reports on social media accounts criticizing the HTS's management of areas under its control.



Factions of the Armed Opposition also continued carrying out arrests and kidnappings in April, most of which occurred on a mass scale, in many cases targeting several members of the same families, including women. We also recorded arrests of an ethnic nature taking place, with these incidents being concentrated in areas under the control of Armed Opposition factions in Aleppo, Raqqa and Hasaka governorates.

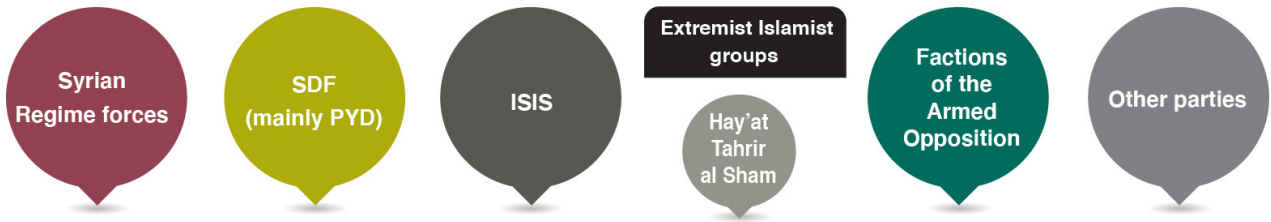
As the month of Ramadan grew closer, the Idlib region witnessed an increase in reverse displacements, with an estimated 110,000 previously displaced people returning to their homes in April.

III. The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in April

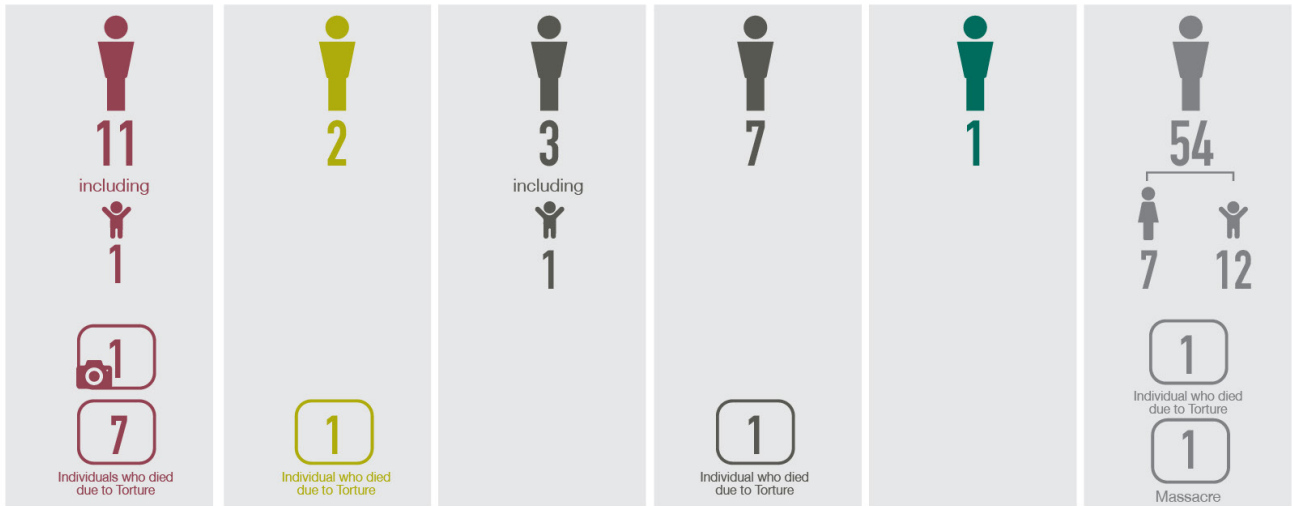
This report outlines the most notable human rights violations that were documented by the SNHR in April 2020 at the hands of the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria.



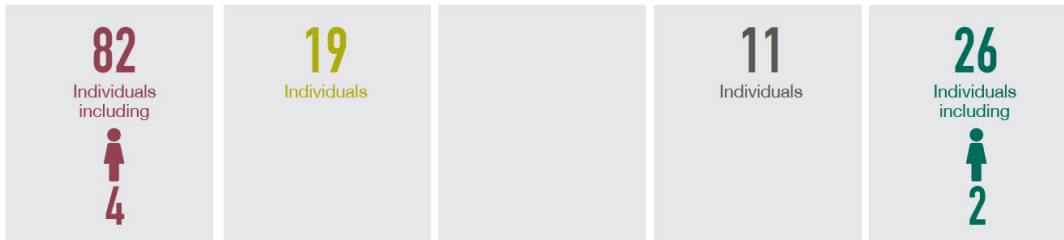
Record of the Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in April 2020



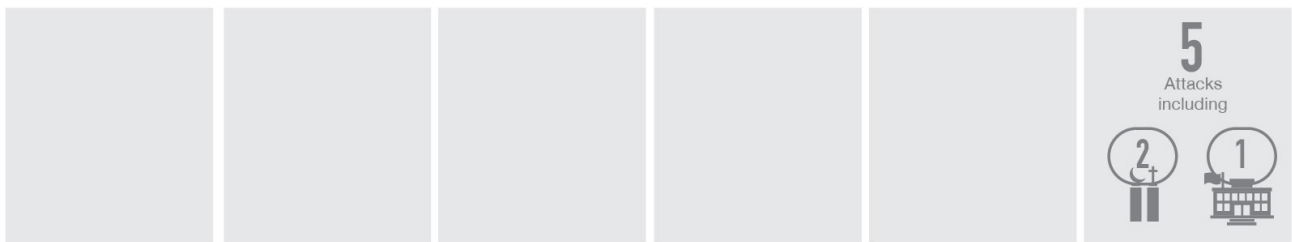
Extrajudicial Killing



Arbitrary Arrests and Unlawful Detention



Attacks on Vital Civilian Facilities



A. Extrajudicial killing:

In April 2020, SNHR documented the deaths of 78 civilians, including 14 children and seven women (adult female); among the victims was one media worker. We also documented the deaths of 10 individuals due to torture, including one child, and at least one massacre. We issued a report on the first of this month detailing the civilian victims documented killed in April at the hands of the perpetrator parties in Syria.

The death toll of civilian victims was distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:

A. The main parties:

- **Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):** 11 civilians, including one child.
- **ISIS:** Three civilians, including one child.
- **Extremist Islamist groups:**
 - o Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of factions of the Armed Opposition): Seven civilians.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** One.
- **Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party):** Two civilians.

B. Other parties:

We documented the deaths of 54 civilians, including 12 children and seven women, by other parties, distributed as follows:

- Landmines of unknown origin: 10 civilians, including one child and one woman.
- Fires of unknown source: 20 civilians, including four women.
- Shelling from unknown sources: Two civilians, including one woman.
- Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified: 10 civilians, including six children and one woman.
- Killings by unknown persons: Nine civilians, including three children.
- Drowning: Two civilians, including one child.
- Lebanese forces: One child.

B. Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance:

In April 2020, SNHR documented at least 138 cases of arbitrary arrests, including six women (adult female), at the hands of the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria. The largest number of arrests was carried out by Syrian Regime forces in Deir Ez-Zour governorate, followed by Damascus Suburbs governorate. We issued a report on the second of this month detailing the record of cases of arrests and enforced disappearances which we documented in April 2020 at the hands of the main perpetrator parties in Syria.



These arrests are distributed according to the main perpetrator parties, as follows:

- Syrian Regime forces: 82, including four women.
- Extremist Islamist groups:
 - o Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: 11.
- Factions of the Armed Opposition: 26, including two women.
- Syrian Democratic Forces: 19.

C. Attacks on vital civilian facilities:

SNHR documented at least five incidents of attacks on vital civilian facilities in April, all carried out at the hands of other parties. Among these attacks, we documented one on a school, two on places of worship (mosques), and two on markets.

These attacks are distributed as follows:

- **Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified:** Two.
- **Attacks whose perpetrators have not yet been identified:** Three.

The record of attacks documented in April on vital civilian facilities is distributed according to the perpetrator party as follows:

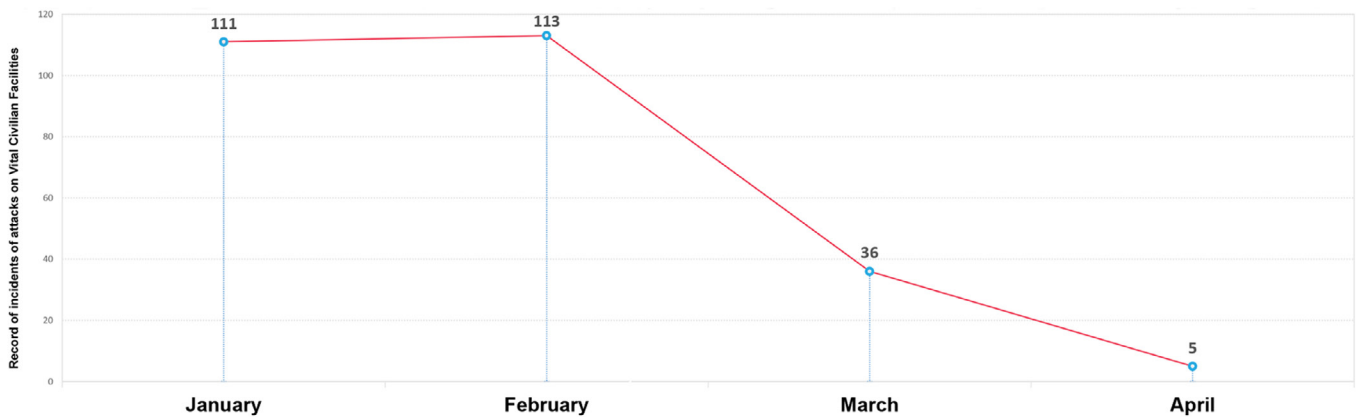
Attacked Facility	Perpetrator Party	
	Other parties	
	Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified	Attacks whose perpetrators have not yet been identified
Places of Worship		
Mosques	-	2
Vital Educational Facilities		
Schools	-	1
Communal Facilities		
Markets	2	-
Total	2	3



Thus, the record of attacks on vital civilian facilities documented since the start of 2020 up to the start of May of the same year at the hands of the main perpetrator parties in Syria has now reached 265 in total, distributed monthly as follows:



At least 265 incidents of attacks on vital civilian facilities in Syria in 2020 From January to May



The previous chart shows the decline in the record of the attacks on vital civilian facilities in April, compared to the previous months, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the capabilities of the Syrian regime's army and affiliated Iranian militias, in conjunction with the Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement that came into effect on March 6, 2020, which led to a decline in air and ground bombings.

The most notable attacks on vital civilian facilities in April:

On Thursday, April 2, 2020, a motorcycle bomb planted by so-far unidentified individuals exploded in the market of al Bseira city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, causing moderate material damage to a shop. SNHR is still trying to establish contact with witnesses to the incident to obtain more details. Al Bseira city was under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces at the time of the incident.



On Saturday, April 18, 2020, an improvised explosive device, placed in the wagon of a traveling vendor, exploded, near the government Saraya building in Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, injuring [three civilians](#), in addition to causing moderate material damage to a number of shops. SNHR is still trying to establish contact with witnesses to and survivors of the incident to obtain more details. Afrin city was under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition supported by Turkish forces at the time of the incident.

D. Record of indiscriminate attacks and attacks using outlawed weapons:

The Syrian Network for Human Rights was unable to document any indiscriminate attacks or attacks using outlawed weapons in April.

IV. Attachments

[78 Civilians, including One Media Worker, Documented Killed in Syria in April 2020](#)

[At least 138 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in April 2020 Despite the Recent Amnesty Decree](#)

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

- The evidence we have gathered indicates that attacks continue to be directed against civilians and civilian objects. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have committed various crimes, including extrajudicial killings, arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance. In addition, the indiscriminate bombardment and other attacks carried out caused the destruction of facilities and buildings. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the war crime of attacking civilians has been committed in many cases.
- The Syrian government has not only violated international humanitarian law and customary law, but has also breached a number of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 2139, resolution 2042 on the release of detainees, and resolution 2254, all without any accountability.
- We could find no record of any warnings being issued by the Syrian Regime or Russian forces prior to any attack in accordance with the requirements of international humanitarian law. This has been the case since the beginning of the popular uprising for freedom, providing another blatant demonstration of these forces' total disregard for the lives of civilians in Syria.



- The magnitude and frequency of the violations, the disproportionate use of military force, the indiscriminate manner of the bombing, and the coordinated approach of these attacks leads to the inescapable conclusion that these acts are wholly deliberate and based on high-level orders, and as such constitute a part of state policy.
- The indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment carried out by the alliance of US-led coalition and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces is considered to be a clear violation of international humanitarian law, with indiscriminate killings amounting to war crimes.
- All the attacks documented in this report, particularly bombings, caused massive collateral damage that involved loss of lives, injuries, or significant damage to civilian objects. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.
- The use of explosive arms to target densely populated areas reflects a criminal and wholly deliberate mindset, with the perpetrators clearly intending to inflict the greatest possible number of deaths, which is a clear contravention of international human rights law and a flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention (arts. 27, 31, 32).

Recommendations:

UN Security Council

- The Security Council must take additional steps following its adoption of Resolution 2254, which clearly insists that “ **all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such.**”
- The Syrian issue should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible for violations should be held accountable including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes has been repeatedly proven.
- Ensure peace and security and implement the principle of responsibility to protect civilians’ lives and to save the Syrian people’s heritage and historical artefacts from destruction, looting and vandalism.
- The Security Council should adopt a resolution banning the use of cluster munitions in Syria, similar to the existing prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and include advice on how to safely remove the remnants of such dangerous weapons.
- The four other permanent member states should put pressure on the Russian government to end its support for the Syrian regime, which uses chemical weapons, and to expose its involvement in this regard.



- Request that all relevant United Nations agencies make greater efforts to provide food, medical and humanitarian assistance in areas where fighting has ceased, and in internally displaced persons camps, and to follow-up with those States that have pledged voluntary contributions.

International Community

- In light of the split within the Security Council and its utter inability to take any effective action, action should be taken on the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people by protecting them from daily killing and by lifting sieges, as well as by increasing support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be enacted in local courts regarding these crimes in order to conduct fair trials for all those who were involved.
- SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 'Responsibility to Protect' in dozens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) after all political channels through the Arab League's plan and then Mr. Kofi Annan's plan have proved fruitless, along with the Cessation of Hostilities statements and Astana agreements that followed. Therefore, steps should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, while the norm of the 'Responsibility to Protect', which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.
- Renew pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- Work on fulfilling justice and achieving accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and to activate the principle of universal jurisdiction.

OHCHR

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the incidents mentioned in this report since these attacks were perpetrated by the parties to the conflict.
- Train Syrian organizations to undertake clearance of mines and other unexploded ordnance, and raise local awareness of the dangers of such ordnance.
- Establish a platform that brings together a number of Syrian organizations active in documenting violations and humanitarian assistance, in order to facilitate an exchange of skills and experiences within Syrian society.



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 further evidence and data.

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

- Collect further evidence about the crimes documented in this report.

The United Nations special envoy to Syria

- Condemn the perpetrators of crimes and massacres, and those who were primarily responsible for dooming the de-escalation agreements.
- Re-sequence the peace process so that it can resume its natural course despite Russia's attempts to divert and distort it, empowering the Constitutional Committee prior to the establishment of a transitional governing body.

The Syrian regime

- Stop indiscriminate shelling and targeting of residential areas, hospitals, schools and markets, and end the use of outlawed weapons and barrel bombs.
- End the acts of torture that have caused the deaths of thousands of Syrian citizens in detention centers.
- Reveal the fate of some 83,000 Syrian citizens arrested by the security services whose fate has been concealed to date.
- Ensure compliance with UN Security Council resolutions and customary humanitarian law.

The Russian regime

- Launch investigations into the incidents included in this report, make the findings of these investigations public for the Syrian people, and hold the those responsible accountable.
- Compensate all the damaged centers and facilities, rebuild and rehabilitate them, and compensate all the families of victims who were killed by the current Russian regime, as well as all the wounded.
- Completely cease the bombing of hospitals, protected objects, and civilian areas, and respect customary international law.
- As a guarantor party in Astana talks, the Russian regime must stop thwarting de-escalation agreements, and apply pressure on the Syrian regime in order to end all indiscriminate attacks and to allow unconditional passage of humanitarian aid to besieged areas.



- Stop using incendiary weapons in populated areas, compensate the victims and their families for all human and material damage caused by the use of these weapons, and provide treatment for dozens of civilian casualties.
- Provide detailed maps of sites where Russian forces have launched cluster munition attacks, issue these to the United Nations and inform the Syrian public about them, thus facilitating the safe disposal of unexploded ordnance.
- Begin to achieve a breakthrough in the issue of detainees by revealing the fate of 83,000 people forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime.

The Coalition (US-led coalition and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces)

- The states of the coalition must unequivocally and sincerely acknowledge that some of their bombing operations have resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians. Rather than attempting denial, these states should take speedy steps to launch serious investigations, and immediately compensate and apologize to the victims and all those affected.
- The states supporting the SDF should apply pressure on these forces in order to compel them to cease all of their violations in all the areas and towns under their control.
- The states supporting the SDF should cease all forms of support until the SDF commits itself to complying with the rules of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. This is primarily the responsibility of the supporting states. Providing the SDF with weapons and support while knowing that the SDF violates the rules of international humanitarian law can be seen as a contribution to these violations.
- Syrian Democratic Forces must immediately stop conscripting children, hold the officers involved in such violations accountable, and pledge to return all children who have been arrested for conscription immediately.

Armed Opposition factions

- Armed Opposition factions must ensure the protection of civilians in all areas under their control. These forces should also take care to distinguish between civilians and military targets and cease any indiscriminate attacks.
- Pledge to cease any arbitrary arrests, and investigate incidents that have resulted in violations of international humanitarian law.
- Take punitive action against those who commit violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.



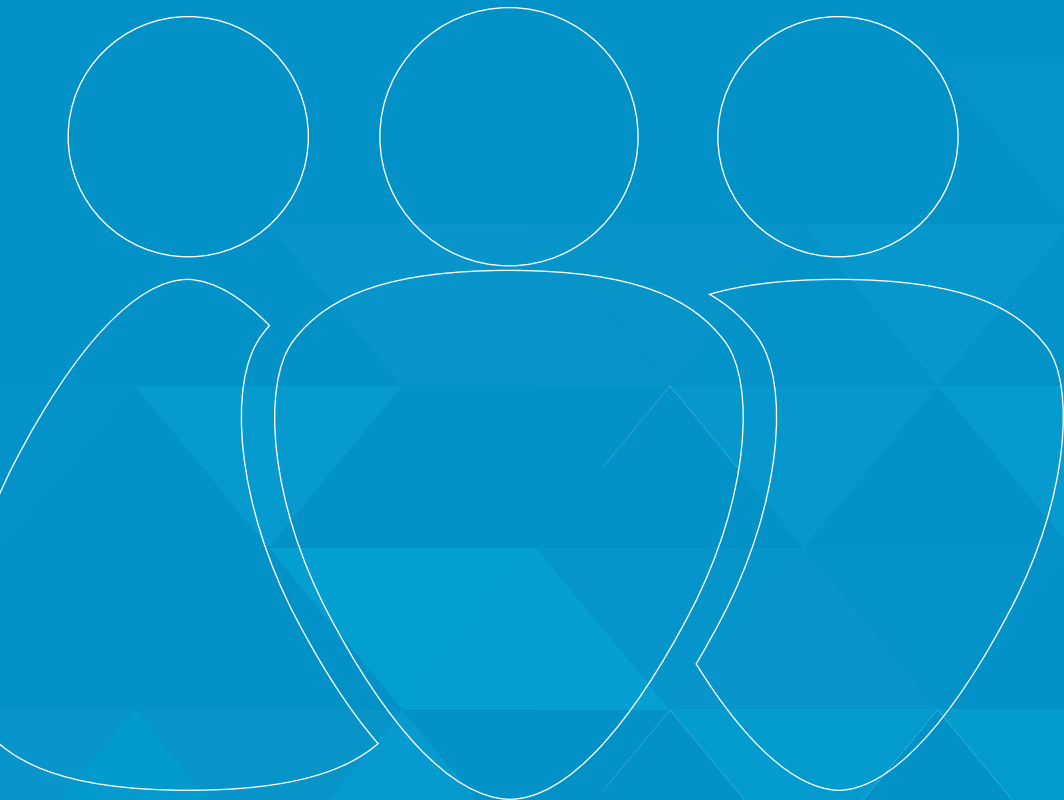
Humanitarian Organizations:

Develop urgent operational plans to secure decent shelter for internally displaced persons.

Acknowledgments

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