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.

72 Civilians, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, Killed in Syria in November 2023: Nine of Them, Including One Woman, Died Due to Torture

Syrian Regime Forces Commit a Massacre in Qoqfin Village in Rural Idlib, Killing 10 Civilians from the Same Family, Including Seven Children and One Woman

Friday 01 December 2023
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I. Background and Methodology

This report documents the civilian deaths that were recorded by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) as taking place in Syria at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in November 2023. The report sheds light particularly on victims who died due to torture, and victims among medical personnel, as well as focusing on documenting the massacres perpetrated by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria which the SNHR team was able to document during this period; it should be noted that we use the term, ‘massacre’ to refer to an incident in which no fewer than five peaceful individuals were killed. The report also includes a summary of the most notable incidents during this month. Full details of every incident are archived on the SNHR database.

Documenting deaths in Syria has been one of the most important roles performed by SNHR since March 2011. This task is all the more crucial since murder is the most prevalent of all the violations perpetrated in the country, and the one which most profoundly affects the Syrian people, with countless families suffering incalculable and irreparable trauma through the loss of parents, spouses, children, siblings, friends, etc.

These violations have become so widespread primarily due to the systematic killing of civilians by Syrian regime forces and their affiliated militias. Between March 2011, and the beginning of 2012 as ever since, Syrian regime forces were responsible for the overwhelming majority of deaths in Syria. The regime began by using tanks and artillery, then proceeded to also use warplanes and helicopter gunships which were deployed in attacks using barrel bombs, in addition to ballistic missiles and chemical weapons.

The emergence of several other parties during the Syrian conflict has further increased both the importance and the complexity of documenting the victims killed in Syria.

The killing of civilians in Syria has continued for the twelfth consecutive year, as it has done continuously ever since the initial outbreak of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011, resulting in casualty figures that are among the highest worldwide; this underlines the fact that Syria is still the most dangerous nation in the world for civilians, and remains an exceptionally insecure and perilous environment is wholly unsuitable for the return of refugees.

This report catalogues the death toll of victims at the hands of the parties actively engaged in the Syrian conflict. It should be noted that accurately ascribing responsibility sometimes requires more time and investigation than usual, especially in the case of joint attacks. We also face additional challenges in assigning responsibility for attacks in some incidents of ground-based bombardment, especially those in which the bombardment originates from an area adjacent to the one targeted, which is controlled by a different party to the perpetrator. In such cases, SNHR tries to thoroughly investigate each incident, in order to conclusively identify the party responsible for the bombardment.

Despite these efforts, however, there are cases in which we are unable to definitively assign culpability for a particular killing to one of two possible parties due to the area’s proximity to the lines of engagement, the use of similar weapons, or other reasons. In such cases, the incident is classified under the category ‘other parties’ until such time as we have gathered sufficient evidence to conclusively assign responsibility for the violation to one of the two parties.
The parties to the conflict documented by SNHR as having as committed extrajudicial killings in this report are:

1. **Main parties:**
   - Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, Shiite foreign militias)
   - Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

2. **Other parties.**

While we as the SNHR are keen to accurately ascribe responsibility for incidents to the relevant parties, we exclude two types of attacks from the process of assigning responsibility, namely anti-personnel landmines, and remote explosions, including suicide or forced suicide attacks. We discussed this issue previously in detailed reports.

As for the anonymous victims whose names we have not yet been able to determine or regarding whom we have so far been unable to find any identifying information or any picture or video footage, these cases are catalogued in a separate archive until any information confirming these victims’ identity is received which would enable their cases to be transferred to the victims’ archive, with their names and other details registered accordingly.

Through use of SNHR’s extensive database, we can catalogue the victims according to the governorate where they were killed, as well as by their governorate of origin. However, we choose in our monthly report to document the death toll of victims according to the governorate in which they were killed, rather than by their place of origin.

In this report, we record only the death toll of civilians whose deaths we were able to document during the last month. SNHR does not document the deaths of fighters and militants killed during the conflict, while some of the victims documented may have been killed months or even years ago, as in some cases of death due to torture; in these cases, where the deaths have only recently been confirmed, we include two dates, the date when we were able to document the victim’s death, and the date on which we think the death occurred.

The methodology adopted by SNHR in documenting the victims can be found at this link. 

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1. We generally use the term ‘the Syrian regime’ rather than ‘the Syrian government’, because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is that of a totalitarian dictatorship where power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of individuals, namely the President of the Republic and the heads of the regime’s security apparatus. As a result, 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, with no real decision-making power or active role of their own. Syria is under autocratic/family rule, with no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade merely for show. The Minister of Justice cannot even summon a low-ranking security office, let alone a security branch head. Syria is ruled by the president assisted by the heads of the security branches.

   While we are aware that the United Nations and its agencies use the term ‘the Syrian government’, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

2. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Syrian Network for Human Rights Methodology
This report draws upon the constant daily monitoring of news and developments by SNHR’s team, and on information from our extensive network of various sources that has been built up over the course of our work since 2011. The SNHR also provides a special form that can be completed by victims’ relatives with victims’ names and personal information so that the Victims Documentation Department can follow up on the information provided, verify its accuracy and then include it in the database.

We note that the death toll of victims detailed on SNHR’s database includes extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the controlling forces which occurred as a violation of either international human rights law or international humanitarian law or both, but does not include cases of natural deaths or those which occurred due to disputes between members of society or other such issues.

Our investigations confirm that all of the attacks included in this report that were carried out by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria targeted civilian areas where we documented no military presence or armories before or during the attacks. Also, the perpetrators of the attacks failed to issue any warnings to civilians prior to any of the attacks as required by international humanitarian law.

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

II. The Syrian Regime Has Failed to Register Hundreds of Thousands of Citizens It Killed Since March 2011 in the Civil Registry’s Death Records

Although hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens have been killed, ‘disappeared’ or gone missing since the early days of the popular rising in March 2011, they have not been officially registered as dead by the relevant official state authority, namely the Civil Registry Department. The Syrian regime unconscionably controls the issuance of death certificates, which are not made available to victims’ families, whether the victims were killed at the hands of the Syrian regime or by other parties, or to the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared. In fact, the regime only allows death certificates to be issued for those who meet the narrow criteria set by the regime and its security services. In many previous reports, we have discussed the phenomenon of the regime’s forcing victims’ families to sign false statements written by the security authorities beforehand, stating falsely that ‘armed terrorist gangs’, rather than the regime, killed their loved ones, if they wish to obtain a death certificate. The Syrian regime has not only failed to launch any investigations into the causes of death for hundreds of thousands of Syrians but has also failed to hold to account even one member of its security or military forces for their involvement in these killings.
In order to obtain a death certificate, the Syrian regime relies on three things:

• Medical reports prepared by regime personnel, citing a false cause of death, such as a heart attack for those forcibly disappeared in its detention centers, or claiming falsely that the victim died as a result of injuries from war munitions.

• Statements from the local neighborhood headman or ‘Mukhtar› and any witnesses, who are asked to confirm the death.

• Acknowledgement from the victims’ families, who often urgently need to obtain a death certificate; for this reason, family members understandably feel they have no choice but to remain silent about the true cause of their loved ones’ deaths and the identity of those responsible for them.

Through our exhaustive monitoring and investigation process, we have been able to document three methods used by the Syrian regime to register the deaths of a limited number of its victims who were killed, or forcibly disappeared then subsequently killed, which we detailed in a report we issued on August 19, 2022, entitled ‘The Syrian Regime, Through Its Security Services and State Institutions, Controls the Incidents of Registering the Deaths of Victims Killed/‘Disappeared’ in the Armed Conflict Since March 2011’.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of victims’ families are unable to obtain death certificates for their loved ones from the Syrian regime, for fear of linking their name with that of a person who was detained by the regime and killed under torture, which implies that their deceased family member had been a dissident who had opposed the Syrian regime, or had been registered as a ‘terrorist’ if he or she had been wanted by the security services. Additionally, many victims’ families have been forcibly displaced outside the areas controlled by the Syrian regime.

On August 10, 2022, the Minister of Justice in the Syrian regime government issued Circular No. 22 specifying the procedures for the conduct of proceedings related to registering deaths at Sharia courts. The circular included new conditions stipulating that five items of evidence must be submitted to and approved by the relevant judges in proceedings related to registering the death. It also requires that all relevant courts involved in death registration cases comply with the circular’s content. The circular also gave security clearance to judicial authorities empowering them to register death cases, increasing the security services’ intrusion. We issued a report in which we analyzed the constitutional and legal violations contained in this circular’s text and the consequences thereof.
III. Brief on the Most Notable Incidents of Killing in November

In November, we documented the killing of 72 civilians, including 14 children and seven women. Below are a number of observations regarding the events that marked this month:

A. Syrian regime forces

In November, Syrian regime forces killed 32 civilians, including 10 children and four women, as well as seven individuals who died due to torture, one of them a woman. Furthermore, Syrian regime forces killed one medical worker and one media worker. In total, civilian deaths at the hands of regime forces accounted for approximately 45 percent of November’s total. While victims killed by Syrian regime forces were scattered across several Syrian governorates, the largest proportion was concentrated in northwestern Syria with Idlib governorate recording the highest number of deaths at the hands of Syrian regime forces with 41 percent of the total, followed by Aleppo governorate with 16 percent. Meanwhile, northwestern Syria saw fewer monthly deaths compared to the previous two months, especially October. On November 25, Syrian regime forces committed a massacre in the form of an artillery attack that targeted agricultural land to the west of Qoqfin village in Jabal al-Zawiya in southern rural Idlib, with the attack carried out during the olive harvesting, when civilian families go out to the olive groves to harvest the crop. The attack killed 10 civilians, including seven children and one woman.

On Sunday, November 5, Mustafa Halawanji, a 10-year-old boy from Aleppo city, died of wounds sustained when he was shot by a regime sniper the day before, November 4, in al-Kreizat village near Tadif city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate. The area was under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA) at the time of the incident.

On Monday, November 6, a woman, identified as Mariam al-Shafi, and a boy, identified as Abdul Raouf Obayda al-Mekhlef, were killed in an artillery attack by Syrian regime forces who fired multiple mortar shells at al-Hawayej town in eastern Deir Ez-Zour governorate. The area was under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) at the time of the incident.

We also recorded the deaths of seven individuals, including one woman, due to torture at the hands of regime forces in the month of November. These deaths were distributed across governorates as follows: Two from Damascus city, Two from Deir Ez-Zour, one of them a woman, and one each from the governorates of Daraa, Aleppo, and Rural Damascus.

B. SDF

The SDF killed 12 civilians, including two children and two individuals who died due to torture, in the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Aleppo. Deir Ez-Zour governorate accounted for 83 percent of all deaths at the hands of the SDF. Moreover, we documented the killing of seven civilians, including a girl - six in Deir Ez-Zour and one in Aleppo - by SDF snipers, while two civilians were killed in Deir Ez-Zour city by a mortar shell fired by SDF personnel. Two individuals died due to torture at the SDF’s hands in the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Aleppo. There was also an incident in which SDF
personnel killed an unborn baby inside his mother’s womb, which took place on November 10, 2023, when SDF personnel attacked and beat Aisha al-Mohammad al-Hamid, who was seven months pregnant at the time, as well as using their weapons to hit her, during a raid on her husband’s family’s house in al-Sa’wa town in western rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate to arrest her brother in law. The assault resulted in her unborn baby dying, while she sustained severe wounds and fractures, and was taken to the hospital where she remains in a critical condition. The area was under the control of the SDF at the time of the incident.

C. Other parties

In November, we documented the killing of 28 civilians, including two children and three women at the hands of other parties. Deaths at the hands of other parties accounted for approximately 39 percent of November’s death toll. Those deaths are distributed as follows:

1. Landmines of unidentified sources

We documented the deaths of three civilians, including one child and one woman, that were caused by the explosion of landmines of unidentified sources in November. This brings the total number of deaths caused by landmine explosions since the beginning of 2023 to 104 civilians, including 26 children and nine women.

On Saturday, November 4, a woman, identified as Dousha al-Ahmad al-Mohammad, was killed by the explosion of a landmine whose source we have not yet been able to identify near her home village of al-Mahsanli in eastern rural Aleppo governorate, which is on the dividing lines between the areas under the control of the SNA and those controlled by the SDF. The area was under the control of the SDF at the time of the incident.

On Sunday, November 5, a seven-year-old boy, identified as Ali Yousef al-Haj, was killed by the explosion of a landmine whose source we have not yet been able to identify near his home village of al-Jat to the north of Manbij city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate, which is on the dividing lines between areas under the control of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and those controlled by the SDF. The area was under the control of the SDF at the time of the incident.

2- Gunshot of unidentified source

We documented the killing of 16 civilians, including one child and two women, who were shot dead by unidentified gunmen in November. Of these 16, seven were killed in Daraa governorate and three in Suwayda governorate. We also documented similar incidents in Deir Ez-Zour.

On Thursday, November 16, two men, identified as 31-year-old Rwad Rakan al-Hajli, and 34-year-old Wesam Hayel al-Hajli from Anz village in southern rural Suwayda governorate, were shot dead by gunmen we have not yet been able to identify in Tal B’at area in southern Suwayda governorate near the Syrian-Jordanian border. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.
On Friday, November 17, a man, identified as Mohammad Mustafa al-Jabbawi, was shot dead by gunmen we have not yet been able to identify, while he was on his way to a local mosque in his hometown, Inkhel, in northern rural Daraa governorate. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

3- Turkish Border Guard

We documented the killing of four civilians at the hands of the Turkish Border Guard (three from Hasaka governorate and one from Idlib governorate), who were killed while they were trying to cross into Türkiye. This brings the total number of victims documented as having been killed at the hands of the Turkish Border Guard since the beginning of 2023 to 17 civilians. It is worth noting that since the February earthquakes, the rates of killings, beatings, and torture by Turkish Border Guard against Syrians trying to irregularly cross into Türkiye have seen a marked increase.

On Friday, November 10, two men, identified as Ahmad al-Antar and Abdullah al-Khalaf from al-Kasra town in western rural Deir Ez-Zour, were shot dead by Turkish Border Guard (Gendarmerie) while trying to cross into Türkiye from the Ras al-Ein area in rural Hasaka. The area was under the control of the SNA at the time of the incident.

IV. Civilian Death Toll

In November, SNHR documented the killing of 72 civilians, including 14 children and seven women (adult female) at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria. November’s death toll brings the total number of civilian victims killed by the different parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since the beginning of 2023 up until the start of December to 941 civilians in total.

This year’s civilian deaths at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria are distributed by month as follows.
82 civilians, including 14 children and seven women, as well as nine individuals, one of them a woman, who died due to torture documented killed in Syria in November 2023.

As the chart shows, November saw a decline in the number of civilian deaths compared to October, which saw the highest monthly death toll in 2023 so far, accounting for approximately 17 percent of the total, followed by June with approximately 13 percent of the total. Conversely, May saw the lowest monthly death toll in 2023, accounting for approximately four percent of the total.

The civilian deaths we documented in the month of November are distributed according to the parties to the conflict and controlling forces as follows:

**A. Main parties:**
- Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):
  
  We documented the killing of 32 civilians, including 10 children and four women, at the hands of Syrian regime forces.

- (SDF)
  
  We documented the killing of 12 civilians, including two children, at the hands of the SDF.

**B. Other parties:**

We documented the killing of 12 civilians, including two children, at the hands of the SDF.

- Landmines whose source we have been unable to identify: 16 civilians, including one child and two women.

- Gunfire whose source we have been unable to identify: Three civilians.

- Bombings whose perpetrators we have been unable to identify: Two civilians.

- Killings by parties we have been unable to identify: Four civilians.
November’s civilian deaths at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria are distributed across Syria’s governorates as follows:

As the graph shows, Deir Ez-Zour governorate saw approximately 25 percent of all victims killed in November, the highest number of all the governorates, followed by Idlib governorate with approximately 22 percent, with most of the victims killed in Idlib being killed at the hands of Syrian regime forces, followed by Daraa governorate, which accounted for approximately 19 percent of the total.

V. Death Toll of Victims Who Died Due to Torture, and Victims Amongst Media, Medical and Civil Defense Personnel

A. Toll of victims who died due to torture

In November, SNHR documented the deaths of nine individuals, including one woman, due to torture at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria, bringing the total number of victims documented as having died due to torture at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since the beginning of 2023, up until the beginning of December to 46.
72 Civilians, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, As Well As Nine Individuals, One of them a Woman, Who Died due to Torture Documented Killed in Syria in November 2023

As the chart shows, November saw a significant rise in the number of deaths due to torture, which accounted for approximately 20 percent of the total, with most of these victims, one of them a woman, killed at the hands of regime forces. August saw the highest monthly number of deaths due to torture so far documented in 2023, accounting for 22 percent of the total.

The victims who died due to torture in November are distributed according to the parties to the conflict and controlling forces responsible for their deaths, as follows:

A. Main parties:

- **Syrian regime forces**: Seven victims.
- **SDF**: Two victims.
Below are the most notable cases:

Tahani Ahmad al-Hamidi, a 27-year-old woman from al-Qosour neighborhood in Deir Ez-Zour city, was arrested on Saturday, July 23, 2022, by Syrian regime forces in a raid on her husband’s family’s house in Damascus city over accusations of working with the SNA. She was held in Adra Central Prison in Rural Damascus governorate. Her family was able to last visit her in August 2023 in the same prison, finding her in poor health, with fractures to her hand and nose, and unable to stand up on her feet due to the brutal torture, starvation, and medical negligence she’d been subjected to. Her body also showed signs of torture at the time. On Friday, November 3, 2023, her family learned, while trying to request another visit to see her, that she had died in Adra Central Prison on October 27, 2023. Her family has not yet received her body.

Brothers Qusai and Muath Abdul Rahman Burhan, born in 1991 and 1992 respectively, from al-Zabadani city in northern Rural Damascus governorate, were both civil engineering students at the time of their arrest by the Syrian regime’s Raid Squad (Division 215), when they were detained along with a group of seven other activists. The activists were arrested in a nighttime raid on New Year’s Eve, December 31, 2013, in the Rukn al-Din neighborhood of Damascus city. They were taken to a detention center in Damascus governorate, and have been classified as forcibly disappeared ever since, with the regime denying any knowledge of their whereabouts, and refusing to allow anyone, even a lawyer, to visit them. On Thursday, November 9, SNHR acquired a document certifying the deaths of Qusai and Muath Burhan, obtained from the civil registry office in Rural Damascus governorate. According to the documents, Qusai died on January 31, 2014, while Muath died a couple of weeks later on February 16, 2014. We can confirm that Qusai and Muath were in good health at the time of their arrest, indicating a strong possibility that they died due to torture and medical negligence. We can also confirm that Syrian regime forces have not yet returned the brothers’ bodies to their family.

It should also be noted that the other activists arrested along with Qusai and Muath that night are still classified as forcibly disappeared persons, and we have serious concerns about their fate.

B. Death toll of medical personnel

We documented the killing of one medical worker at the hands of Syrian regime forces.

On Monday, October 30, 2023, a nurse, identified as Abdul Hamid Fatah Zawyani, was killed by Syrian regime forces who fired two anti-armor missiles at a civilian car transporting Abdul Hamid on a road between the cities of Binnish and Taftanaz on the southern outskirts of Taftanaz city in eastern rural Idlib governorate, which is a Turkish military point. The three passengers in the car were all members of the medical team working at the Relief International-supported medical complex in Binnish city. The first missile directly hit the rear of the car, while the second landed in the middle of the road nearby the car as it was passing through al-Talheya village in eastern rural Idlib. The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham at the time of the incident.
C. Death toll of media workers

We documented the killing of one media worker at the hands of Syrian regime forces.

On Friday, November 10, 2023, a media worker, identified as 37-year-old Mahmoud Saeed al-Kafri, was shot dead by an armed group affiliated with the Syrian regime's Air Force Intelligence Directorate. The group, headed by a figure known as Abu Ali al-Lahham, shot Mahmoud in Ma’raba town in eastern rural Daraa. Mahmoud was a member of the Daraa 24 Network team, and had worked prior to 2018, when regime forces took control of Daraa city, in the relief and educational fields. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

D. Death Toll of Civil Defense personnel

We documented the killing of one medical worker at the hands of Syrian regime forces.

VI. Most Notable Massacres

In November, SNHR documented one massacre at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria. This increases the total number of massacres documented since the beginning of this year to 20, distributed as follows:

A. Main parties:

• Syrian regime forces and pro-regime militias: Five massacres.
• Russian forces: One massacre.

B. Other parties:

• Killings by parties we have been unable to identify: Four Massacres.
• Landmines whose source we have been unable to identify: Three massacres.
• Gunfire whose source we have been unable to identify: Two massacres.
• Bombings whose perpetrators we have been unable to identify: Four massacres.
• Jordanian forces: One massacre.

A total of 10 civilians, including seven children and one woman, were killed in the massacre documented in November.
Around 10:35 local time on Saturday, November 25, Syrian regime artillery forces, stationed in Shourlin village in Jabal Shahshabo in northern rural Hama, fired three shells suspected to be laser-guided Krasnopol shells, with the attack taking place in tandem with overflights by a Russian Orlan-30 reconnaissance aircraft, hovering over the area. The three shells landed consecutively on agricultural land to the west of Qoqfin village in Jabal al-Zawiya in southern rural Idlib, when families were harvesting olives during the olive season. The attack killed **10 civilians from the same family**, including seven children and one woman, (a man and his own family, along with his sister and her children), as well as injuring an elderly woman. The first two shells landed on agricultural land nearby where the family members were working, while the third one landed in the targeted site, resulting in the massacre. While the area was under the control of armed opposition factions and the HTS at the time of the incident, it is located in close proximity and exposed to regime-held areas.

SNHR spoke to ‘Observer Abu Amin 80’, who is a civilian observer charged with eavesdropping on the regime’s wireless communications and monitoring the movement of warplanes and artillery. He told us:

“I was in the observatory in southern rural Idlib on Saturday, November 25, 2023. At 10:20, I picked a conversation between regime personnel on wireless communication devices in al-Fatra site in rural Hama. They were talking about detecting movement at a site that they did not specify. They requested the preparation of artillery to target this movement immediately. In turn, we alerted all areas in southern rural Idlib to take precautions. I should add that the areas of the southern sector in Jabal al-Zawiya are targeted on a daily basis since they are close to the dividing lines. At 10:30, the strikes began from the regime sites in Shourlin in Jabal Shahshabo in northern rural Hama, after they received the coordinates from the point in al-Fatra. The attack was initiated using an Akatsiya 152 gun that fired Krasnopol shells, in tandem with a Russian Orlan-30 reconnaissance aircraft flying over the area. The first two shells landed in Qoqfin area, while the third landed in an area with civilians present according to the reports we received, as aid was requested. We sent out a public alert, and the nearby Civil Defense teams moved after receiving the alert.”

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14 Civilians, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, As Well As Nine Individuals, One of Them a Woman, Who Died Due to Torture Documented Killed in Syria in November 2023

SNHR spoke to Osama Haj Hussein, the leader of the Center 1218 (Balyoun) rescue team of the Civil Defense (White Helmets). He told us:

“On Saturday, November 25, 2023, we received a report from civilians at around 10:45 about agricultural land near Qoqfin village that had been targeted, with deaths and injuries among the civilians who were harvesting olives at the targeted site. The aid and rescue teams moved immediately at around 10:50, and we arrived there in about 10 minutes. We faced some difficulties since the area is exposed to a regime site in Jourien in rural Hama, as well as another site on Jabal Shahshabo. We left our vehicles at a nearby location in fear of another attack. Before arriving, we met a young man riding a motorbike and transferring an injured elderly woman whose injuries were moderate, but she was not aware of the nature of what had happened. All she knew that they had been bombed, but she did not realize that she had lost her sons and her brother’s family. Another car was transferring an injured girl and an injured young man whose condition was critical. We received those cases and delivered them to the aid team behind us, who in turn transferred them to medical facilities in the villages of Jabal al-Zawiiya. We arrived at the massacre site, and found body parts everywhere. A number of civilians arrived before we did. We started collecting the scattered body parts. Almost all the dead bodies, there were eight that were dismembered. As far as I saw, one shell directly struck the site where the family was. It seems that everyone, the adults and children, were in one place under an olive tree. The body parts were scattered over 15 meters, so we collected the big parts, but the small ones were everywhere. When we were working at the site, which took about 30 minutes, another shell landed about 300 meters from where we were to the west on top of the mountain. However, we found no remnants of the shell, not even an electrical circuit, but at the impact site there was a very small hole. In my experience with such attacks, the shells used have been Krasnpool, but we found no proof, parts, or electrical circuits in the area. The children that were taken to the dispensary died from their critical injuries, but the woman stabilized and was in good health. With the two children, the death toll reached 10 deaths.”
72 Civilians, Including 14 Children and Seven Women, As Well As Nine Individuals, One of them a Woman, Who Died due to Torture Documented Killed in Syria in November 2023

SNHR spoke with a media worker named Saed al-Din Zidan from rural Idlib. He told us:

“Around 10:40, we received reports through news groups about a bombardment of Qoqfin village in southern rural Idlib, with deaths among olive workers. I called up my colleagues on a private group, and I found out there had been a massacre. I rushed from al-Bardaqli area with some colleagues of mine to Jabal al-Zawiya, and we arrived about an hour later. We found Civil Defense vehicles nearby, and met with other colleagues who arrived before us. We travelled in one car since the area is exposed, and we did not want to draw attention by using multiple cars. I know the nature of the area well. We arrived at the targeted site, which is exposed to the Flefil area, where regime forces are stationed. We left the car nearby and continued on foot. I arrived at the site which was an olive grove. There was equipment used to pick olives, such as ladders. I found two colleagues there. I started looking for signs and remnants of the bombardment. The shrapnel was visible in the olive branches that were everywhere. There were a woman’s clothes hanging from a tree. The impact of the explosion was large and shrapnel were scattered everywhere. I learned from the observatories that they used a Krasnpool shell, but found no remnants for the shell or holes created by the shells. There was a tree about eight meters from the olive tree that the civilians were harvesting. That tree had a swing, and two children were killed there, which means that the shrapnel had killed them about eight meters away. The body parts were scattered over a wide area, yet despite the large radius, I found no holes created by the shell. We documented the site and headed back to the car. On the way back, I learned from one of the observatories in the area that the site had been targeted with four Krasnpool shells, but they did not fall in the same targeted site.”

The death toll of civilians in Syria continues to rise. Civilians, including 14 children and seven women, as well as nine individuals, one of them a woman, were documented killed in Syria in November 2023 due to torture.

Children’s toys at the site of a massacre caused by an artillery attack by Syrian regime forces near Qoqfin – November 25, 2023

SNHR also spoke with Khaled Waldi Qaddi from Qoqfin village, who is a cousin of the victims. He told us:

“Oh Saturday morning, I headed to the agricultural land to the west of Qoqfin village with a young guy to farm the land after I had finished harvesting olives. My land is directly adjacent to my cousin’s Abdullah Qaddi. I started farming as soon as I arrived, and I could hear the sounds of my cousins and their children, since we were only 30 meters apart. I was about to go there to greet them, but I heard a shell that landed to the south about three kilometers away. A few seconds later, we heard the sound of a shell from the south of Jabal Shahshabo, and it landed near us directly on my cousin’s land. The shrapnel scattered across the area following a strong sound, and dust filled the sky, and I saw black objects which I was not sure if they were shrapnel or body parts. I could not see anything in the first few seconds. I rushed to where my cousins were - I was screaming their names. My cousin Khadija was staggering and around her were dead bodies. I started running like a crazy person and around me dead bodies and body parts of children and adults. There was a girl breathing heavily, and we rushed over and carried her, and there was my female cousin and another young man who were both severely wounded. A number of farmers arrived at the site and we started carrying the injured. The little girl died on the way, and the young man died later when he reached the medical facility. The news reached the village immediately, and civilians started to come with cars, as well as Civil Defense personnel. We started collecting the body parts and transferring them to the village. The area is a civilian area, and about 500 meters away there is a Turkish military point, and the area is exposed to the regime areas, and can be easily seen from the regime points in Jourin or Shahshabo. I returned to the land two days after the massacre, and there were still small body parts and shrapnel everywhere. We lost 10 martyrs, mostly children. At the time of the attack, I heard nothing in the sky, but I was told by other civilians that there was a silent Russian reconnaissance aircraft that gave the coordinates for the attack.”

VII. What is SNHR Doing About the Extrajudicial Killing Issue?

Since 2011, SNHR has been developing complex programs to archive and categorize the victims’ data, which the team collects and verifies, enabling us to catalogue the victims according to their gender, age, the date and place of death, method of killing, type of weapon used, and perpetrator party, and to make comparisons between these parties. We can also distribute the death toll according to the governorate in which the death occurred, and according to the governorate from which the victim originated, in order to show the extent of the loss suffered by the people of that governorate, enabling us to accurately ascertain the highest rates of violence documented in the case of each violation. SNHR’s Victim Documentation Department team constantly updates the network’s comprehensive database, with all the data added to the SNHR’s database being retained securely, and several backup copies being stored in different locations.

Since 2011, we have also been exceptionally concerned with the documentation of incidents involving the killing of children and women; there is hardly any statistic recorded on our database that does not include victims in either category and usually in both, due to the vulnerability of these groups in the community, and because they give an indication of the rate of targeting of civilians. We later added other civilian groups which have played a key role in the popular uprising and later in the armed conflict, such as media, medical, and humanitarian aid personnel, and Civil Defense rescue workers.

For nearly 12 years, we have issued daily death tolls of victims, as well as daily news reports on killing incidents. We also issue a monthly report detailing the death toll of victims, whose deaths were documented in Syria during the previous month, amongst civilians, as well as of those who died due to torture, in addition to issuing a biannual report and annual report, as well as dozens of other special reports documenting the total death toll or the death toll at the hands of one of the parties to the conflict in particular, in addition to a monthly report and special and periodic reports documenting the massacres committed on Syrian soil.

We have also turned the victims’ database into a map and interactive charts accessible on our website, which categorize the victims by governorate, gender, age group, the party responsible for their deaths, and other criteria. There are also charts detailing the death toll of victims killed at the hands of all parties to the conflict, as well as others giving information on specific groups, such as specifically detailing the death toll among women and children victims, with all of these being updated regularly.

SNHR also periodically submits special forms to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, as well as to the Special Rapporteur on torture, submitting cases of killings on which we were able to document all of the available data, having obtained the consent of each victim’s family members before submitting them.
It should be noted that the United Nations has relied on SNHR for all the statistics it has used in its analysis of victims in the conflict, given SNHR’s prominent role as one of the most credible sources. SNHR also has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Humanitarian Outcomes on contributing to its Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) project, which stipulated the establishment of a joint coordination and cooperation mechanism aimed at documenting and archiving violations and violence affecting aid workers. SNHR has also partnered with numerous United Nations bodies, in addition to various states’ governments, to provide them with statistics from our databases, in order to serve the justice process, and ultimately to ensure the accountability and prosecution of criminals. SNHR is also used as a trustworthy source by numerous Arab and international news agencies and many international human rights organizations.

VIII. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

• The evidence we have collected regarding incidents involving deaths indicates that the attacks documented in this report were deliberately directed against civilians and civilian objects. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have committed various crimes of extrajudicial killings, including fatal torture. Their attacks and indiscriminate bombardment have resulted in 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.

• A large proportion of the Syrians killed died as a result of landmine explosions, with none of the perpetrator forces involved in the Syrian conflict issuing maps revealing the locations where landmines were planted. This indicates a chilling total indifference by all parties to the lives of civilians, particularly children.

• The Syrian regime has not only violated international humanitarian law and customary law but has also breached a number of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolutions 2139 and 2042 on the release of detainees, as well as resolution 2254, all without any accountability.

• The indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment carried out by Syrian Democratic Forces is considered a clear violation of international humanitarian law, with the crimes of indiscriminate killing amounting to war crimes.

• The use of remote bombings to target densely populated areas reflects a criminal mindset intent on deliberately inflicting the greatest possible number of deaths, which is a clear contravention of international human rights law and a flagrant violation of the Geneva VI Convention, Articles 27, 31, and 32.

• We have documented cases of extrajudicial killings committed by various controlling forces against the populations under their control, which constitute serious violation of international human rights law.
Recommendations

UN Security Council

- The Security Council should take additional steps following the adoption of Resolution 2254, which clearly demands that all parties should, “...Immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment.”

- The Syrian issue should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those involved in perpetrating crimes against humanity and war crimes should be held accountable.

- Members of the Security Council must stop using their veto to protect the Syrian regime, which has committed hundreds of thousands of violations over the past ten years, many of which constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes.

- Establish security and peace in Syria and implement the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ norm (R2P) in order to preserve Syrians’ lives, heritage, and cultural artifacts from being destroyed, looted, and ruined.

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

- Seriously work to achieve a political transition under the Geneva Communiqué and Security Council Resolution No. 2254, to ensure the stability and territorial integrity of Syria, and enable the dignified and safe return of refugees and IDPs.

- Allocate a significant amount of money for clearing mines left over by the Syrian conflict from the United Nations Mine Action Service, particularly in areas prepared to carry out this task with transparency and integrity.

International Community

- In light of the split within the UN Security Council and its utter incapability, action should be taken at the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people and increase support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be applied 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’ doctrine (R2P) in dozens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICR2P) after all political channels through the Arab League’s plan and then Mr. Kofi Annan’s plan were exhausted, with the Cessation of Hostilities statements and Astana talks that followed proved equally fruitless. Therefore, steps should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations and the norm of the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine, which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. The UN Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.
• Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, or quickly establish a tribunal dedicated to trying crimes against humanity and war crimes to end the cycle of impunity that has now spanned 12 years in Syria.

• 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.

• Work to launch projects to create maps revealing the locations of landmines and cluster munitions in all Syrian governorates. This would facilitate the process of clearing them and educating the population about their locations.

• Support the political transition process and impose pressure to compel the parties to implement the political transition within a period of no more than six months so that most of the violations end and millions of displaced people can safely return to their homes without fear.

• Stop any forcible return of Syrian refugees, since the situation in Syria continues to be extremely unsafe, and put pressure on the Syrian regime to achieve a political transition that would ensure the automatic return of millions of refugees.

**UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR)**

• The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the violations mentioned in this report and previous reports and should shed greater light on the issue of the continuing killing in Syria.

**Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)**

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

• Focus on the issue of landmines and cluster munitions within the next report.

• Work on identifying the responsibility of individuals within the Syrian regime who are involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes, publish their names to expose them to international public condemnation, and end all dealings with them at every political and economic level.

**International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)**

• Collect further evidence about the crimes documented in this report, and provide an exchange of experiences with Syrian organizations working in the field of documentation, data collection and analysis.
The United Nations Special Envoy for Syria

- Condemn the perpetrators of these crimes and of the 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 transitional governing body.
- Call for rapid implementation of democratic political change that restores victims’ rights and embodies the principles of transitional justice.
- There is no sense in pursuing any political process in light of the continued bombing of hospitals and UN aid, and the pursuit of a zero-security military solution by the Syrian regime and its allies, and the UN Envoy must acknowledge this.
- Clearly assign responsibility to the party responsible for the death of the political process, and disclose to the Syrian people the timing of the end of the political transition process.

Syrian regime

- Stop indiscriminate shelling and targeting of residential areas, hospitals, schools and markets.
- End the acts of torture that have caused the deaths of thousands of Syrian citizens in detention centers.
- Ensure compliance with UN Security Council resolutions and customary humanitarian law.
- Provide detailed maps of the locations where the regime planted landmines, especially in civilian areas or near residential communities.

Russian regime

- Completely cease the bombing of hospitals, protected objects, and civilian areas, and respect customary international law.
- As a guarantor party in the 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 allow the unconditional passage of humanitarian aid to besieged areas.
- 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 disposal of unexploded ordnance.
The Coalition (US-led coalition and SDF)

- 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.
- The SDF should form a special committee to investigate incidents of violations committed by SDF forces, disclose the details of their findings and apologize for them, hold those responsible accountable, and compensate the victims and affected.
- Provide detailed maps of the locations where the SDF has planted landmines, especially in civilian sites or near residential communities.

All Armed Opposition factions/SNA

- 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.
- Launch investigations into the human rights violations that have taken place, hold those responsible accountable and make the findings of these investigations public for the Syrian people.
- Provide detailed maps of the locations where the Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army planted landmines, especially civilian sites or near residential communities.

Humanitarian organizations

- Develop urgent operational plans to secure decent shelter for internally displaced persons, primarily widows and orphans.
- Exert efforts in landmine clearance operations in parallel with relief operations whenever the opportunity arises.

Acknowledgment

We extend our most heartfelt gratitude to the victims’ families and friends, and to eyewitnesses and local activists, for their significant and valued contributions to this report.