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 analyzes in Syria.
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Introduction

Syria’s protracted conflict continued throughout the past year of 2023, with its devastating effects continuing to wreck the lives of millions of Syrians. In light of this, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has remained committed to our mission of reporting and documenting all kinds of human rights violations across the country, guided by the best working practices. In this 13th edition of our annual report published at this time yearly since the beginning of the popular uprising in March 2011, we summarize the most notable human rights violations perpetrated in Syria in 2023 as documented by SNHR’s team, in addition to shedding light on ongoing violations, and stressing the imperative need for a political solution, as well as covering other issues that have had a major impact on the lives of the Syrian people.

Over the past 13 years, we have documented numerous types of violations at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria, many of which still persist. While all parties have been responsible for violations, however, the Syrian regime remains by far the greatest culprit, being responsible for a massively greater number of abuses than any of the other parties, individually or collectively. These violations, which include, inter alia, killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, forcible displacement, torture, seizure of lands and properties, assassinations and remote bombings, have intensified in light of the prevalent state of insecurity; all have resulted in a catastrophic human rights crisis in Syria. The past year, 2023 was particularly marked by the resumption of military hostilities, as the year saw the most intensified escalation by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces in two years, which targeted areas in northwestern Syria that are subject to the Cessation of Hostilities agreement of 2020.

The mounting and worsening effects of the massive magnitude of violations committed in Syria over the past 13 years is only becoming more dramatic and serious year by year. These effects manifest themselves in an accelerating deterioration in the already abysmal living and security conditions across the country. The economic situation in particular has dramatically worsened in 2023, which was even worse than the preceding years. Syria is ranked as one of the world’s worst countries in terms of many fundamental human rights, corruption, and terrorism.

As human rights violations continued across Syria, there have been a number of stand-out observations that shaped the nature of these violations, some of which are:

- Civilian deaths and directed attacks: Aerial and ground attacks on populated areas have resulted in a tremendous number of casualties. In many cases, the indiscriminate nature of these attacks constitutes a violation of international humanitarian law in itself, with these assaults further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

- Enforced disappearance and arbitrary arrest: The different parties to the conflict are still using enforced disappearance and arbitrary arrest as instruments of oppression and control. Families of forcibly disappeared persons are still haunted by the state of constant uncertainty and lack of any knowledge about the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones.

- Torture: We have documented many deaths due to torture in detention centers spread across Syria. Torture remains a key factor in perpetuating the culture of fear and oppression.

- Attacks on vital facilities: The widespread targeting of vital facilities have had a devastating impact on civilian infrastructure, which denied millions of people of their basic rights to healthcare and education, and further undermined the stability of the social fabric.
The protracted nature of the Syrian conflict only underlines the imperative need for a sustainable political resolution. The complications of the Syrian crisis, with many international, foreign stakeholders involved, all of whom have conflicting regional and international interests, require a clinically nuanced approach that prioritizes the aspirations and rights of the Syrian people. **Any political resolution proposed must aim to:**

- **End hostilities and establish a ceasefire:** A countrywide ceasefire must be a primary condition for any productive political dialogue. A ceasefire would provide a much-needed sense of relief for civilians and produce an environment conductive to dialogue.

- **Comprehensive political dialogue:** It is imperative to have a comprehensive political transition that represents all groups in Syrian society, with priority given to victims’ voices, including those of women and forcibly displaced people.

- **Accountability for human rights violations:** No political resolution will be workable without achieving accountability and justice for the victims of human rights violations. This would involve establishing mechanisms for finding truth, justice, and reparations.

- **Reconstruction and rehabilitation:** A potential political resolution must be founded on reconstructing Syria and rehabilitating its social, economic, and political institutions.

Besides the ongoing conflict and the political resolution reaching a deadlock, **there are other issues urgently requiring attention:**

- **Humanitarian crisis and displacement:** Syria's humanitarian crisis remains one of the most severe such crises worldwide. Meeting the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, ensuring their safe and voluntary return, and securing access to humanitarian assistance are all objectives of the utmost importance.

- **Economic decline and livelihoods:** The rapid economic decline has had a severe impact on the livelihoods of Syrians nationwide. Economic recovery and sustainable development are two crucial preconditions to ensure long-term stability.

- **Children and young people:** The armed conflict has robbed an entire generation of their childhoods. Protecting children’s rights, ensuring education access, and addressing children’s and young people’s psychological needs are fundamental objectives for the future of Syria.

- **Women’s rights and involvement:** Women have disproportionately been affected by the conflict. Women’s rights and involvement in all fields are critical issues.

As Fadel Abdul Ghany, SNHR Executive Director, says:

> This report can be viewed as a historical testament documenting the gross violations that the Syrian people had to endure. Simultaneously, it is a reminder of the incredible resolve of the Syrian people and their persistent calls to attain their legitimate right to political transition. The findings of this report only underscore the difficulty of achieving this goal without collective action at the international level. Therefore, we call on the international community to renew its commitment to finding a sustainable solution to the protracted armed conflict. This report also confirms that Syria remains one of the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophes, and accordingly we stress that humanitarian assistance must continue, and must be increased. While we continue to document and report violations and expose their perpetrators, our mission remains the same as it always has been: to advocate for justice, peace, and dignity for all Syrians.
Background

Founded in June 2011, three months after the beginning of the popular uprising, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) is an independent human rights organization which monitors and documents human rights violations in Syria, mobilizing our efforts and capabilities towards limiting them, contributing to the protection of the victims’ rights, exposing the perpetrators of violations in preparation for holding them accountable, raising awareness amongst Syrians of their civil and political rights, promoting the optimal conditions for human rights, advancing transitional justice, supporting democratic change, achieving justice and peace in Syria, and preserving and chronologizing the events that transpired. Based on these objectives, SNHR archives the violation incidents it documents within an extensive database, issuing reports and studies based on the material gathered there.

SNHR is a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICR2P), the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, the International Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC), the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), and the Every Casualty Worldwide (ECW) initiative, as well as being a co-founding member of the Global Alliance on War, Conflict & Health, and a member of the Chemical Weapons Convention Coalition (CWCC).

It should also be noted that the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has relied on SNHR as the primary source for all of its statistics related to the analysis of victims of the conflict in Syria; SNHR also works in cooperation with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) and has signed a data-sharing agreement with the Independent International and Impartial Mechanism (IIIM), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and other UN bodies, as well as with international organizations such as the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Amnesty International. SNHR has also been a principal source for many lawsuits, including the case brought to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the application of the Convention against Torture. Furthermore, the group is one of the most important data sources for the Syria situation reports issued by the foreign ministries of many countries worldwide, with a large number of Arab and international news agencies relying on SNHR’s reports and statistics for their coverage and reports on Syria.

In 2023, SNHR continued its work, issuing approximately 75 reports and nearly 856 news articles, in which it addressed multiple types of the most notable human rights violations committed by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria, including, inter alia, extrajudicial killings, arrest, torture, forced displacement, and the use of prohibited munitions and other highly destructive munitions. These reports were based on evidence from numerous sources, including approximately 304 testimonies given by victims who have been subjected to various types of violations, injured or survivors of the attacks, paramedics, central signal workers or victims’ families. All these testimonies were obtained through speaking directly with eyewitnesses, with none of them cited from any second-hand sources. We also utilized hundreds of photos, videos, and other open source items of information. All these procedures are carried out in accordance with SNHR’s internal protocols, which we have worked diligently for years to perfect and refine, and which we strive constantly to develop through our experience in order to keep pace with the highest standards of care and reliability. To read more extensively about SNHR’s work methodology, please refer to this link.
In this report, we provide a record of the most notable violations perpetrated in 2023, together with brief details of some of these violations, many of which we have referred to in the reports we released over the past year, in order to ensure that the report is of a manageable length. Additionally, the report includes detailed information on key political, human rights-related and military events that occurred in 2023 to provide a clearer picture of the context of the events during which the violations occurred. We also emphasize that the legal framework we use to assess the situation in Syrian is modelled on international humanitarian law and customary international law, along with international human rights law. In addition to referring, within a narrow scope and a limited number of cases, to the Syrian regime’s violation of the Syrian Constitution and the local laws established in its name.

As we emphasize in every report, the information provided in this report represents the bare minimum of the actual severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred, which we were able to document, given the exceptional difficulties and challenges that we have faced during our work as shown in our methodology. Also, it does not include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications of the documented events.
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Gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law persisted in 2023 across all of Syria. In fact, the different parties to the conflict and controlling forces have committed serious violations, some of which in a systematic and widespread manner. Some of these also constituted crimes against humanity. Residents continued to grapple with the worsening humanitarian, economic, and security conditions, as hostilities and unlawful attacks against populated areas continued throughout the year, including against the areas affected by the February 6 earthquakes. Meanwhile, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances escalated. As mentioned above, we also documented new deaths in detentions. The Syrian regime vastly surpasses all other parties in terms of the numbers of violations committed. In this context, as of the end of 2023, approximately 156,000 of the Syrian citizens arrested since March 2011 are still under arrest and/or forcibly disappeared, 88 percent of them at the hands of Syrian regime forces. Meanwhile, half of the Syrian population has been displaced, either as IDPs or refugees in other countries. The Syrian regime, which has control over the Syrian state, continues to promulgate more laws enabling it to commit more violations against the Syrian people, particularly forcibly disappeared persons and forcibly displaced persons. Moreover, the Syrian regime is using the resources of the Syrian state to manufacture and traffic narcotics, with the drugs trade exponentially and visibly growing in the last two years. **Below are some of the most notable events observed by SNHR in 2023:**

On June 29, the UN General Assembly passed resolution A/77/L.79 that provides for establishing an independent UN body with the purpose of working on the missing persons issue in Syria. SNHR welcomed this resolution, reiterating our willingness to collaborate with the UN body once it’s established. SNHR believes in the vital, fundamental importance and role of the newly formed body, and that it has much to work on in order to support and advocate for missing persons in Syria. The Independent Institution on the Missing Persons in Syria must work to make this issue a principal one on the agendas of all states, given its vital importance as an issue affecting the lives of millions of Syrian people.

A total of 83 states voted in favor of the draft resolution, including only two Arab states (Qatar and Kuwait), while 62 states abstained from voting, with 11 states voted against: Belarus, Bolivia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Russia, and Zimbabwe. On June 30, we released a statement addressing this resolution. On June 22, 2023, SNHR also released a report exposing the states that voted in support of the Syrian regime and against the rights of the Syrian people at the UNGA.

August 2023 saw many civil, peaceful, anti-regime demonstrations in regime-held areas, with the protesters holding the Syrian regime responsible for the worsening economic, social, and political situation in the country. Since August 17, those protests grew in scale across several governorates, with SNHR documenting demonstrations by thousands of citizens in the two governorates of Daraa and Suwayda, in addition to other protest activities in Damascus, Rural Damascus (‘Rif Dimshaq’), Latakia, Tartus, and Aleppo. The protestors named Bashar Assad as being responsible for the dire state of the Syrian nation, and called for the downfall of the Syrian regime. These protests come at a time of multiple, unprecedented and increasingly dire economic, living, and human rights crises in Syria. For instance, a
Syrian state employee currently earns an average monthly salary of no more than approximately $10, which is a natural outcome of the Syrian regime's oppressive policies since March 2011. The Syrian regime, predictably, responded to these protests by carrying out crackdown and inspections targeting many of those who were involved or expressed demands in those demonstrations. On August 26, SNHR released a statement stressing the Syrian regime’s brutal response to those protests, shedding light on the most notable violations committed by the regime in the course of its response. The protests, which continued throughout September, were concentrated particularly in the governorates of Suwayda and Daraa in southern Syria, with protesters calling for the release of those who were arrested for participating in or supporting the protest movement. On September 13, for instance, regime forces broke up a demonstration in front of the Baath Party headquarters in Suwayda city with gunfire using live bullets, injuring at least five individuals to varying degrees. Protests continued until the end of the year, being concentrated in Suwayda governorate. In addition to the demands of the last two months, the protestors also called for the downfall of the Syrian regime.

On May 30, municipal workers employed by the Kurdish Self-Administration authority found a mass grave in Manbej city in rural Aleppo, while they were carrying out repair work around the hotel used by the Civil Administration to house its committees and departments. A total of 10 bodies were found. According to the preliminary intelligence we acquired, these bodies date back to the period when ISIS controlled the city, when the group used the same building as its headquarters. Some of the bodies found were handcuffed, leading to speculation that they were killed in field executions.

On June 10, the Self-Administration authority in northern and eastern Syria published a statement on its official website revealing that it had begun the process of prosecuting foreign ISIS fighters detained by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in “public, fair, and transparent trials that comply with the international and local laws on terrorism.” SNHR stresses that world’s states must repatriate their nationals from the SDF detention centers, rather than leaving their fate in the hands of the SDF whose legal framework lacks clear laws that can be used as grounds to determine the fate of those detainees.

In 2023, the Israeli army carried out dozens of attacks inside Syria. Indeed, the rate of these attacks rose significantly compared to 2022. Many sites in Syrian governorates, including Aleppo, Damascus, Deir Ez-Zour, Hama, Daraa, and Rural Damascus, were targeted in the Israeli attacks.

While the Israeli aerial attacks mostly targeted military sites for regime forces and pro-regime Iranian militias, many resulted in civilian casualties. A notable attack took place on February 19, when the Israeli Air Force carried out airstrikes targeting a residential building in Kafrousua neighborhood in the center of Syria’s capital, Damascus. The bombardment caused massive destruction to the parking lot and the first four floors. The building is located behind the Iranian school in Kafrousua neighborhood. The bombardment killed a Syrian regime army officer, Colonel Engineer Amjad Ahmad Ali, and a lower-ranking soldier named as Iksim Isbir. The Syrian regime’s air defense systems in Mount Qasioun and al-Mazza Airbase shot down Israeli rockets, with some landing in the residential neighborhoods in Damascus. As a result, Lilyan al-Ouda, a pharmacist, and Asif al-Mahmoud, an internist and cardiologist, died in al-Mazra’a Square in the center of the Syrian capital.
On April 2, the Syrian regime’s Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that Israeli warplanes targeted multiple locations in Homs city and its rural areas. On the same day, Reuters cited Western intelligence sources who said that the sites targeted were the T4 Airbase and al-Dab’a Airport, where Iranian officers and Hezbollah members were stationed. On April 4, SANA reported that Israeli airstrikes targeted sites in the vicinity of Damascus city, killing two civilians. SANA also reported on April 9 that Israeli warplanes targeted multiple points in southern Syria, causing material damages. On the same day, Israeli’s Channel 13 reported that the attack targeted the headquarters of forces affiliated with Maher Assad, commander of the regime army’s Fourth Division and the brother of regime head Bashar Assad. On April 29, SANA reported that Israeli warplanes targeted multiple points in the vicinity of Homs city, injuring three civilians, and causing material damage. On September 21, the Russia Today website reported an attack by an Israeli drone in western Rural Damascus (‘Rif Dimshaq’) governorate, which killed two Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) members.

On December 25, the Russia Today news agency reported that the Israeli Air Force had carried out an attack on al-Sayyidah Zaynab area near Damascus, killing a commander from the pro-regime Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). On December 29, SANA reported that the Israeli Air Force had carried out an attack at dawn that day targeting multiple points in Damascus, adding that another attack had taken place at around 23:05 the previous night, December 28, targeting sites in the southern area.

Furthermore, Israeli Air Force targeted the airports of Damascus and Aleppo in a number of attacks, which rendered the two airports out of commission on multiple occasions. For instance, on March 7, SANA reported that an Israeli attack targeted Aleppo International Airport, putting it out of commission. According to a report by the Israel-based Alma Research and Education Center, released on the same day, the airport may have been targeted because of “specific and focused” intelligence suggesting that it contained advanced weapons. At dawn on August 28, Israeli forces carried out an attack from the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of western Latakia governorate, targeting Aleppo International Airport, damaging its runways and rendering it out of commission. According to pro-regime sources, the Israeli Air Force also carried out attacks on October 12 and October 22 on Damascus International Airport that rendered it temporarily out of commission, in addition to killing one civilian worker.

The February 6 earthquakes that hit Southern Türkiye and Northern Syria

At around dawn on February 6, around 04:15, a 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck Southern Turkey and Northern Syria. The earthquakes’ epicenter was in the Kahramanmaraş area of central southern Türkiye near the Turkish-Syrian border. The first earthquake was followed by a 7.6 magnitude earthquake about 11 hours later. The two earthquakes and the subsequent aftershocks caused massive human and material losses in both Türkiye and Syria. The region of northwestern Syria was one of the areas worst affected by the earthquake due to the severe overpopulation there caused by that region housing large numbers of IDPs displaced from other areas, primarily as a result of the violations against them by the Syrian regime, which not only bombed their homes, but followed them after they fled and targeted the camps that housed them in their displacement. These conditions were worsened by the fragility of building structures and infrastructure in northwestern Syria that had already been targeted frequently and repeatedly over the preceding years in offensives by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally. All of these factors significantly and dramatically compounded the devastating impact of the earthquake in the region. On February 6, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) released a statement confirming that the earthquake affected areas that were already housing a great number of IDPs families in Syria. As the statement noted, many of the residents living in those areas had already experienced displacement as many as 20 times previously.
The statement added that the ongoing conflict has greatly weakened the country’s vital infrastructure, including the health sector, gravely undermining its capability to respond to such emergency cases, with only 59 percent of the total infrastructure working at full capacity across the entire country, making post-earthquake Syria an emergency within an emergency. On the same day, Amnesty International released a statement stressing that “The international community must immediately mobilize resources to support the rescue and rehabilitation efforts in northern Syria.” Meanwhile, in a separate statement, HRW noted that “all parties to the armed conflict in Syria should allow for the rapid and unfettered passage of humanitarian assistance to civilians in need, for whom this earthquake comes on top of war and displacement.”

A second tragedy, compounding that of the original earthquake, was the failure of the UN’s main rescue mechanisms to respond to the earthquake victims in northwestern Syria. The UN’s response signally failed to meet the magnitude of the earthquake in the area, with some UN mechanisms activated late, and others not activated at all, such as issuing distress calls to mobilize efforts and assemble teams worldwide. On February 15, SNHR released a report calling on the UN to launch an internal investigation into why earthquake-related humanitarian assistance arrived so late in northwestern Syria, and called on all those different mechanisms to disclose the reasons behind blocking and delaying their entry to Syria by days, which resulted in more losses of lives, since responding to any earthquake is crucially important. The late arrival of UN humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria, leaving local civil society organizations completely alone to face this harrowing catastrophe and its consequences, led to more people dying under the rubble.

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1. Those are the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC), the International Search and Rescue Advisory Groups (INSARAG), the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

2. The first consignment of UN humanitarian aid to arrive in northwestern Syria following the earthquake did so on February 9 - three days after the earthquake, consisting of six truckloads supplied by IOM that entered Syria via the Bab al-Hawa Crossing. The second aid consignment arrived on February 10 in an additional 14 trucks also supplied by the IOM, while the third aid convoy, which entered Syria on February 11, consisted of 22 trucks carrying relief aid supplies provided by the UNHCR, the UNICEF, the UN Population Fund, and the WHO. Additionally, on February 12, 10 trucks supplied by the IOM entered as the fourth convoy. On February 13, the fifth convoy, consisting of six trucks supplied by the World Food Programme (WFP) entered Syria. See: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (2023, February 15). A Total of 6,319 Syrians Died Due to the Recent Earthquake, Including 2,157 in Non-Regime Territories, and 321 in Regime Territories, While 3,841 Died in Türkiye.

3. The convoy that arrived on February 9 was scheduled before the earthquake. As such, the first UN aid convoy to be deployed to Syria as a response to the earthquake was the one that next day, February 10.
SNHR's 13th Annual Report:
Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2023

Under normal circumstances, SNHR's team is charged with documenting victims who have been extrajudicially killed and does not document cases of natural deaths or deaths caused by disasters. However, given the extraordinary circumstances of the devastating earthquake that hit southern Türkiye and northern Syria, and the inescapably dire need, our victims team was tasked with documenting the victims who died as a result in the February 6 earthquakes. In this work, our team relied on its extensive experience, wide network of contacts, and geographical dispersion. Despite this experience and knowledge, we faced extraordinary challenges in the process of documenting deaths resulting from the February 6 earthquakes and the late arrival of UN and international humanitarian assistance, most notably the fact that a great number of the SNHR's field members in Syria were themselves affected by the earthquake, along with team members in Southern Türkiye, with many facing displacement, which complicated the process of documentation compared to other similar incidents. The second challenge is the massive number of victims who died over a wide geographical area, vertically extending from southern Türkiye to Rural Damascus in the center of Syria, and horizontally from western rural Aleppo to Latakia and Jabla on the Syrian coast in the east. In addition to this, the earthquake almost completely destroyed some villages and towns, such as Harem and Jendeires in northern Syria. While stressing that the number of victims we were able to officially document is the minimum of actual fatalities, SNHR documented the death of 10,024 Syrians, including 2,267 children and 1,627 women, due both to the February 6 earthquakes themselves and to the late arrival of the UN and international humanitarian assistance. Those deaths were distributed according to area, with 4,191 dying in non-regime areas in northwestern Syria, 394 dying in regime areas, and 5,439 Syrian refugees dying in Türkiye. Also among those who died were 73 medical personnel, five media workers, 62 humanitarian workers, and four Civil Defense (White Helmets) rescue workers in northwestern Syria. SNHR released three reports as updates on the death toll from the February 6 earthquakes, which included charts outlining the distribution of deaths according to the governorate in Syria where they took place, as well as the distribution of Syrian victims who died in Türkiye by their governorate of origin.

4. See:
Northwestern Syria houses the overwhelming majority of IDPs, who were estimated, at the time of the earthquake, to number 3.2 million people from all over Syria. These IDPs fled the violations committed by the Syrian regime and its allied Iranian and Russian militias. Children and women account for approximately 75 percent of the IDPs. Since 2011, no fewer than two percent of the IDPs have returned to their original areas, which are only a few kilometers from their place of displacement, due to their fear of more regime violations. This displacement, the longest in recent modern history, is explained by two reasons: the violations committed against IDPs in their areas of residence, and the declining rates of international support for these IDPs.

As if the tragedy of displacement were not enough suffering for the IDPs to endure, we have also documented hundreds of deliberate attacks on civilians and vital facilities in areas of displacement. Furthermore, international observers often turn a blind eye to the Syrian regime’s deliberate severance of IDPs’ access to all basic services, including water and electricity. The region also suffers from widespread destruction and poor infrastructure in light of the military operations targeting it, most notably at the hands of Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces. The February 6 earthquakes only exacerbated the scale of destruction. According to figures from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) issued on April 7, 2023, a total of 1,869 buildings were completely destroyed and another 8,731 partially destroyed in the earthquakes.

The February 6 earthquakes resulted in the displacement of 160,000 Syrians according to SNHR’s estimates, most of whom had already been previously displaced and had been living in utterly dire conditions. The aftershocks also compounded these people’s suffering, with around 11,020 aftershocks recorded as of March 1, according to Türkiye’s Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). Approximately 80 percent of residents had to flee their homes and sleep outdoors as a result of the aftershocks, only prolonging and worsening their suffering, which was also further exacerbated by their poor living conditions and psychological trauma.

Despite all of the above, SNHR recorded that the Syrian regime almost immediately began bombing earthquake-affected areas in the wake of the tragedy. In fact, our monitoring showed that some of these attacks took place during rescue operations following the earthquakes. On April 13, we released a report summarizing the ground attacks carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies on northwestern Syria that lasted throughout the nine weeks following the earthquake, with some attacks targeting areas close to camps where some people affected by the earthquake were living, leading to further traumatic displacement. At the time of the report mentioned above, a total of 132 ground regime attacks had been recorded since February 6, including 29 attacks on areas far from the dividing lines between areas controlled by different forces. These attacks killed five civilians, including one child, and injured no fewer than 42 others, with seven of the attacks targeting vital facilities, including a school, a medical clinic, a mosque, and two markets. The report outlines some of those attacks.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime insisted that it should be the sole recipient and distributor of all UN humanitarian aid due to its control of the Syrian state, despite its shameful history of murderous violence and its deliberate obstruction of the delivery of the aid supplied, as well as its blatant theft of the overwhelming majority of this aid. Since our report released on February 28, we highlighted the utter failure of the idea that “Delivering some aid is better than delivering nothing” in Syria, which was the retort often heard from workers in the field of humanitarian relief aid who operated in regime-held areas. We based this argument on three main points:
5. When we note that the Syrian regime steals 90 percent of all relief aid and should not be trusted to distribute aid, this being the case, delivering aid donated for earthquake victims or others via the Syrian regime is, effectively, providing support for a regime involved in terrorizing its people, using chemical weapons, and committing multiple other crimes against humanity. 2. None of the organizations operating in the areas under the Syrian regime’s control have any autonomy, whether these are the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), the Civil Defense, or any other groups founded by the regime’s security apparatus. International organizations are required to deal solely with these regime-controlled, effectively handing control of aid to the regime’s security apparatus and enabling it to pillage the vast majority of this aid. This is the same security apparatus that is involved in crimes against humanity, including torturing people to death and disappearing nearly 100,000 Syrian citizens; and 3. The Syrian regime is exploiting the flow of humanitarian assistance and the sympathy expressed towards the earthquake victims and survivors for political gain. In reality, the Syrian regime does not care about the Syrian people, whether in the areas under its control or in those outside its control. We have already explained how the Syrian regime has engineered the theft of aid⁵ in a calculated way which relies primarily on organizations that are completely subservient to the regime itself, most notably,⁶ the Syria Trust for Development (STD)⁷ and the SARC⁸. SNHR has released an extensive report detailing how the Syrian regime used NGOs to steal donors’ funds, and how it seizes funds intended for humanitarian assistance and channels them to further its agendas and control the fates of those who are supposed to be the recipient of such funds.⁹

Moreover, we have repeatedly warned in many reports that humanitarian aid, a mission of a most noble cause, must not be perverted into becoming an instrument to finance and support a regime responsible for crimes against humanity against an entire nation.

Noteworthy key developments in the humanitarian sector in 2023

Northwestern Syria houses no fewer than 4.5 million people according to the OCHA, with two million of these people living in camps. Ninety percent of this population relies on UN cross-border humanitarian assistance that has been delivered since 2014 in accordance with Security Council resolutions. Sadly, this has left the issue of humanitarian aid vulnerable to massive yearly extortion by Russia, with the scope of humanitarian aid to Syria shrinking annually to the point of its being delivered solely via one crossing with the introduction of the concept of cross-line humanitarian assistance through Security Council resolution 2585 (2021), which was followed by Security Council resolution 2462 (2022), which stated that another six-month renewal would require a separate resolution.

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5. When we note that the Syrian regime steals 90 percent of all relief aid and should not be trusted to distribute aid, we do not mean that the people in regime-controlled areas should not receive relief aid. These areas host massive numbers of people who are effectively hostages. Our message is that there is an urgent need to work on devising recommendations and plans that ensure the delivery of at least 60, 70, or 80 percent of relief aid to those affected, in a way that ensures that the intended recipients receive most of it and the Syrian regime is unable to steal as much of it, rather than stopping relief aid altogether.

6. One of the most visible types of evidence on the regime’s theft of aid is the fact that these organizations do not release financial transparency reports. No one actually knows how much money they have received or how those funds have been spent. These bodies do not disclose their hierarchy, and solely employ people with close ties to the regime and the security apparatus.

7. The Syria Trust for Development (STD) is a governmental, non-independent organization affiliated with the Syrian regime’s Ministry of Defense, which is managed by regime army officers, rather than independent civilian experts, according to the organization’s own definition which can be found on the defense ministry’s own official website.

8. The SARC was founded in accordance with Legislative Decree No. 117 of 1969, issued by then-President Nureddin al-Atassi, and at that time had extensive privileges and administrative and financial independence.

On January 4, 2023, the OHCHR released a statement by a group of UN human rights experts, in which they called on the Security Council to extend the mandate of UN cross-border relief aid delivery. On January 6, the IRC issued an urgent plea to extend UN cross-border aid delivery to Syria. On January 8, the OCHA revealed in a tweet that a convoy has been deployed from the Syrian regime-controlled territories in Aleppo to Syria’s northwestern region as part of the cross-line aid delivery mechanism in line with Security Council resolutions 2585 and 2642 on cross-border and cross-line aid delivery.

On January 9, the Security Council unanimously adopted Security Council resolution 2672 (2023) on the mechanism for cross-border aid operations into northwestern Syria. The resolution provided for the renewal of the mechanism for humanitarian assistance delivery via the Bab al-Hawa Crossing with Türkiye into northwestern Syria for an additional six months, ending on July 10. Moreover, the Security Council requested that the UN-Secretary General submit a special report on humanitarian needs in Syria by no later than June 10, 2023. On January 9, UN-Secretary General António Guterres issued a statement on the extension of the mechanism for UN cross-border relief aid delivery to Syria. The statement stressed that UN cross-border aid operations are still an indispensable lifeline for 4.1 million people in northwestern Syria, with humanitarian needs reaching their highest levels since the conflict began in 2011, amid the harsh winter and the cholera outbreak.

The convoy, which was composed of 18 trucks carrying food baskets, medications, special supplies, food supplies for children, educational equipment, and health supplies, was the fifth one to enter northwestern Syria after Security Council resolution 2642 was adopted in July 2022, and the 10th after Security Council resolution 2585.
On July 11, Russia used its veto powers in the UN Security Council to block a draft resolution to extend the cross-border mechanism to deliver humanitarian aid to northwestern Syria by nine months, which had been proposed by the Switzerland and Brazil. On July 9, SNHR issued a statement reiterating our legal position first stated three years ago, that the delivery of UN humanitarian assistance does not require the UN Security Council’s permission. Meanwhile, Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) called on the Security Council on July 5 to renew the cross-border mechanism to deliver humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria.

On July 14, the Syrian regime sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council informing them of its decision to grant permission to the UN and its agencies to use Bab al-Hawa Crossing to deliver humanitarian aid with full regime collaboration and coordination for a period of six months starting on July 13.

On August 7, the Syrian regime and Martin Griffith, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, announced that they had reached an understanding that would allow the UN and its partners to continue to deliver cross-border humanitarian aid “at the necessary scale and in a principled manner that allows engagement with all parties for the purposes of seeking humanitarian access and that safeguards the UN’s operational independence.” A day after this, on August 8, António Guterres, the UN-Secretary General, welcomed this development that allowed the UN to continue to use the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing for the next six months to deliver humanitarian aid to northwestern Syria.

On August 19, the OCHA revealed on its X (formerly Twitter) account that delivery of humanitarian aid to northwestern Syria via the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing had been resumed. It is worth noting that this convoy was the first to enter the region since July 10 after the Security Council had failed to renew the mandate of the resolution on delivering cross-border humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria.

On November 13, the OCHA revealed that the UN and the Syrian regime had reached an agreement to extend the Syrian regime’s permission for the use of Bab al-Salam and al-Ra’ie crossing to deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria by three months (until February 13, 2024). The understanding between the OCHA and the regime first became apparent following the February 6 earthquakes that devastated northwestern Syria.
On December 21, Lisa Doughten, the Director of the OCHA’s Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization Division, said in a briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria that 2023 had proven to be another challenge-filled year for the Syrian people. The UN official revealed that the earthquakes that hit Syria affected about nine million people countrywide, with about 60,000 families losing their homes as a result, in addition to damaging hundreds of thousands of homes, thousands of schools, and hundreds of health facilities.

On the UN’s response to the results of the February 6 earthquakes. On February 9, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said in a press conference that the earthquake had hit the region of northwestern Syria in the midst of a worsening humanitarian crisis in the area, with needs reaching unprecedentedly high levels, the worst since the conflict began. In his speech at the press conference, Mr. Guterres said, “I would be of course very happy if the Security Council could reach a consensus to allow for more crossings to be used, as we need also to increase our capacity to deliver on crossline operations into Idlib from Damascus.” On February 10, a total of 16 noted international law experts, including former judges at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), together with professors, international judges, and researchers, issued a letter in which they stressed that there are many mechanisms outside the control of the UN Security Council which could be invoked to deliver humanitarian assistance to Syria. The letter further stressed that the UN needs to use its mandate to save lives, rather than being beholden to a narrow interpretation of international law that unnecessarily blocks the delivery of relief aid to millions of people in the most vulnerable place in the world. On the same day, the first UN aid convoy deployed in response to the earthquake entered northwestern Syria via the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Türkiye. The next day, February 11, SNHR, together with a group of other Syrian and non-Syrian humanitarian groups, issued a joint statement on the situation in the region of northwestern Syria following the earthquake. The statement called on António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, and Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to direct all UN mechanisms and agencies to work under a direct mandate from the UN General Assembly, overcome any logistical challenges, and use all the border crossings available to access northwestern Syria. On February 12, Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, said in a tweet, “We have so far failed the people in north-west Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn’t arrived. My duty and our obligation is to correct this failure as fast as we can.” At the time, SNHR released a report in which it stressed that this apology should have been in an official statement, rather than a mere tweet, in addition to making a pledge to compensate the families of the victims who died under the rubble because of the late arrival of humanitarian assistance.

On February 13, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, said in a press release that he “welcomes” the head of the Syrian regime Bashar Assad’s agreement to open the two border crossings between Türkiye and northwestern Syria at Bab al-Salam and al-Ra’ie for an initial period of three months to allow the passage of humanitarian assistance. On February 21, SNHR, together with a number of human rights and civil society organizations, released a joint statement stressing that the response to the earthquake should not be exploited as a means to restore relationships with the Syrian regime which has been involved in perpetrating innumerable crimes against humanity against the Syrian people. The statement added that the Syrian regime’s theft of UN and international relief aid has been exhaustively proven in reports by numerous respected local and international human rights groups, and is no longer a controversial
or questionable assertion, but simply a statement of fact. Indeed, such theft has been a calculated policy used by the Syrian regime since at least 2015, for which the regime has constructed an elaborate framework through its security apparatus, which makes it virtually impossible for any UN or international organizations to operate outside this framework in Syria. On February 23, Amnesty International released a report on the response to the earthquake disaster, in which it confirmed that, “In Syria, the government continues to prevent or restrict aid from entering areas with populations perceived to be opposed to the government,” adding that the regime government had also “prevented aid from reaching predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods in areas under the control of the Kurdish civilian council in Aleppo city.” As of February 15, the report added, “only small rescue teams from Egypt and Spain were sent to assist volunteer groups in northwest Syria. Local organizations told Amnesty International that they received minimal support in terms of heavy machinery and other rescue tools that severely hampered their search and rescue efforts. However, Arab, north-African countries, Iran and others sent support to the Syrian government, which was used only in government-held areas and not in the northwest.” On May 13, Reuters reported that the Syrian regime had decided to extend its authorization for the UN and relevant UN organs to use the two additional border crossings, namely Bab al-Salama and al-Rai, for three months ending on August 13, to enable delivery of post-earthquake aid to northwestern Syria.

The Syrian regime has exploited the February 6 earthquake catastrophe since its early days, both politically and economically. Many human rights groups have warned repeatedly of the regime’s theft of relief aid intended for the earthquake victims in Syria, as the regime did not send any of that aid to the areas outside its control despite the massive devastation seen in those areas. The regime also took advantage of the earthquake to provide cover for the destruction caused by its military operations in areas where it had regained control, demolishing hundreds of buildings damaged in bombing by its own forces on the pretext that they had sustained dangerous structural fractures in the earthquake, as reported by pro-regime websites, and further confirmed to us by activists. On May 12, Amnesty International released a statement stressing that, with millions of earthquake victims in northwestern Syria still dependent on UN cross-border humanitarian assistance for survival, the UN should continue to deliver aid to the area via all border crossings irrespective of whether or not the Syrian regime decided to keep the Bab al-Salam and al-Rai crossings open after the Syrian regime’s authorization ended on May 13. According to a legal analysis published by the group on the same day, it is lawful to deliver impartial humanitarian assistance to the civilians in critical need of such aid with no authorization from the Security Council or the Syrian regime under international law, since no alternatives exist, in light of the crucial need to continue the UN cross-border assistance process to prevent the suffering of civilian residents and grave human rights violations in northwestern Syria.

Laws and decrees expanding arrests and perpetuating the grip of the regime’s security apparatus and authoritarian rule

On September 3, 2023, the Syrian regime promulgated Legislative Decree No. 32 of 2023, rescinding Legislative Decree No. 109 of August 17, 1968, and its subsequent amendments, including the establishment of Military Field Courts. According to Legislative Decree 32/2023, all cases which had been handled by Military Field Courts were subsequently to be referred to the military judiciary and to be processed in accordance with the Military Penal Code (Legislative Decree No. 61/1950 and its subsequent amendments). SNHR believes, however, that this dissolution was part of a range of policies and procedures adopted by
the Syrian regime in its efforts to sweep the issue of enforced disappearances under the rug, as this move came after the regime issued its ostensible amnesty decrees and registered forcibly disappeared persons as dead in the civil registry records, and that it may well presage other similar regime decisions in the future.

The Military Field Court is one of the worst exceptional criminal courts ever created in Syria’s history for two main reasons: First: its dysfunctional bylaws and infamous reputation have made it one of the main apparatuses founded by the Syrian regime to effectively streamline crimes of enforced disappearance, and provide a chillingly efficient instrument to eliminate and crush dissent, terrorizing dissidents and civilian activists, including children and women, through the power of its sentences. Second: The sheer, harrowing number of the victims who have been lost to these courts, as confirmed by SNHR’s data, which indicates a strong correlation between enforced disappearances and Military Field Courts, which leads us to believe that many of the 96,000-plus individuals classified as forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime have been tried by Military Field Courts. Enforced disappearances in regime detention centers are systematic in nature, rather than random, resulting from deliberate and calculated decisions and directives issued by a highly sophisticated security, military, and judicial hierarchy including all the echelons and apparatuses of power associated with detention centers, from the President of the Republic and the Vice-President on Security Affairs, to the National Security Council, Ministry of Defense, the various security directorates, exceptional judicial institutions, the Command of the Military Police, the Command of the Military, the Ministry of the Interior and other regime agencies down through the chain of command. That is to say that the massive number of people forcibly disappeared at the hands of the Syrian regime have been processed by the monstrous machinery of this security, military, and judicial hierarchy, the most notable of which are the exceptional judicial institutions. In relation to Military Field Courts in particular, the Syrian regime has resorted to referring detainees and forcibly disappeared persons to Military Field Courts since March 2011, i.e., since the very early days of the popular uprising for democracy, and before the establishment of the Counterterrorism Court in July 2012, and in subsequent years. Moreover, analysis of the data shows a clear correlation between the number of victims forcibly disappeared at the hands of the Syrian regime and the victims referred to Military Field Courts. Meanwhile, there is a large disparity between the number of people who were tried by Military Field Court and survived and those tried by the regime’s Counterterrorism Courts who survived. On September 12, we released an extensive report entitled, ‘An Instrument of Death and Disappearance: How the Syrian Regime Uses Military Field Courts Against Activists and Dissidents’, which notes that the Syrian regime has admitted the execution of 7,872 individuals, including 114 children and 26 women, out of 14,843 detainees who received death sentences issued by Military Field Courts between March 2011 and August 2023. The report further reveals that no fewer than 24,047 of those forcibly disappeared by the regime, including 98 children and 39 women, have been referred to the Military Field Court, with their fate remaining unknown.

On November 30, 2023, the People’s Assembly of Syria held the 30th sitting of its tenth regular session for the third legislative period, during which its members approved the draft law on ‘Managing and Investing Transferrable and Non-Transferrable Assets That Were Seized Pursuant to an Unappealable Judicial Ruling’, passing it into law. According to the new law, the Ministry of Finance is responsible for handling issues related to the management and investment of these transferrable and non-transferrable assets as detailed in the law, with the exception of areas of land located outside the regulatory zones, which are managed
and invested by the Minister of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. On December 8, SNHR released a report entitled, “Preliminary Analysis of the Law on Managing and Investing Transferrable and Non-Transferrable Assets That Were Seized Pursuant to an Unappealable Judicial Ruling, as Promulgated by the People’s Assembly of Syria,” in which the group noted that this legislation is the fruit of a deliberate and calculated policy which the regime has perpetuated and extended since March 2011, of seizing the transferrable and non-transferrable assets of a wide range of the Syrian people - most notably arbitrarily arrested detainees, prisoners forcibly disappeared in regime detention centers, and hundreds of thousands of dissidents classed as ‘fugitives’ among the forcibly displaced. In pursuit of this policy, the regime has issued large numbers of decisions authorizing the provisional and judicial seizure of property and assets, ultimately culminating in the regulation of these practices through promulgating the law. The articles of this law, which will also apply retroactively, will apply to all unappealable judicial rulings on the seizure of transferrable and non-transferrable assets, regardless of whether these rulings have been issued prior to or since this law’s promulgation. It is clear, therefore, that the legislation contravenes the principle of non-retroactivity, which is not limited to identifying and naming certain acts as crimes and offenses, but also extends to the resulting imposition of penalties and ruling. The principle of non-retroactivity is usually further emphasized and particularly maintained in times of conflicts, as is the case in Syria. As such, this new law cannot legally be used as grounds to impose penalties, with the principle of non-retroactivity not only preventing the seizure of property and assets, but also prohibiting their disposal and any utilization of these items by the executive authority. This law was introduced to enable the management and investment of transferrable and non-transferrable assets seized pursuant to an unappealable judicial ruling. Through this legislation, ownership of the assets in question will automatically be transferred to the state. As such, this procedure violates all the laws that protect defendants’ right to ownership of their property under the Syrian constitution, domestic laws, and international humanitarian law, customary international law, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

On December 1, the Syrian regime promulgated Legislative Decree No. 37 of 2023, an amendment to article 26 of the mandatory military service law. Following this amendment, those called up for reserve service who are 40 years of age or older and have yet to join the reserve forces can pay a fee in lieu of $4,800 or an equal amount in Syrian pounds to be excused. The law also permits those of 40 years of age or older who are still in active military service to pay this fee to be relieved of their duties, with $200 (or an equal SYP amount) deducted for each month they’ve served in the reserve forces.

As such, this decree applies to those who fail to join the military and have reached the age of 40 or more, or those who have fulfilled part of their military service. What is significant about this decree is that it discredit the regime’s claims that it does not retain any servicemen aged over 40 in its military ranks. This decree is one of a range of administrative procedures being enacted on two levels: first, the regulatory level, on which the regime has passed a number of legislative decrees in rapid succession to release those who have served for many years while accepting voluntary contracts, and secondly financial by requiring the payment of such substantial fees for Syrian citizens whose average monthly income is now estimated at $25.
On December 17, the Syrian regime promulgated Law No. 29 of 2023, which is an amendment to Article 50 of the Military Penal Code of 1950. Under the new amendment, those civilians to whom Article 50 applies shall now be tried before a regular criminal court, instead of the military judiciary, unless their alleged crimes are related to relevant military law. According to Article 1 of the Military Penal Code, “military courts handle the cases of all individuals commissioned in the army or armed forces, or in any military unit established in line with a decision by the relevant authority for a certain function during times of war, or times of a state of war, or when the army or the force in question is present in an area where an emergency has been declared provided that the crime stems from their function, as well as civilian workers at the Ministry of Defense in the event that the crime stemmed from their function and the criminal offense committed by the civilians is directed against a military individual as defined in the applicable Military Service Law.”

This new decree has no bearing on the regime’s practices of having civilians arrested in relation to the conflict appear before the military judiciary. This is because the regime brings baseless charges related to targeting its forces against civilians referred to the military judiciary. Even more, the regime has expanded the personal mandate of the military judiciary to include personnel affiliated with the unofficial regime forces fighting alongside the regime’s official forces. We believe that these inclusions grant those unofficial forces immunity in case any civilian wishes to file a lawsuit against them, as the procedural protocol dictates that a lawsuit cannot be officially filed unless their superiors among the security branches’ officers first give their approval, or through a decision issued by the General Staff of the Army and Armed Forces. In the past 13 years, the Syrian regime has never put any military personnel on trial in the context of the armed conflict.

The 23rd amnesty decree since 2011 excludes political prisoners, despite the frequent issuing of these decrees, with all 23 leading to the release of only 7,351 arbitrarily arrested detainees to date, while the regime continues to imprison approximately 135,253 detainees/forcibly disappeared persons.

On November 16, the Syrian regime promulgated Legislative Decree No. 36 of 2023, providing a general amnesty for all crimes committed before the date of the decree, excluding political prisoners, prisoners of consciousness, and those arrested in relation to the armed conflict. This decree was preceded by three other amnesty decrees in 2022. By issuing these amnesty decrees within this short period of time of no more than a few months, the regime is trying to promote a distorted image of itself to influence public opinion and mislead the international community into believing its claims that it is indeed releasing detainees. Simultaneously, the regime is also trying to accomplish domestic goals related to the deteriorating state of its overcrowded prisons. That is to say that the regime is releasing more actual criminals and contravening its punitive laws just to relieve the pressure on its prisons, to such a degree that in many Syrian areas today, criminals have no hesitation in committing crimes knowing that they will barely serve any time and will be included in any upcoming amnesty decree. The high frequency of the regime’s issuance of these amnesty decrees has popularized and perpetuated this mindset among criminals, especially since these decrees primarily favor them.
On November 21, SNHR released a report analyzing some articles in this decree, focusing on seven main points, divided into two sections; the first of these sections focused on full and partial pardons, while the second focused on exceptions to the amnesty, namely those related to detainees and persons forcibly disappeared by the regime, which SNHR believes to be one of the reasons why the regime issued this decree in this way and form. The regime has failed to release at least 3,696 children in its custody or 144 detainees now aged 70 older, despite their being included in many previous amnesty decrees. The report concludes that Legislative Decree No. 36 of 2023 was designed specifically to ensure the release of drug users, deserters, military servicemen, and criminals who committed misdemeanors and infractions. Meanwhile, the decree excludes all prisoners of conscience and detainees arrested in the context of the conflict, which leaves it devoid of legal meaning and with no real bearing on the release of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons held in regime detention centers.

Military operations and use of unlawful weapons

The year 2023 saw more intensified military operations and hostilities compared to the two preceding years, 2022 and 2021. Even though Idlib in northwestern Syria is one of the de-escalation zones that are subject to the Russian-Turkish Cessation of Hostilities agreement which came into effect on March 6, 2020, we documented a significant military escalation in the last quarter of 2023, which the area had not seen since the end of 2019.

In 2023, we recorded many aerial and ground attacks by Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces targeting populated areas far from the dividing lines separating areas controlled by different forces. Also in 2023, we recorded numerous military operations that failed to distinguish between military and civilian targets. The majority of the attacks taking place in 2023 were focused on the villages and towns of Jabal al-Zawiya which are closed to the dividing lines with armed opposition factions in southern, western, and eastern rural Idlib, while other artillery attacks targeted Sahl al-Ghab area in western rural Hama, eastern and western rural Aleppo, and northern rural Latakia. Regime ground attacks have resulted in civilian deaths and injuries, as well as damaging or destroying vital civilian facilities. For instance, On January 12, 2023, Syrian regime artillery forces fired multiple shells at Kafir Tal town in western Aleppo, with one of the shells hitting Omar ben al-Khattab Mosque in the center of the town, partially destroying it.
On February 27, Syrian regime artillery forces carried out heavy bombardment of multiple areas in northern Idlib, targeting the Idlib-Sarmada public road in northern Idlib, with multiple shells landing in the vicinity of the IDP camps in the area. On March 24, a civilian was killed in a regime ground artillery attack that targeted residential neighborhoods and a popular market in the center of al-Abzemou in western Aleppo. On March 30, regime artillery forces fired a shell at an irregular encampment of tents housing IDPs on the western outskirts of Termanein town in northern Idlib. The shell landed on a bus that one of the displaced people was using as a shelter, injuring one civilian. On June 2, a regime artillery attack targeting agricultural lands to the south of al-Atareb city in western Aleppo caused a fire that burned approximately 10 hectares of agricultural crops, which naturally negatively affected the owners of this land and associated properties.

On June 27, the Syrian regime air force carried out airstrikes on agricultural land between the two towns of al-Yadoda town and Ataman in western rural Daraa governorate. While the bombardment resulted in no casualties, it is worth noting that this was the first time that those areas had been targeted since 2018. Daraa governorate is subject to settlements that were agreed on by regime forces in September and October in 2021.

Since early-September, northwestern Syria has been enduring a military escalation by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, involving aerial and ground attacks targeting populated areas far from the dividing lines. On October 5, 2023, regime forces launched an offensive involving intensified ground attacks, including both indiscriminate and deliberate assaults, on areas in northwestern Syria under the control of armed opposition factions and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In many of these attacks, the bombardment targeted densely populated civilian areas, with the offensive lasting until the end of October. The attacks were concentrated in Idlib city and areas in its western, southern, eastern, and northern rural parts of the governorate, as well as in areas in western rural Aleppo governorate and Sahl al-Ghab in western Hama governorate. We documented regime forces’ use of cluster munitions, as well as of incendiary weapons, against civilian areas far from the dividing lines, which were accompanied by no military maneuvers, meaning that the sole aim of these attacks was to spread far among civilians. As SNHR’s victim documentation team confirmed, the offensive by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on various areas in the governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama between October 5 and late-October resulted in the
deaths of no fewer than 62 civilians, including 24 children and 13 women (adult female), as well as three humanitarian workers, and injured dozens of other civilians, as well as causing varying degrees of damage to many civilian objects, including educational facilities, medical facilities, and other vital civilian facilities. On October 13 and November 14, SNHR released two reports proving that Syrian-Russian alliance forces had committed violations that constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes in the form of unlawful attacks on northwestern Syria since early-October. These attacks continued after October, albeit more sporadically. For instance, on December 9, regime attacks targeted Idlib city and Sarmin town, to the east of Idlib city, killing nine civilians, including two children and one woman, and injuring another 27, as well as damaging a number of vital facilities. Another regime ground attack on December 17 targeted Darat Ezza city in western Aleppo, killing five civilians, including a pregnant woman.

In November, Syrian regime forces killed multiple civilians in northeastern Syria. For instance, on November 6, regime artillery forces fired a mortar shell at al-Hawayej town in eastern Deir Ez-Zour, which is under the SDF’s control, killing one woman and one child. On November 24, a member of the Syrian regime’s National Defense militia shot a civilian dead as he attempted to cross the Euphrates River from Darnaj town to al-Ashara city.

In the first half of 2023, no Russian aerial attacks were recorded until the end of May when we documented the year’s first two aerial attacks by Russian forces on May 26 and May 30 respectively. The first attack targeted Fleifel village in southern rural Idlib, while the second targeted a house in al-Manabea neighborhood in northwestern Sarja village. In the last-quarter of June, Russian forces intensified their aerial attacks, targeting multiple areas in northwestern Syria, which resulted in civilian deaths and injuries. On August 22, fixed-wing warplanes believed to be Russian fired missiles at an IDPs shelter in Sahl al-Rouj in western Idlib, killing two civilians, including one child, and injuring five others, as well as killing a number of sheep and other livestock owned by the IDPs, and damaging the building.

In October, Russian attacks intensified in northwestern Syria, most of them concentrated in civilian areas in western and southern rural Idlib, resulting in civilian deaths and injuries, with some of these attacks targeting vital civilian facilities, including IDPs camps. The Russian air force continued to carry out intensified attacks at various times until the end of year, targeting different areas of northwestern Syria that are close to the dividing lines. Russian forces have failed to respect the principles of distinction and proportionality in these attacks, resulting in civilian casualties.
On the subject of the use of unlawful weapons, we documented one attack in which Syrian regime forces used cluster munitions, and eight attacks involving the use of cluster munitions. We have documented no military maneuvers in the targeted areas, with these attacks carried out in tandem with attacks using incendiary munitions, resulting in civilian deaths and injuries, as well as causing mass panic. Meanwhile, we did not document any attacks involving the use of chemical weapons or barrel bombs.

In the first quarter of the year, we recorded military attacks carried out by Turkish forces and armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA) targeting SDF-held areas in northern rural Aleppo, and the areas of Manbij and Ein al-Arab in eastern rural Aleppo, as well as the villages administratively affiliated with the Ein Eisa subdistrict in northern rural Raqqa, and the vicinity of Tal Tammer in northern rural Hasaka.

Meanwhile, armed opposition factions and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) forces continued to target regime-held areas in rural Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo, in 2023, in retaliation for the attacks by the regime against the territories under their control. Most of these attacks targeted military sites. On December 9, HTS used a rocket launcher to bombard the towns of Nebbel and al-Zahra in western Aleppo, killing two women and a child, and injuring 22 others.

Also in 2023, the SDF escalated its military offensives against the areas under the control of armed opposition factions/SNA in northern Syria, mainly northern rural Aleppo, including northeastern and northwestern rural Aleppo. Those attacks resulted in casualties and damage to vital civilian facilities. It should be noted that, the SDF targeted IDPs camps/gatherings in ground attacks. On January 20, SDF personnel used a rocket launcher to bomb residential neighborhoods in Izaz city in northern Aleppo wounding seven civilians, including a child, a woman, and four civilian police officers, as well as causing damage to some houses in the city. On August 22, the SDF used a rocket launcher to fire rockets that hit a house in al-Ghazzawiya town near rural Afrin city in northwestern Aleppo, injuring a civilian who died a few days later of the wounds sustained in the attack.
In September 2023, the SDF carried out attacks in which they indiscriminately targeted civilians amid clashes between the group and the Deir Ez-Zour Military Council backed by Arab tribes. These attacks were concentrated in the villages and towns of eastern and northern rural Deir Ez-Zour, as well as areas in the rural areas surrounding Manbij in eastern Aleppo governorate. On September 2, for instance, an artillery attack by the SDF in Hajin city in eastern Deir Ez-Zour governorate killed two women and injured 20 others. On September 7, SDF artillery forces targeted a camp housing Bedouin tribes on the eastern outskirts of Bershaya village, administratively affiliated with al-Bab area in eastern Aleppo, killing one civilian. We have also recorded the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), commonly known as drones, by the SDF in attacks that resulted in civilian deaths and injuries.

On September 25, for instance, an SDF drone targeted the river crossing connecting the two towns of Theyban and Mahkan in eastern Deir Ez-Zour, killing a woman and her granddaughter who were trying to flee to Theyban. The SDF has also seized control of dozens of civilian facilities, mostly schools and medical facilities, in the course of those clashes, and repurposed them as military outposts. Some of the areas where the clashes took place saw protests demanding that the SDF leave the schools that have been turned into military outposts, following the outbreak of the clashes, and restore them to their original purpose of education.

The rampant state of insecurity was one of the main issues plaguing Syria throughout the year. In fact, SNHR recorded many incidents in which civilians were killed in regime-held areas by drones operated by unidentified parties. There have also been many assassinations of civilians at the hands of unidentified assailants, mainly in the two governorates of Daraa and Deir Ez-Zour, as well as some in Aleppo, albeit to a lesser degree. We also documented dozens of killings at the hands of unidentified parties across Syria.

Furthermore, 2023 saw remote/forced bombings in many areas across the country’s divided territories. These incidents, however, were most heavily concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo, Daraa, and Damascus. Identifying the perpetrators in such bombings is rather a challenging task, with the controlling forces bearing responsibility for protecting civilians in their areas, and for investigating those incidents as they happen, and making the findings of those investigations available to the public. These mayhem-inducing attacks resulted in civilian deaths, as well as damage to vital civilian facilities. On July 27, a motorbike of unidentified source exploded near a SAIPA-model taxi in al-Sayyidah Zaynab in Rural Damascus, killing eight civilians, including four children and one woman, according to the information that SNHR has been able to obtain. On October 5, an explosion of unidentified source shook the Syrian regime’s Military Academy in Homs governorate during a graduation ceremony attended by hundreds of graduating students and their families. In total, 84 individuals, including three children and 29 women, were killed, with 28 of the victims being military servicemen, according to SNHR’s documentation.
Additionally, more civilian deaths were recorded in 2023 caused by the explosion of war remnants, unexploding munitions, and landmines. Most of these incidents, in which dozens of civilians, including women and children, were killed, occurred in the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour, Daraa, Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib, as well as in regime-controlled areas. As in the case of bombings, the task of assigning culpability to a specific party for planting landmines is extremely challenging, with areas where landmines are found having been under the control of different parties at different points. Nonetheless, the growing numbers of civilian deaths resulting from such explosions is an indication that none of the controlling forces have made any tangible efforts to remove landmines, or even tried to detect their locations, fence off these locations, or warn locals of the mines’ presence in these areas. There were dozens of deaths caused by landmines in 2023. One notable such incident occurred on August 25, when four children were killed by the explosion of landmines of unidentified source while they were harvesting shaflah (caper berries) near their home village of Qart Weran located to the northwest of Manbij city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate. It is worth noting that we recorded a rise in the number of landmine explosions during the desert truffles season, in which many civilians were killed and injured as they searched for and collected desert truffles.

In October, some SDF-controlled areas were targeted in Turkish aerial attacks, mostly using drones. Commenting on these attacks, the Turkish Foreign Minister claimed that they had targeted some SDF military sites and enclaves. Some of these attacks resulted in damage to a number of civilian facilities, mostly power and oil stations.

**Landmines and cluster munitions are still scattered across wide areas of Syria, posing a lethal threat to human lives nationwide for decades to come**

Antipersonnel landmines (APLs) are defined as a type of munition designed to be installed above or below the ground, which are triggered and detonated when either a person or a vehicle touches or approaches them. In line with this definition, cluster munition remnants that have not yet exploded are considered APLs, since they bear similar characteristics in that they may potentially explode at any moment should any object touch them.

Wide areas of Syrian territory have been contaminated by landmines at the hands of all the parties to the conflict and controlling forces. Meanwhile, none of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces have disclosed or fenced off the areas contaminated with landmines. Moreover, various areas of Syria have been repeatedly and heavily bombarded using cluster munitions for nearly 11 years, first at the hands of Syrian regime forces and then by Russian forces since the formal launch of Russia’s military intervention in 2015. Hundreds of cluster submunitions have effectively become landmines11 scattered across large swaths of land in various Syrian governorates, posing a lethal threat to civilians’ lives for decades to come. On January 31, 2023, SNHR released an extensive report entitled, ‘Cluster Munitions Remnants are an Open-Ended Threat to the Lives of Syria’s Future Generations’, providing details of the nature of those munitions, and emphasizing the fact that they are scattered across wide areas of Syria. The report also contained a number of maps of the affected Syrian governorate showing the approximate site of areas suspected to be contaminated with cluster munitions remnants. SNHR released a second report tackling...
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12. We face special challenges in definitively attributing culpability in such incidents to either of the two parties to which we assign responsibility for attacks involving the use of cluster munitions, namely the Syrian regime and Russian forces. As such, we attribute culpability in cases of killing by the explosion of cluster munition remnants to the Syrian-Russian alliance. Since the first documented use of cluster munitions in Syria, in July 2012, SNHR has been building a database specifically dedicated to the documentation of cluster munition attacks, feeling that this type of attack warrants special attention. SNHR’s teams work tirelessly to ensure, insofar as is possible, that the type of munitions used in each attack, as well as the containers (both rockets and shells) carrying the cluster munitions, and the quantity of submunitions contained in each, are correctly identified. Carrying out this exacting work also helps in subsequently estimating the areas that have been contaminated by unexploded cluster bomb submunitions or bomblets. We also focus on identifying the launching platforms used or the airbases from which the warplanes that carried out the airborne attacks took off. According to the data we’ve collected through monitoring to date, the Syrian regime and Russian forces are the only parties that have used cluster munitions in Syria. These attacks have been carried out using rockets or shells containing dozens/hundreds of submunitions that were dropped from warplanes or fired from launching platforms believed to be stationed in the Mediterranean Sea or via rocket launchers. We have tried to distinguish between the attacks carried out by the Russian regime and the Syrian regime as much as possible.

On the subject of injuries

Landmines have caused disfigurement and serious injuries to civilians. In any landmine explosion, it’s usual for hundreds of fragments to penetrate the victim’s body, possibly resulting in amputation and the rupturing of arteries and blood vessels, not to mention eye and ear injuries. Even though it is difficult to accurately determine the number of victims injured as a result of landmine explosions, we estimate that at least 456 civilians were injured in 2023 alone, with many having to undergo amputations of limbs as a result of these explosions, and now being in need of artificial limbs and rehabilitation and support programs.

12. We face special challenges in definitively attributing culpability in such incidents to either of the two parties to which we assign responsibility for attacks involving the use of cluster munitions, namely the Syrian regime and Russian forces. As such, we attribute culpability in cases of killing by the explosion of cluster munition remnants to the Syrian-Russian alliance. Since the first documented use of cluster munitions in Syria, in July 2012, SNHR has been building a database specifically dedicated to the documentation of cluster munition attacks, feeling that this type of attack warrants special attention. SNHR’s teams work tirelessly to ensure, insofar as is possible, that the type of munitions used in each attack, as well as the containers (both rockets and shells) carrying the cluster munitions, and the quantity of submunitions contained in each, are correctly identified. Carrying out this exacting work also helps in subsequently estimating the areas that have been contaminated by unexploded cluster bomb submunitions or bomblets. We also focus on identifying the launching platforms used or the airbases from which the warplanes that carried out the airborne attacks took off. According to the data we’ve collected through monitoring to date, the Syrian regime and Russian forces are the only parties that have used cluster munitions in Syria. These attacks have been carried out using rockets or shells containing dozens/hundreds of submunitions that were dropped from warplanes or fired from launching platforms believed to be stationed in the Mediterranean Sea or via rocket launchers. We have tried to distinguish between the attacks carried out by the Russian regime and the Syrian regime as much as possible.
It is clear, therefore, that the continuing presence of landmines continues to pose a major obstacle to the work and return of IDPs, as well as to the work of relief workers, Civil Defense personnel, and to their equipment, not to mention to the process of reconstruction and development.

**Violations against children and women continue**

Syria is still one of the world’s worst countries for civilians. Violations against children are a natural and primary outcome of the 13-year protracted armed conflict and the failure of the Security Council and international community to bring about a political transition in Syria, which has been the root of the conflict and the principal demand of the popular uprising of March 2011.

Throughout the past 13 years, almost every violation we have recorded involved children. The children of Syria have faced a mounting level and seriousness of violations during the conflict. Every year, we release an annual report on violations against children. As of the end of 2023, as SNHR’s database attests, no fewer than 5,229 of the children arrested since March 2011 at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria were still classified as being detained and/or forcibly disappeared, with approximately 71 percent of those being arrested and/or forcibly disappeared at the hands of the Syrian regime. Not only has this terrible situation resulted in a massive and disproportionate number of child victims who’ve been subjected to grave human rights violations, the most crucial of which are extrajudicial killing, unlawful arrest/detention, torture, sexual violence, recruitment, and targeting of facilities providing essential basic services such as education and healthcare, but Syria’s children live in an exceptionally dangerous environment. The parties to the conflict and controlling forces have heavily planted hundreds of thousands of APLs, which include cluster munition remnants, across large swaths of territory across all Syrian governorates, which will continue to pose a long-term threat to the lives of civilians, including children, for years to come. The shiny nature and primary colors of these submunitions are particularly potentially attractive to young children, making them the group most endangered by landmines.

Most of the violations perpetrated in Syria have had a destructive impact on the lives of children who are deprived of their most basic rights, while creating an unsuitable, life-threatening, and hostile environment in which to grow up. As if this were not traumatic enough for children to deal with, the living conditions for Syria’s children have grown exponentially worse in light of the repeated forced displacement caused by the relentless bombardment by the Syrian regime and its allies, as well as the clashes between the various parties to the conflict, all of which have also led to widespread destruction of infrastructure and a lack of basic services, coupled with ever-worsening living conditions and an economic catastrophe, as well as the lack of any viable future in the horizon. In addition to the other gross violations, we observed a vast number of other violations related to the need for protection of children that should be mentioned, including the use of judicial proceedings intended for adults in trying children; child labor; denial of social and cultural rights such as a proper education; denial of an adequate residence which can refer to children living in camps, and the use of children in drug trafficking. While some of these violations existed before the conflict, they have dramatically escalated in number and severity as a result of the conflict, and have had a persistent and excessive impact on children, as well as extending to affect other rights, since most of these violations are compounded and all have been among the primary factors in the decline of the
state of children’s rights in Syria. This vicious and continued cycle of violations and abuses against children have had unimaginably destructive ramifications on children’s wellbeing, which will be hard to redress in the near future for as long as the abysmal status quo in terms of security, human rights, economic and societal collapse, persists.

It is no secret that the February 6 earthquakes and the poor response to them in comparison to the level of the survivors’ needs have catastrophically impacted the residents of the affected areas, including children, especially in northwestern Syria. On June 15, Save the Children released a statement, in which it stressed that the devastating February 6 earthquake has had a “profound” impact on the educational infrastructure in northwestern Syria. The statement reveals that “a staggering 54% of schools and 37% of teaching and learning spaces were affected by the earthquake - a total of 822 school buildings.” The statement added that immense efforts and resources are required to repair and rebuild those facilities, so that children can resume their education. On November 2, the OCHA released a report, noting that the recent escalation in hostilities had affected the access to education of about 2.2 million school-aged children in the 2023-24 school year, which began in northwestern Syria in September. Estimates suggest that about one million of those 2.2 million children are now out of formal education. The situation is particularly dire in displacement camps, with 57 percent of all children there lacking access to elementary schools, and 80 percent lacking access to high schools. By October 18, the report added, the recent offensive, by Syrian-Russian alliance forces in Idlib and western rural Aleppo, which began on October 5, had led to the displacement of 120,000 people, including 40,000 school-aged children who require educational support. On December 12, the UNICEF released an appeal for Humanitarian Action for Children in Syria in 2024, in which it noted that “13 years of crisis have upended the lives of children and their families... leaving 15.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including 7 million children.” The appeal also reveals that, of 6.8 million IDPs, 5.3 million are in need of humanitarian assistance.

With regard to recruiting and using children in hostilities, most of the parties to the conflict in Syria continued to use children in the armed conflict in 2023. This is done either by offering inducements to children or abducting them, with the practice especially associated with the SDF that has been operating children’s military training camps for years, with these camps established in areas remote from the children’s original areas of residence, and with the children prevented from contacting their families. Furthermore, many of the abducted children’s families have been threatened and warned not to disclose to the UN or human rights bodies that their children have been recruited or conscripted. Moreover, families are not allowed to visit their children, and those who attempt to do so are usually subjected to verbal insults and thrown out of SDF headquarters.

In June 2023, the UN Secretary-General recently submitted his annual report on ‘Children and Armed Conflict’ for the year 2022. On Syria, the report says that in 2022, “the United Nations verified 2,438 grave violations against 2,407 children [...] that had occurred in previous years”, with these violations including killing and maiming, recruitment, detention and abduction, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, using schools and hospitals for military purposes, and denial of humanitarian access. Those violations affected 2,407 children in 2022. The report also notes that monitoring of these violations had generally faced many obstacles due to restrictions limiting access. By comparing Syria with the other countries of the world, SNHR made the following findings:

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14. Ibid.
1. Syria is the world’s worst country in terms of child recruitment and use of children in conflict.

2. Syria is the world’s fourth-worst country in terms of child-killing and maiming.

3. Syria is the world’s fourth-worst country in terms of military use of schools and hospitals.

On October 27, the UN Secretary-General submitted his fourth report on children and armed conflicts in Syria to the UN Security Council. The report, which documented the effects of the conflict on children and Syria while highlighting patterns and trends of violations in the period from July 1, 2020, to September 30, 2022, revealed that the UN had verified 5,219 grave violations against 5,073 children. The report revealed that the total number of violations had increased by 10 percent on the previous report submitted in April 2021, which covered the period between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2022. The report further revealed that “recruitment and use of children was the most prevalent verified violation (2,990), followed by killing and maiming of children (1,891) and the abduction of children (222).”

Women in Syria have also suffered multiple and repeated patterns of violations over the past 13 years, including 2023. Those violations vary in their severity and frequency, and in their current and future ramifications for girls and women in Syria, depending on the nature and type of violation. Besides the seven gross human rights violations committed against females, which have been practiced in a systematic way - extrajudicial killing; unlawful detention, arbitrary arrest, abduction, and enforced disappearance; torture; sexual violence; child recruitment; attacks on medical facilities, such as hospitals, and the blockage or denial of humanitarian assistance, women in Syria have faced insurmountable challenges over their involvement in activism, or, on a more basic level, in obtaining their most essential rights and needs amid the numerous horrific violations committed against them and how those violations have been employed by the parties to the conflict. In addition to those main violations, there are other violations related to the protection of women, including violations related to judicial and security procedures put in place to prove ownership of property or assets, certifying deaths, and the gender dimensions of many laws and regulations involving discriminatory practices that have affected women. Moreover, female activists have faced slander and intimidation, which grew dramatically worse in light of the conflict. Women working in the public sphere have faced significantly higher numbers of violations. In its report released on March 8, International Women’s Day, SNHR noted that the earthquake that hit northwestern Syria had worsened the tragic situation of women, displacing no fewer than 35,000 women. According to a report issued by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), over 1.3 million women in northwestern Syria are in need of urgent access to reproductive health services in an area where health facilities are already stretched beyond capacity. The statement stressed that the earthquake that hit Türkiye and Syria in February 2023 had reduced large parts of the existing vital infrastructure, including hospitals, UNFPA-supported health facilities, and women and girls’ safe spaces, to rubble.

This vicious cycle of violations against women has inflicted profound psychological wounds. These intensely traumatic, raw experiences, along with the high levels of stress stemming from these violations have led to traumas, panic, and many other physiological and psychological ailments. On June 12, the COI released a paper entitled ‘Gendered Impact of the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on Women and Girls’. The paper noted that all types of sexual violence and gender-based violence have increased throughout Syria as the conflict has continued.
Living, economic, and security situation in Syria

With violations continuing non-stop in Syria for 13 years, the Syrian state and society have suffered catastrophic consequences across all sectors. The increasingly poor security situation throughout Syria has not been without its repercussions on the Syrian economy which has rapidly declined, particularly in the last two years. In fact, Syria’s economy is increasingly being drained of its material, human, and social capital at the same time, as the Syrian regime consumes the country’s resources to fuel its war against what began as popular protests and later devolved into an internal armed conflict in which the regime has displaced over half the population either as IDPs or refugees. In short, the Syrian economy is increasingly moving towards total collapse. On March 14, 2023, the WFP reported that 12.1 million people in Syria, over half of the country’s population, were suffering from severe food insecurity, making Syria one of the six most food-insecure nations worldwide, with this crisis compounded by rising food and fuel prices that hit their highest levels in a decade. The WFP also stressed that it was facing a funding crisis which threatened to reduce the already meagre aid directed in an unprecedented fashion. On May 1, the UNHCR released a report revealing that, as the conflict in Syria entered its 13th year, 15.3 million people across the country were in need of humanitarian assistance, constituting a five percent increase on the same period in 2022. The report also stressed that the February 6 earthquakes had further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, adversely affecting approximately 8.8 million people in Syria. On June 29, Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, revealed that 90 percent of all residents of Syria were under the poverty line due to the effects of the 12-year long conflict, adding that millions would have to cope with reduced food assistance allotments in the following month due to a funding shortage.

Towards the end of the year, on December 21, the OCHA released a report entitled, ‘Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview’, in which the UN agency revealed that an estimated 16.7 million people, including 5.5 million IDPs, would require humanitarian assistance countrywide in 2024, with over 2 million IDPs living in what the report described as ‘last resort’ sites. The report also noted that 2023 was seeing increased malnutrition and humanitarian needs, with the governorates of Rural Damascus, Idlib, Raqqa, and Quneitra moving upwards from ‘acceptable’ to ‘stress’ level on the Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) scale. Moreover, the report noted that the Syrian Pound had lost about half of its value. As of November 2023, one USD equalled 14,200 Syrian Pounds (SYP) on the parallel exchange foreign market.

Regime-controlled areas

The extent to which areas in Syria have been affected in terms of residents’ living situation vary depending on the controlling forces. It is apparent, however, that regime-held areas are among the worst with regard to the living and economic conditions, with the service and security situation both increasingly deteriorating over the past year. The Syrian Pound’s (SYP’s) exchange rate to the US Dollar (USD) plunged to unprecedented levels, reaching an exchange rate of 10,000 SYP to 1 USD in the first third of July. The collapse of the SYP’s value regressed further to 12,000 in the last week of the same month according to sp-today.com. In December, a report published by the regime-controlled Central Bank of Syria’s official exchange market rate gazette announced that the value of one USD had increased against the Syrian Pound, standing at 12,500 SYP, while in the official exchange rates gazette, one USD equaled 12,700 SYP. According to sp-today.com, meanwhile, one USD was equal to 14,000 SYP as of the second half of December.
Another indication of the abysmal living standards for residents of regime-held areas was revealed in an Economist report released on July 31, which reported that Damascus city had again been named the least livable city worldwide, as in the previous several years. The report added, “Although Bashar al-Assad, the country’s brutal dictator, is no longer a pariah in the Middle East, his gradual return to the international stage has not led to any improvements in the living standards of his people. It is not likely that will change anytime soon.”

This is wholly unsurprising. The Syrian regime’s government is unable to provide the most basic fundamental essentials, such as water, bread or electricity. Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime’s allies in the war, are certainly not concerned with providing such services. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime’s government continued to implement rationing policies for electricity and for drinking water across most areas under its control. These crises, together with the almost complete lack of fuel, have led to an near-complete crippling of public life in regime-controlled areas with dozens of factories becoming inoperative due to the lack of fuel and raw production materials since the beginning of 2023. In fact, in some areas of Syria, power is cut off for 20 hours a day and available for only four on two intervals. The month of November, for instance, saw power outages lasting for over eight hours for every one hour of electricity provided. Similarly, the water supply continued to be scarce in many areas due to the power rationing policy and inadequate water pumping facilities. As for drinking water, the Syrian regime’s government issued a decision to raise the price of drinking water on a consumption-based rate. On August 24, the pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper reported that the decision to “rationalize the consumption of drinking water” had been taken “in order to limit waste and [stop the public] from taking drinking water for granted because of its low prices” according to an unnamed Ministry of Water Resources source in the regime government.

The February 6 earthquakes also severely damaged the service sector. Many earthquake-stricken areas and neighborhoods suffered from power outages lasting for days, especially in the governorates of Aleppo, Latakia, and Hama, while public water tanks collapsed in some areas, resulting in civilian injuries and water outages.

Regarding fuel, citizens had to cope with subsidized household gas being cut off several times this year. Meanwhile, prices of the different types of fuel (diesel, gas, household gas, industrial gas) all increased multiple times this year, to a point of making them unaffordable for the great majority of citizens, which naturally affected the costs of other goods, most notably foodstuff and medical supplies. The rising prices of fuel, which was hard to find in markets, distribution centers, and gas stations, caused ongoing transportation...
crises throughout the year. For instance, on July 24, the pro-regime Tishreen Newspaper published pictures of large groups of people waiting at bus stops in the searing summer heat. Also on August 23, the pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper reported that many employees at regime institutions were considering quitting their jobs to ease transportation costs far higher than they can afford, while others had submitted requests for sick leave or administrative leave to escape the rising transportation costs.

All the above exacerbated the suffering of citizens who've been left with no choice but to flee. In fact, migration rates from regime-controlled areas have steadily increased over the past year, both through regular and irregular means. Another sign of this widespread desperation to flee abroad is the crowded Passport and Immigration Department offices, packed with citizens seeking to obtain passports to leave the country. Relatedly, the Syrian regime's government issued a decision to increase the cost of obtaining an instant passport from 500,000 SYP to 1.5 million SYP, as reported by the pro-regime Watan Newspaper on January 2, 2023. SNHR has repeatedly stressed in multiple reports that the Syrian regime is exploiting people's need to obtain passports, which the regime sees as a way to extort money to fund its war on the country's dissidents, which constitutes another violation of basic human rights. Ironically, while the Syrian passport is now the most expensive in the world, it is the second-worst passport worldwide according to the 2023 Passport Index.

The pharmaceutical sector has been one of those worst affected by the fuel crisis and the decisions made by the Syrian regime's government, with many sick patients losing access to essential medication; among those worst affected by this have been citizens suffering from chronic diseases who were shocked to discover that their medications are no longer available at pharmacies, either because of some factories going out of commission or because of these drugs’ prohibitively expensive prices. According to Hassan Dwieran, the head of the Pharmacists Union in Damascus in a statement to the pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper published on January 15, 2023, the medications available only cover 50 percent of the market’s needs. Related to the medicine crisis, on January 17, 2023, SANA reported that the Syrian regime health ministry’s Directorate of Pharmaceutical Affairs had announced a new price list including most locally produced medicines, which saw a 50 percent increase for some medicines, while other prices were increased by as much as 80 percent according to a report by the al-Watan Newspaper on the same day. Baby milk formula became almost completely unavailable on the markets and in pharmacies, with this scarcity making it prohibitively expensive.

Moreover, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the many neighborhoods and areas destroyed in bombardment in the areas over which the regime was able to reimpose control is almost nonexistent.18 We have not recorded even one well-planned operation to remove rubble or repair buildings, which in itself poses a threat to public safety, while residents of areas that saw violent military operations living in constant fear of these buildings falling down, with no material resources available to repair them. We, at SNHR, believe this is a deliberate choice by the Syrian regime which, even while draining the state’s resources in its continuing torture, repression and bombardment of civilians, demands that others shoulder the costs of repair and reconstruction. As we documented, many municipalities removed or demolished structures and buildings accused of violating construction codes, despite their being used as temporary housing by dozens of families who had been displaced from their original homes. Whatever pretexts the regime gave, these operations were and are still being carried out to enable it to take over those areas.

18 An example that provides an idea of the dire state of the reconstruction process is an incident recorded in early April, in al-Rastan city, northern Homs, in which heavy construction equipment s by armed Syrian regime forces, was used to demolish a number of schools that were damaged in previous bombardment by regime forces and in various regime military operations in the area over the past 12 years. Five schools in the regime-controlled city were demolished, namely the Mohammad Saeed Ayoub School, the Mohammad Tayseer Farazat Vocational School, al-Oula School for Girls, the 16 Tishreen School, and the Mohammad Qasem Tlas School. It is worth noting that none of these schools had been repaired or renovated since Syrian regime forces took back control of the city in May 2018.
With respect to the security situation, the regime-controlled areas have been plagued by a rampant state of insecurity which grew worse following the February 6 earthquakes. In many affected areas, thefts and murders became commonplace amid a state of mayhem, with the authorities failing to investigate such crimes. Broadly, the state of insecurity has penetrated the regime-held areas on many levels, to the extent that even public service institutions have been robbed. On June 1, for instance, the pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper reported that a medical dispensary affiliated with the Quneitra Health Directorate had been vandalized, and its solar panels stolen. A similar incident took place in a school in the same area. Meanwhile, the only transformer providing power to the sole well feeding water to a village in rural Hama was stolen according to a June 16 report in the same newspaper. On July 2, the same newspaper reported that the power grid of al-Salamiya city “is being repeatedly targeted by thieves”. On September 15, the al-Watan Newspaper reported that medium-voltage cables feeding Abu al-Fedaa subdistrict in western Hama city had been stolen and wrecked for the second time in a week. The theft also caused a fire and material damage, according to the newspaper. SNHR stresses that this rampant state of insecurity only makes civilians more vulnerable to thefts and mugging, while the targeting of service institutions makes civilians’ lives more difficult and further denies them their most basic civil rights. All of this is living proof of the Syrian regime’s failure to address the multiple living crises that exacerbate the already intense suffering plaguing citizens’ lives.

**Northwestern Syria**

The region of Northwestern Syria is divided into two areas of control:

- Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham has military and administrative control over large areas of the region, mainly wide areas of Idlib governorate and parts of Western Aleppo. The Salvation Government and local councils are the group’s administrative arm in those areas.

- The SNA’s Interim Syrian Government controls some areas and also has a subsidiary local council.

The residents of this region also suffer from a poor economic and living situation, with most being IDPs, the most impoverished and disenfranchised group in Syrian society. This is because IDPs, who have been uprooted from their homes and jobs, have no real opportunity in the meantime to return to their original areas that fell under the control of the regime. Unemployment is a ubiquitous problem among IDPs who rely mostly on humanitarian aid. On December 21, the OCHA released a report on the situation in northwestern Syria, in which it noted that about 4.5 million people living in the region were bracing for another cold winter season, with heavy rainfall, snowfall, and flooding expected, with 2023 marking the 12th winter in conflict for Syria’s population. Additionally, the report noted that 800,000 IDPs were still living in tents, out of two million IDPs living in 1,500 camps across northwestern Syria. The report added, “87 per cent of IDPs live in sites that need camp management and 79 per cent live in sites with a critical level of overcrowding that puts their health at risk. 80 per cent of residents in IDP sites are women and children.”

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To make matters worse, the people in the region deal in Turkish Lira (TRY) which has also been sharply decreasing in value against the USD. In December, the exchange rate went over 28 TRY for 1 USD, which naturally affected already struggling consumers’ purchasing power, with prices of goods rising as the TRY fell. Moreover, people’s constant fear of potential attacks by the Syrian regime and Russia makes the prospects of any medium- or long-term investment in the region unfeasible. Perpetuating this mindset remains one of the most important objectives of the sporadic attacks carried out by the Russian-Syrian alliance.

Under these bleak circumstances, people in northwestern Syria are grappling with an increasingly poor economic and living situation in parallel with rising prices for food and grocery supplies, all intensified by the people’s waning purchasing power due to widespread unemployment and poverty, especially in those areas housing internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps, with wages for those in work in these areas also continuing to decline. Additionally, the service and healthcare sectors are also going through a funding crisis, as humanitarian needs are sharply increasing. The February 6 earthquakes further exacerbated the suffering of civilians in northwestern Syria throughout 2023, with all public services adversely affected by the devastating earthquakes. On March 6, the IRC issued a press release stating that, despite the passage of approximately one month since the February 6 earthquake, millions of women and children were still at risk, particularly in northwestern Syria. The press release revealed that two-thirds of the children surveyed by the IRC showed signs of psychological distress, manifesting in increased crying, grief, and nightmares. The “rapid protection assessment” conducted by the IRC in northwestern Syria expressed concerns for the safety of women and girls due to the overcrowding situation, and insufficient access to basic services.

As for services, the cities and towns of northern and eastern rural Aleppo saw popular protests at the beginning of the second week of January 2023 over the decision of the Turkish energy company AK ENERGY, the regional energy supplier, to increase electricity costs in the area. Similarly, the Idlib region also saw an increase in the prices of household gas, according to a statement released by the regional Salvation Government on February 18. Furthermore, some areas had to cope with extremely restricted water access due to the poor conditions of the main water grid and the frequent power outages. The heavy bombardment of residents and service facilities by Syrian-Russian alliance forces was another major factor affecting access to services, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee again, leading to increasing suffering on all levels. On the night of June 3, protesters took to the streets in the cities and towns of Afrin, Marea, Souran, al-Bab, and Jendeires in rural Aleppo governorate to demonstrate over the refusal of the Syrian-Turkish Electricity (STE), the power supplier in the area, to accept civilians’ demands for lower electricity prices and to increase the number of hours of electricity provided under a rationing system. In response to this peaceful demonstration, the protestors were confronted with gunfire from the Turkish Border Guard, resulting in a number of civilian injuries, while a detainee, a member of the Ahrar al-Shraqiya [the Freemen of the Sharqiya] military faction was killed. The protests also saw acts of vandalism and fires breaking out in a number of the company’s offices.

On October 29, the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) released its latest update on its analysis of protection in northwestern Syria. The report noted that accessing rights has become increasingly challenging for residents there in light of the ongoing conflict and protection crisis that began 12 years ago, adding, “The earthquakes in February 2023 further compounded humanitarian needs, while exacerbating existing protection risks.” The report further revealed that fear is the most salient factor affecting residents’
decision to move elsewhere in northwestern Syria. It cited a recent survey which showed that 82 percent of those asked had expressed this fear as a primary source of concern, while one-third of respondents said they were considering moving abroad. Lastly, the report noted that 3,761,691 individuals in northwestern Syria were currently in need of protection, with the situation of 2,042,945 of these people described as ‘catastrophic’ and the situation of 1,618,183 described as ‘extreme’.

SNA forces also persecuted the owners of olive groves around Afrin city and in the surrounding rural areas, who are mostly of Kurdish ethnicity, imposing fines on both the lands and the olive harvests from olive press facilities. We also documented that SNA factions chopped down olive trees, as well as other trees in forested areas, and resold the wood for heating, a policy that has been implemented in the area for years.

**With regard to the security conditions,** the controlling forces in these areas have also been responsible for some oppressive acts. On June 27, for instance, Sarmada city in northern Idlib saw protests by residents of Hama governorate over HTS’ detention of a number of prominent figures in the region over their opposition to the group. In response, HTS’ security forces and Salvation Government personnel surrounded the protesters participating in a demonstration at the roundabout in Sarmada city and erected checkpoints to prevent other protestors from reaching the area.

Meanwhile, some SNA-controlled areas in northern rural Aleppo governorate, particularly al-Bab city, suffered from insecurity. SNHR has documented armed clashes in neighborhoods and popular markets, which intensified in the middle of the year. Most of those clashes took the form of infighting between different SNA military factions. On June 26, we also recorded an assault by SNA gunmen on the teaching staff of the International Sham University, a private university. SNHR released a statement condemning the assault on the day following the incident.

On December 18, a group of lawyers held a demonstration in front of the Justice Palace in al-Ra’ie city in northern Aleppo, a city under SNA control. The demonstrators called for discharging the interim government and ending corruption in the judiciary. In response, personnel from the Civilian Police, which is affiliated with the SNA’s General Staff, beat a number of protestors and media workers, breaking a number of cameras and other items of filming equipment. Additionally, four media workers were arrested and released the same day.

**SDF-controlled areas in northeastern Syria**

The living, economic, and security conditions in these areas all saw a sharp decline throughout 2023. Prices of food, fuel and other essential commodities in the region continue to rise due to the controlling forces’ failure to regulate the market. As we also documented, civilians in northeastern Syria were also unhappy at the low quality and prohibitive prices of the bread produced there; this was particularly pronounced in mid-2023, when residents of Manbij and Ein al-Aran city in northeastern Aleppo governorate voiced frustration at the scarce access to some basic grocery supplies, most importantly flour, leading to low levels of bread production, and, in turn, rising bread prices, all of which was part of the SDF’s punitive policies against those areas for their protesting over the group’s policies in the area.
Additionally, the service sectors failed to secure civilians’ needs, especially with respect to drinking water, electricity, and agricultural supplies. In fact, the controlling forces made no tangible effort to improve access to safe drinking water, with residents having to rely on unprocessed and unsafe sources of water, while sewage networks have been inadequate, increasing the likelihood of the spread of waterborne diseases. Indeed, many civilians had to make do with drinking untreated water pumped directly from the Euphrates River without going through any purification process due to most water stations being put out of commission for technical reasons, as well as due to the lack of fuel.

In mid-2023, Hasaka city suffered a water outage that lasted for over two months, as Allouk Water Station stopped pumping water due to a power outage, depriving almost one million people in the region of water, with this suffering amid the stifling summer heat worsened by the rising prices of drinking water. The situation was further worsened by clashes breaking out in the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Hasaka between the SDF and the Deir Ez-Zour military council backed by Arab tribes in early-September. These clashes made it extremely difficult for residents in those areas to secure their day-to-day needs, such as food and medication.

Moreover, the water and electricity crisis in Hasaka governorate was exacerbated in October, by some feeding stations being put out of commission by Turkish aerial attacks on the area. On October 26, HRW released a report stressing that the aerial drone attacks by Turkish forces on SDF-held areas between October 5-10, had damaged the vital infrastructure and caused water and power outages in those areas. On November 6, REACH announced in a brief that the water crisis that had afflicted northeastern Syria for the past three years was still continuing. The brief noted that the area was still dealing with gaps in its water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems. In particular, it noted the small communities and informal areas isolated from water networks have limited access to safe and affordable drinking water. On December 1, Sudipto Mukerjee, UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria ad interim, released a statement on the militarization of the Ebrea Water Plant, revealing that the plant had been used as a military site since November 23 during nighttime hours, preventing workers from operating the equipment there, which in turn deprived 45,000 people in the area of their source of safe drinking water.

Naturally, the poor economic situation contributed to worsening security conditions. The region of northeastern Syria continued to suffer from a state of rampant insecurity, seeing spreading crime, including murders, and thefts. On January 4, 2023, for instance, we recorded that a school in al-Keshkhya town was burgled by unknown thieves who stole the school’s heaters and heating supplies, forcing it to suspend teaching activities. Raqqa city also saw popular protests condemning a murder of a woman and her daughter in the city on January 16, 2023. In response, the SDF arrested a number of the protestors later the same month.

Relatedly, there were a number of protests in the cities, towns, and villages of rural Deir Ez-Zour throughout the year in protest at the poor living conditions and rampant corruption, with protestors also calling for the release of detainees. Similar peaceful protests took place in Manboj and Ein al-Arba in northeastern rural Aleppo. The SDF responded to these demonstrations by opening fire at the protesters, killing a number of the protesters, and arresting others.
In March, teachers held demonstrations in Theyban town in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour calling for improving education and better wages, in addition to protesting at the conscription policies enforced by the SDF in their areas of control.

**Syria is one of the leading narcotics suppliers worldwide in 2023**

This year’s developments confirmed that Bashar Assad, the head of the Syrian regime, is the sponsor of the Captagon trade in Syria. The regime-held areas have become the world’s largest source of Captagon, under the sponsorship of the regime itself, in coordination with the Lebanese group Hezbollah. The Syrian regime is a highly centralized apparatus. As such, production of Captagon on such a massive scale in areas under its control cannot possibly be done without the central approval and management of the regime itself." For years, the Syrian regime has caused harm to the citizens of other states by exporting narcotics through its land and sea crossings, an industry which expanded following 2018, when the regime restored its control over large areas that it previously lost. It must be noted that Syria is today a narco state, with Captagon being its most important export, as well as one of the most important sources of funding for the Syrian regime in recent years. On April 12, the French newspaper Le Monde reported that the Syrian regime had enlisted pharmaceutical experts in Syria to manufacture and produce Captagon, establishing a massive network of secret pharmaceutical laboratories to manufacture these amphetamine pills.

Another report on this issue was released by the BCC on June 27. The piece, a joint investigative report by BBC News Arabic and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), was entitled, ‘From Inside the Syrian Captagon State’. The investigation, which took place in three countries - Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria - provided further proof that the Syrian regime is responsible for producing and exporting Captagon in a deliberate and calculated way that extends from the highest echelons of power in the Syrian regime all the way to the drivers of the vehicles used to transport the narcotics. The report shows that this has been a central policy for the Syrian regime which incriminates those in the highest positions of power in the regime, namely Bashar and Maher Assad, as well as Syrian regime army officials and different security checkpoint personnel, necessarily implying that many regime security bodies are involved in and intimately aware of the details of the smuggling operations. The report largely corresponds with SNHR’s information, that Bashar Assad is the main source of the Captagon trade in Syria.

Over the course of 2023, we recorded dozens of statements by Jordanian authorities about their thwarting of attempts to smuggle narcotics (Captagon, marijuana, Tramadol, etc...). According to the statements published by the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) on their website, drones coming from Syria had been used in these foiled smuggling attempts. Rates of smuggling attempts dramatically increased towards the end of 2023, with some involving shootouts between the Jordanian Border Guard and smuggler networks, which are supervised by the Syrian regime and Iranian militias.

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21. On March 28, the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) released a statement noting that 80 percent of the world’s Captagon supply is produced in Syria, calling this illicit trade ‘a financial lifeline for the Syrian regime.’ The statement also noted that the Syrian regime is deeply involved in this trade, with regime strongholds, such as Latakia Port, being used to process ‘multi-billion-dollar shipments.’

On a related note, we documented several aerial attacks targeting multiple areas of Syria that were suspected to be carried out by the Jordanian forces, with those attacks resulting in civilian casualties. For instance, at dawn on May 8, two warplanes, which are believed to have entered Syrian airspace from Jordan and are suspected to have been affiliated with the Jordanian military, carried out two simultaneous attacks on targets in the governorates of Daraa and Suwayda. The first attack targeted a former wastewater facility near Khrab al-Shahm town in western rural Daraa governorate which is located near the Jordanian-Syrian border. The facility was being used at the time of the attack by armed groups associated with regime forces and Hezbollah, as a temporary storage facility for narcotics shipments, especially Captagon, which is manufactured in Damascus and rural Damascus, before being transported elsewhere for smuggling via the Jordanian-Syrian borders. While the attack caused some destruction to the facility’s buildings, no civilian casualties were recorded, since the site is controlled by military personnel with no civilians present.

However, the second attack was carried out against al-Sha’ab village in the far southeast of Suwayda governorate. The targeted site was a residential house inhabited by the family of 45-year-old Mer’ie Ruwyshed al-Ramthan, who is believed to have been a key head figure of a massive drug trafficking network in southern Syria responsible for distributing Captagon and other narcotics in the area. Al-Ramthan was also the key figure responsible for recruiting and arming smugglers across the south of the country. He commanded a local armed militia whose manpower is estimated to number in the hundreds, centered in the desert ‘badiya’ of Suwayda, where it controls a number of areas. This militia is responsible for securing trafficking routes and overseeing operations involving the transporting and smuggling of Captagon and other narcotics, as well as arms. According to our intelligence, this operation is run in coordination and collaboration with the Syrian regime’s ‘al-Ferqa al-Rabe’a’ (Fourth Division), headed by Major General Maher Assad, brother of the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad. Al-Sha’ab village is the largest and best known of the areas used for the storage and distribution of shipments of Captagon and other narcotics set to be trafficked. This village, which is also the main starting point for drug-smugglers and drug shipments headed for Jordan, is known as a safe haven for many individuals involved in activities related to manufacturing and trafficking Captagon and other narcotics, including non-Syrian and non-Lebanese people. On May 12, SNHR released a report summarizing some of the human rights violations resulting from those attacks on the pretext of combating the Captagon trade, while also holding the Syrian regime responsible for housing and concealing Syrian and non-Syrian drug suppliers among Syrian civilians. The report documented the killing of seven Syrian civilians, namely: Mer’ie, his 36-year-old wife Hend al-Ramthan, and their five children aged between two and 10 years old.

While the Jordanian authorities did not officially claim responsibility for the operation in question, the Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ayman al-Safadi, speaking at a press conference held jointly with his Dutch counterpart a few hours after the operation, noted that Jordanian authorities had reached an agreement with the Syrian regime to form a joint security force to combat and eradicate the threat of drug trafficking, adding that the plan would be set in motion in the very near future. At the same press conference, the Jordanian minister also revealed that the two sides had established communication channels. A few days before that, on May 4, CNN reported that al-Safadi had asserted that his country would do whatever is necessary to combat the threat of drugs, including “taking military action” inside Syria to eliminate this threat.
Those statements suggest that those attacks were carried out in coordination with the Syrian regime which is not concerned by the deaths of Syrian citizens or the infringement of Syrian sovereignty. It should be noted that it is absurd to attempt to combat the Captagon trade in collaboration with the same entity that is producing said Captagon. Al-Ramthan himself was simply part of a far larger network that incorporates dozens of drug suppliers, all working under the command of the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. Certainly, killing any one of these will not end the Captagon trade.

Another similar attack took place on December 18, which killed four civilians, including one woman and two children. The attack targeted number of areas in rural Suwayda governorate close to the Jordanian border were targeted by airstrikes suspected to be carried out by the Jordanian air force, hitting a farm near Thebien village in southern rural Suwayda governorate, as well as targets in Salkhad city, Um shama village, and a site near Um al-Rumman village in southern Suwayda. On December 19, Reuters reported that Jordanian planes had carried out airstrikes the day before, December 18, targeting what it said were hideouts for “Iranian-backed drug smugglers in retaliation against a large-scale smuggling operation”; this followed Jordanian forces foiling an attempt by smugglers linked to Iranian militias to cross into Jordan using medium weapons and explosives.

On June 29, the US Department of State submitted its Report to Congress on A Written Strategy to Disrupt and Dismantle Narcotics Production and Trafficking and Affiliated Networks Linked to the Regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria to Congress. The interagency plan was devised by the US Department of State in partnership with the Department of Defense, Department of Treasury, The Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy, in line with the requirements of the CAPTAGON Act which was approved by US President Joe Biden on December 8, 2022.

On the basis of harmonizing interagency efforts, the report laid out a fourfold strategy: 1. Provide diplomatic and intelligence support to law enforcement investigators; 2. Use targeted sanctions and other financial tools to disrupt the efficiency of what the document calls the “Assad regime-affiliated trafficking network”; 3. Provide foreign assistance and training to partner countries; and 4. Use diplomatic engagements and public messaging to exert pressure on the Assad regime to curtail Captagon production. SNHR welcomes this strategy which, should it be put in motion, would put more pressure on the Syrian regime to limit its Captagon production and trade, which have become an economic lifeline for the regime in recent years. SNHR also reiterates that the laws aiming to combat Captagon trade in Syria must be involved based on international coordination, and on taking more action to hold the regime accountable and end its impunity.
Forced displacement

The violations committed first and foremost by the Syrian regime, and to a secondary degree by the other parties to the conflict, have displaced half the Syrian population, either as IDPs or refugees in other countries, with tens of thousands more now seeking refuge in light of the continued violations. With many countries in the world today choosing to restore relations with the regime, the primary perpetrator of all these violations, those displaced are losing any hope for a return to Syria in the near future. With the number of Syrian refugees currently standing at about 6.5 million, they now make up the largest refugee population globally.

Syria has borne witness to incomprehensible levels of violence against civilians by the various parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria, first and foremost the Syrian regime itself, in every part of the country, generating a constant and profound sense of fear and panic in the hearts of Syrians, that has driven them en masse to seek safety elsewhere, especially following relentless, indiscriminate bombardment, most notably by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, which partially or completely destroyed most of Syria’s cities, to the point that many have become uninhabitable. Meanwhile, the continuing security crackdowns against Syrian dissidents by the Syrian regime’s various and far-reaching security apparatuses have played a large role in displacing thousands more Syrians to other areas. Additionally, the siege and blockade policy enforced by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces in many areas has been followed by coercive settlement agreements that resulted in the forced deportation of thousands more people from their homes. In fact, the COI has concluded that there are grounds to believe that pro-regime forces may have committed a crime against humanity in the form of forced displacement.

Furthermore, the ongoing violations by the various parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria are the primary cause of more and more refugees fleeing. While it may be true that the rate of violations has fallen somewhat in the past two years, the cumulative effect of 13 years and counting of violations has brought about a Syria with an atrocious human rights situation, riven by killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, forcible displacement, torture, pillaging of land and properties, and a widespread state of chronic insecurity under which assassinations and remote bombings have become prevalent, with these and many other violations combining to cause upheaval across Syria. In light of these violations that threaten the most fundamental tenets of human rights and human dignity, with no foreseeable end to this suffering or any feasible way to hold their perpetrators accountable, hundreds of Syrians are trying to sell their properties, flee their country, and seek asylum in other nations worldwide. What we documented in 2023 in this regard should serve as a sobering alarm of the dangers that threaten about seven million IDPs, with SNHR recording further massive displacement waves as a result of the hostilities carried out by the different parties to the conflict. Below are some of the factors driving the displacement movement seen in 2023:

- We documented numerous incidents of bombardment targeting earthquake-affected areas in northwestern Syria, as well as around areas housing earthquake-affected IDPs. Naturally, these attacks forcibly displaced the traumatized survivors again. On February 18, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) reported that the number of people displaced in the aftermath of the earthquake was as high as 86,000, noting that most of the movement of displacement had been from Jendeires town in northern Aleppo and the two cities of Salqin and Harem in western Idlib. It should be
noted that these areas had originally housing large numbers of IDPs who had already been displaced, often several times, in the course of the conflict.

- IDP camps, both regular and irregular, have been targeted for both deliberate and indiscriminate bombardment by regime forces, Russian forces, and the SDF.

- We documented the displacement of dozens of families from the areas of Jabal al-Zawiya region in southern Idlib, and to a less degree from areas in eastern rural Idlib towards safer areas in northern Idlib, following regime ground attacks. Most of the villages and towns from which people fled were close to the dividing lines with regime-held areas.

- In the last quarter of 2023, we documented the displacement of tens of thousands of families in northwestern Syria, mostly from areas in Idlib governorate due to the intensified offensive by Syrian-Russian alliance forces targeting northwestern Syria that began in early-October. According to an OCHA report released on October 27, the attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on northwestern Syria led to the displacement of 120,000 people since October 5. The report adds that, as of October 18, about 60,000 of the 120,000 people had returned to their original or former residences.
• The areas of al-Sabha, al-Tayyana, al-Zer, al-Shahil, and Theyban in eastern Deir Ez-Zour all saw displacement movements due to the inspections and raids carried out by the SDF in those areas, in addition to the bombardment by the same group amid clashes between the SDF and the Deir Ez-Zour Military Council, backed by Arab tribes, that broke out on August 27.

• Dozens of families were also displaced from villages and towns in eastern rural Aleppo which have been targeted in artillery attacks originating from areas where SDF troops and regime forces are stationed, in tandem with clashes that broke out in September between the SDF and Arab tribes. On September 11, the OCHA noted that the ongoing hostilities, including bombardment, had led to the displacement of over 26,500 individuals between September 1-9. Meanwhile, clashes in northeastern Aleppo led to the displacement of nearly 4,600 families. Elsewhere in Deir Ez-Zour, the clashes that continued in Deir Ez-Zour from August 27 onwards led to the displacement of over 6,700 families.

• Moreover, dozens of families were displaced within what is known as the 'security square' compound in Hasaka city towards other SDF-held neighborhoods in the same city in light of clashes that lasted for a few days between the Syrian regime’s National Defense militias and other regime bodies within the security square.

• Dozens of families were temporarily displaced in areas close to the dividing lines in multiple areas in eastern Aleppo as a result of rounds of infighting among armed opposition/SNA factions.

Based on the above, it’s clear that parties to the conflict have been deliberately re-targeting residents who were already previously displaced. The parties to the conflict also engaged in clashes near populated areas. In fact, most of the IDPs in northwestern Syria have experienced displacement multiples times. On November 1, the OCHA released a statement entitled, ‘The Cost of Inaction’. As of October 2023, in which it revealed that there are still about 6.8 million IDPs in Syria who have little hope of returning to their original homes. On November 10, Paula Gaviria Betancur, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, and Samuel Cheung, Global Protection Cluster (GPC) Coordinator, released a joint statement expressing their concern at the ongoing impact of the fatal ground and aerial attacks targeting densely populated areas in Syria, including IDP camps, in multiple areas in Idlib governorate and western Aleppo in northwestern Syria. The statement stressed that, since early-October 2023, northwestern Syria had become an epicenter of intensified attacks by regime forces and other parties to the conflict, adding that ‘the consequences of this surge in hostilities have been widespread, affecting more than 91 communities in southern Idlib and western Aleppo.’ On November 19, the UNHCR released a report revealing that Syria’s IDP population had reached 6.8 million people, 5.7 million of whom require assistance to secure shelter. The report also noted that 44 percent of the displaced people and refugees who returned to their original areas were living in substandard and/or unsound and/or inadequate shelters.

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24 This is an area under the control of Syrian regime forces containing a number of neighborhoods and interconnected streets in Hasaka city center, where many regime security branches and headquarters buildings are located.
As for living and humanitarian conditions, the suffering of IDPs in northwestern Syria continued to worsen, with needs reaching unprecedented levels in light of ever-shrinking amounts of assistance from relief aid groups. This crisis is further intensified by the widespread unemployment and virtually non-existent purchasing power among residents of the area. On March 9, the WFP sent out an e-mail to humanitarian organizations operating in northwestern Syria, revealing that, as of April 2023, the already meagre amounts of food in the food basket allocated for each family had been further reduced.\textsuperscript{25} It should be noted that this was the third time food rations have been reduced within a year (first in April 2022 and then in January 2023). On December 4, the WFP issued a statement to the media, revealing that it would be ending its general food assistance program across Syria starting in January 2024 due to what it called “funding shortfalls”. The statement, a copy of which was secured by SNHR, noted that the WFP’s aid in Syria would be limited going forward to supporting families affected by emergencies and natural disasters countrywide through “smaller, more targeted, emergency intervention”. SNHR stresses that ending or reducing aid will only lead to a catastrophe for millions of people in need in Syria, especially for the residents of IDPs camps and reception centers, who heavily rely on this aid to survive. On December 11, the UN OCHA released a report entitled, ‘Global Humanitarian Overview 2024’, in which the agency revealed that the “WFP estimates that every one percent cut in food assistance risks pushing more than 400,000 people towards the brink of starvation.”

On the subject of camps in northeastern Syria, on November 14, REACH released a report entitled, ‘Camps in Northeast Syria - Humanitarian Needs’ in which the group explained that there are currently 12 camps in northeastern Syria housing about 140,000 IDPs, while approximately 520,000 others are living in host communities, collective reception centers, and informal settlements. “The camps primarily host populations that were displaced by conflict events since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. They have not been able to leave, primarily because they cannot return to their areas of origin” the report noted. Moreover, the report explained that the households living in camps are reliant on the life-saving aid provided by the camps, with residents’ individual circumstances and economic conditions preventing households from being able to meet their own essential needs. Even with the level of aid currently being provided there, the report stressed, households are facing serious gaps in accessing essential goods and services.

Various issues also plagued the service sector in IDPs’ camps in northwestern Syria. On June 16, the MSF issued a press release revealing that “water and sanitation infrastructure in newly displaced camps is severely limited. The lack of clean water and the use of contaminated water sources increases the risk of waterborne diseases such as cholera and hepatitis.” On November 7, the same group issued a statement stressing that some two million people are still living in camps in northwestern Syria after being displaced from their homes as a result of the [then] 12-year conflict. The group also noted that “the camps are overcrowded, and their infrastructure is basic or even non-existent”, with over 4,400 households lacking the primary means to shelter themselves from the cold, since many tents were intended as temporary shelters which are not equipped to withstand severe winds or heavy rainfall, as confirmed by the observations of the MSF team that visited 23 camps in the areas of al-Dana, Atama, and Ma’aret Misreen in Idlib governorate.

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\textsuperscript{25} As follows: five kilograms of red lentil was reduced to three, five kilograms of chickpeas was reduced to two, five kilograms of sugar was reduced to four, although the quantities of other foodstuffs supplies remained the same.
Meanwhile, climate conditions add another layer to IDPs suffering. In the winters, IDPs grapple with blizzards, snowstorms, and rainstorms, which flood and uproot tents and their contents, destroy tents and cut off camps, or block passage to them. Under such circumstances, many IDPs are forced into displacement yet again. Meanwhile, in the summers, the searing temperatures and lack of insulating shelter leads to the spread of diseases, especially among children and elderly people. On March 23, the OCHA stated that the rainstorm that hit the camps in northwestern Syria in the first half of March 2023 had destroyed and damaged 1,500 tents. On December 27, the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster noted that, from January-December 2023, ‘a total of 821 incidents were reported in 517 IDP sites; the majority were in Dana, Maaret Tamsrin, Azaz and Atareb’ areas. The nature of the incidents reported were divided between 510 fires (62 percent), 169 floods (21 percent), 97 gales (12 percent), 10 snowstorms (one percent), and 34 other incidents (four percent).

We have also documented many fires breaking out in camps, some of which had unidentified causes, while others were the result of residents resorting to using fuel unsuitable for heating, or due to the misuse of cooking or heating devices. Some fires also broke out due to the explosion of solar batteries under the extreme temperatures, or as a result of electrical malfunctions. We documented the death of one girl in one of those fires in 2023.

Al-Hawl Camp, located in eastern Hasaka city near the Iraqi-Syrian borders, which has about 60,000 residents, including families of former ISIS affiliates of different nationalities, is run by the SDF as more or less a concentration camp, where people are kept in inhumane conditions. On March 31, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and Fionnuala Ni Aoláin, UN Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of human rights while countering terrorism, released a joint statement which stressed that approximately 56,000 women, girls, and children, 37,000 of them foreign nationals, are still imprisoned in al-Hawl and al-Roj Camps. The statement noted that experts have warned that the mass detention of children in the area in retaliation for their parents’ alleged actions is an “egregious” violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The statement also stressed that the detained children are living in extremely dire conditions, with many suffering from tuberculosis and untreated injuries, as well as malnutrition.

26. The Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster is, as its website explains, an Inter-Agency Standing Committee coordination mechanism that supports internally displaced persons (IDPs) to live in safe, dignified, and appropriate settings. It is jointly run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UNHCR, for disaster and conflict-induced IDP situations respectively. https://www.cccmcluster.org/about-us/cccm-cluster
In mid-2023, the SDF allowed a large group of people from Aleppo city to leave the camp for Manbij city, thanks to intermediary tribal mediators. The group, which was composed of 62 families, was the only group of Syrian people to leave the camp this year and the 24th such group since Resolution 146 was issued. In comparison, about 130 Syrian families left the camp in 2022 in two batches. On a related note, many world countries repatriated their nationals from the camp in 2023, including Spain, France, Canada, Denmark, Russia, Barbados, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Iraq. Most of those repatriated were children and women from families associated with ISIS, and were repatriated from the camps of al-Hawl and al-Roj camps in coordination with the SDF.

In al-Rukban Camp on the Syrian-Jordanian borders in eastern Homs governorate, which houses about 7,500 people, Syrian regime forces and pro-regime Iranian militias tightened the siege on the camp at the beginning of the year, and blocked the entry of flour, putting the camp’s main bakery out of commission. Fuel prices have also seen multiple increases since February in tandem with extreme temperatures, further exacerbating the suffering of the IDPs in the camp.

On June 20, the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF) revealed that relief aid had been delivered to the camp with the help of US military aircraft as part of an operation named ‘Syrian Oasis’. The aid shipments contained seeds and irrigation tools, in addition to school supplies for children in the camp.

Residents of Al-Rukban Camp continued to grapple with an almost complete lack of healthcare and severe shortages of basic food supplies. We documented the deaths of babies due to malnutrition and lack of healthcare in the camp in 2023, with the dire service situation also dramatically adding to the existing intense suffering of the IDPs under the harsh climate conditions. In mid-2023, we documented suffocation cases among children as a result of two heavy sandstorms that hit the camp.
On the subject of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Lebanese officials made more hostile and antagonistic statements opposing Syrian refugees’ presence in the country. For instance, on April 4, the al-Jadeed TV website cited Hector Hajjar, Lebanon’s Minister of Social Affairs in the caretaker cabinet, as saying that now is the time to focus on the speedy return of Syrian refugees en masse to certain governorates in Syria. The same official made another statement on May 26, also reported by the al-Jadeed TV website, in which he said, ‘We are working on accelerating the process of returning Syrian refugees to their country’, suggesting paying cash assistance to people in Syria in order to encourage refugees to return. On May 27, Imran Riza, the UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon, Ivo Freijsen, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Representative in Lebanon, and Abdallah Alwardat, the WFP Country Director and Representative in Lebanon released a joint statement on “temporarily pausing” the disbursement of cash assistance in dual currency to refugees for the next month, stating that discussions were still being held on the best mechanism to be implemented for achieving this. This came only four days after the same officials released a joint statement on resuming the disbursement of cash assistance in dual currency to the refugees.

On September 7, Lebanese security forces demolished 17 residences housing Syrian refugees in the Qeb Ilyas Camp in al-Beqaa governorate, displacing over 200 refugees. On September 19, the website of the Lebanese TV channel LBC reported that the Lebanese army had carried out widespread raids in Brital town in al-Beqaa area that targeted wanted persons’ houses and Syrian refugee camps.

In Jordan, on May 23, the WFP released its Jordan Country Brief for April 2023, in which the agency noted a 25 percent year-on-year increase in the average amount of debt owed by Syrian refugees among refugees, both in host communities and in camps. The report said that the fact that the monies owed in debt were predominately used for food purchases, rent, and health expenses was “alarming”. On July 18, the WFP announced that further reductions in food assistance intended for refugees in Jordan have become unavoidable due to lack of funds. In the statement, the WFP revealed that monthly assistance would be reduced by a third for the 119,000 refugees living in al-Zaatari and Azraq Camps. Commenting on the reduction, Dominik Bartsch, the UNHCR Representative in Jordan, warned in a statement released later the same day that refugees would be forced to face dire consequences if the funding crisis were not addressed. SNHR stresses that reducing food assistance to refugees in Jordan has made families there more vulnerable to hunger, and undermines the task of providing a proper healthcare and protection environment for Syrian child refugees in Jordan.

Restoring relations with the Syrian regime creates more Syrian refugees worldwide, rather than the opposite

Readmitting the Syrian regime into the Arab League does not mean that Syria is in any way safe for the return of refugees since the regime is still committing crimes against humanity. SNHR is seriously concerned that any restoration of relations with the Syrian regime may lead to more Syrian refugees being forced to return to Syria; indeed, SNHR has already recorded, as of this writing, the refoulement of no fewer than 874 Syrian refugees from Lebanon since the beginning of April 2023, including 86 women and 104 children. Of these, we have documented the arrest of 97 individuals, including two children and five women as well as two members of the same family, at the hands of the Syrian regime’s Military Intelligence forces in the al-Masna border area. Furthermore, we have documented that the infamous
Palestine Branch, which is affiliated with the Syrian regime’s Military Intelligence Directorate, is studying the security status of the civilians already forcibly repatriated from Lebanon, increasing the possibility of these individuals potentially being arrested in the near future. Many of the refugees who have been repatriated to Syria told us they are trying to flee the country again.

These well-founded concerns stem from the fact that Syrian authorities are still committing gross violations against people in Syria, some of which qualify as crimes against humanity. We believe that the refugees being forcibly repatriated will suffer similar violations amid the absence of any legal framework, with regime security agencies having full and uncontested control of the fate of both residents and returnees. As our exhaustive documentation confirms, the overwhelming majority of arrests are carried out without any court-issued judicial warrant being presented, with many of those arbitrarily arrested ultimately going on to become forcibly disappeared persons. It is probable that all those detained are being subjected to torture, which is often lethal, as well as being subjected to other violations such as conscription, extortion, and seizure of their lands and properties. On September 22, Paulo Pinheiro, Chair of the COI, noted in his address at the 54th Session of the UNHRC that the war in Syria has not ended yet, and that the country is still unsafe for the return of refugees. Mr. Pinheiro reiterated that “Nearly twelve years in, the parties to this conflict continue to perpetrate war crimes and to violate basic human rights.” He also noted that normalizing relations with the Syrian regime in the absence of clear and tangible benchmarks is no way to break the deadlock, and might even doom Syrians to more suffering, destruction, and bloodshed.

Syrian refugees will not voluntarily return as long as the Syrian authorities’ multiple violations continue. We are absolutely certain that those violations will not stop as long as the regime’s security apparatuses continue to implement the same policies they have perpetrated since and before 2011. Therefore, the decision of some states to restore relations with the Syrian regime has eradicated any hope of bringing about a political change towards democratic governance, prompting tens of thousands more Syrians to seek asylum. Relatedly, on December 21, the EU’s Eurostat revealed that 19,220 Syrians had submitted first-time applications for asylum to EU countries in September 2023, with Syrians remaining the largest single population seeking asylum as in previous months.
Lastly, it is imperative that the governments of states hosting Syrian refugees, especially neighboring countries which house the largest proportion of refugees, should stop their constant threats against these refugees to deport them back to Syria, which only causes further anxiety amongst already traumatized refugees, threatens their material stability, and hinders the processes of social integration. Meanwhile, the international community and the UN Security Council should work, as a matter of urgency, to bring about a political transition in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 in a way that creates a foundation for a safe and democratic legal environment that respects human rights and international law. Only when Syrian refugees feel safe, and only then, will they voluntarily choose to return to their home country and their homes.

**Waves of refugees continue as violations continue, Syria is not safe for its residents nor for refugees**

Despite the Syrian regime and its ally Russia “inviting” Syrian refugees to return, and the persecution Syrian refugees are suffering in their asylum countries, as well as some countries’ restoration of relations with the Syrian regime, SNHR recorded rising numbers of people fleeing the country seeking asylum in 2023. **We believe this to be an outcome of the following factors:**

- Serious human rights violations are still being committed by the various parties to the conflict, primarily by the Syrian regime and its allies.
- Military operations are still being carried out by the various parties to the conflict across Syria.
- The deteriorating economic, living, and humanitarian situation throughout Syria. This is only natural after 13 years of conflict.

With the refugee situation also continuing to worsen in neighboring countries, especially Lebanon and Turkey, we documented more irregular, and extremely dangerous, migration attempts towards EU states, either by land via Turkey or by sea via the Mediterranean Sea, with boats setting out from Turkey, Lebanon, or Maghreb states. On January 11, 2023, Germany’s Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) issued a report stating that most of the asylum seekers documented in 2022 came from Syria and Afghanistan, with a total of 70,976 Syrian filing initial asylum applications in 2022, a 29.3 percent increase over the previous year. On January 31, the Statistics Netherlands (CBS) released a report saying that the number of asylum seekers in the Netherlands had increased by 44 percent in 2022 in relation to the previous year. The report added that Syrian asylum seekers are the largest group out of all asylum seekers, making up one-third of the total number of asylum seekers in the country with Syrian asylum seekers accounting for 12,640 of the 35,535 asylum requests received by the Netherlands in 2022. In terms of the number of Syrian applicants, this constitutes an increase by half compared to the year before. On February 22, the European Union Agency for Asylum said that EU countries had received 966,000 asylum requests in the year 2022 with a 50 percent increase from 2021. This increase means that 2022 saw the highest number of asylum requests since 2016. The agency added that Syrians accounted for the largest group of asylum seekers. According to the data, 132,000 Syrians requested asylum in EU countries in 2022.
On January 18, the Associated Press (AP) news agency published an investigative report about a boat carrying 230, mostly Syrian, asylum seekers, which capsized and began sinking shortly after setting off from Lebanon’s northern coast on New Year’s Eve. One Syrian woman and one Syrian child had drowned, the report said, while the Lebanese army had transferred around 200 Syrian survivors in trucks and ejected them on the Syrian side of the border via a non-official border crossing in the Wadi Khaled area. As soon as they reached the Syrian side of the border, the report revealed, they were stopped by men wearing Syrian regime military uniforms. Subsequently, the asylum seekers were detained until their families were able to pay sums of ransom money to secure their freedom, after which they returned to Lebanon with the help of smugglers. Commenting on the investigation, Amnesty International released a statement on the same day saying that “Lebanon should respect its obligations under international law and stop deporting refugees to Syria where they face credible risks of arrest, torture, and other abuse.”

In another incident at around dawn on June 4, no fewer than 15 Syrians, including three children and four women, drowned in the Mediterranean off the coast of Algeria. The victims, who were mostly from Ein al-Arab in rural Aleppo, in addition to a family from Afrin city in northwestern Aleppo, were travelling a boat bound for Spain that capsized and sank near the coastal town of Larhat in Tipaza in Algeria.

In the same month, June 2023, SNHR recorded that no fewer than 48 Syrians, including two children and women, drowned off the coast of Greece on June 14. The victims, who were mostly from Daraa governorate, were on a boat carrying a number of migrants, mostly from Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, which capsized and sank near the Greek coast. SNHR released a statement calling on the Greek authorities and the UNHCR to launch an investigation into the tragic incident. Reuters reported that no fewer than 79 immigrants of multiple nationalities met their demise in the tragedy, while hundreds of others who were aboard the same vessel, which it noted was carrying around 750 people, are still missing, feared drowned. According to a joint statement issued by the UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the boat sent out its first distress call on the morning of Tuesday, June 13, while the Greek Coast Guard announced that it had launched an extensive search and rescue operation on the morning of June 14 after the boat had sunk. The IOM and the UNHCR also stressed that search and rescue at sea is a “legal and humanitarian imperative.”

On June 18-19, the BBC published an investigative report on the incident saying that the overcrowded fishing boat had not moved for at least seven hours before capsizing, judging by analyzing the movement of other ships in the area. However, the Greek Coast Guard claimed that in those seven hours the boat was on its way to Italy and there was no need for rescue. Meanwhile, on June 23, Vincent Cochetel, the UNHCR special envoy for the situation in the Western and Central Mediterranean, called for launching an independent investigation in order to determine what had transpired. SNHR condemned the slow response to the distress call, and called on the Greek government and the UNHCR to launch an investigation into this incident and make its findings available to the public and the families of the victims, hold those responsible accountable, and compensate the victims.
In August, we documented the deaths of 15 civilians, including one child, in the sinking of a boat carrying 50 refugees, mostly Syrians. The boat capsized and sank in the Mediterranean Sea after setting off from the Zuwara area in Libya, which is located 120 kilometers from the Libyan capital Tripoli. Most of the Syrians aboard the boat came from southern governorates of the country - Daraa, Suwayda, Quneitra, and western Rural Damascus ‘Rif Dimshaq’.

On December 17, the Lebanese army released a statement revealing that Lebanese Naval Forces had been able to rescue 51 individuals, including 49 Syrians, from the sea just off the shore of Tripoli city following the sinking of a boat during what it called an illegal migration attempt.

Since the earliest days of the uprising in 2011, SNHR has been working on documenting various patterns of violations. We feel, therefore, that we have reasonable grounds to claim that we have attained a thorough understanding of what the Syrian people have experienced and are still experiencing. Consequently, we reiterate and stress that seeking asylum is a fundamental right for Syrians that all those countries in which Syrians have sought asylum must grant them. Many of the violations committed by the Syrian regime against the Syrian people qualify as crimes against humanity and war crimes, for both of which there is no statute of limitations, while the other parties to the conflict have also committed numerous violations against the Syrian people, including some that constitute war crimes.

**The deportation and refoulement of asylum seekers constitute a violation of international law**

No government in the world has the right to assess the situation in Syria and then make the decision to deport Syrian refugees back to Syria based on such an assessment. This task, namely assessing the situation in Syria, is the responsibility of the UNHCR, the COI, international human rights organizations, and active local human rights organizations working to document violations in Syria, such as SNHR. All these entities have confirmed that Syria is extremely unsafe.

We at SNHR have proven conclusively and repeatedly in dozens of reports that returning refugees are subjected to the same life-threatening violations suffered by local residents in Syria, amid an absence of any legal framework and the predominance of murderous oppression, despotism, and the centralization of the regime’s tyrannical authority. There can be no free and dignified return for refugees without the country first realizing a political transition towards a democratic government that respects human rights.

On January 5, Amnesty International, together with the France-based La CIMADE, and Revivre released a joint statement noting that, even though diplomatic relations between France and the Syrian regime have officially been severed since March 2012, and despite the armed conflict and oppression still going on in Syria, the authorities in two French prefectures had attempted to deport two Syrian people to Syria in October 2022. These attempts were made through talks between the two prefectures and the Syrian regime’s embassy in France. The statement condemned these attempts that violate international law, and called on the French government to clarify its position by reminding the authorities of French prefectures of France’s international obligations.

28. La CIMADE is a French NGO that was founded in 1939 for the purpose of defending the rights of immigrants, refugee, and asylum seekers regardless of their origins, views, or political beliefs.
On March 2, the Danish newspaper Berlingske reported that the Danish Immigration Service had listed Latakia and Tartous as safe areas. Accordingly, Syrians coming from those two areas will not be granted temporary protection status, and will be deported from Denmark. In response, HRW released a statement on March 13 entitled, ‘Syrian Refugees in Denmark at Risk of Forced Return, Syria Not Safe for Returnees Despite Recent Danish Claims.’ The statement noted that ‘Denmark should refrain from playing into the regime’s hands by announcing Tartous and Latakia ‘safe.’ Even if active hostilities may have declined in recent years, the statement added, the Syrian regime continues to perpetrate the same violations that drove civilians to flee in the first place. On a related note, AP reported on June 29 that the UK Court of Appeal had determined that the UK government’s plan to deport asylum seekers from Rwanda is illegal. SNHR welcomes this decision, which is in the best interest of refugees and supports their right to secure a safe and stable environment.

On April 17, the Lebanese military launched a crackdown on areas in the country with a large Syrian population, resulting in the mass detention of dozens of Syrian refugees who had been unable to obtain official documents establishing their legal presence in Lebanon, principally those who had entered Lebanon in 2019 and since then irregularly. These raids, however, also targeted Syrian residents of the country who had been unable to renew their residence.

On April 27, SNHR released a statement noting that personnel from the Syrian regime’s Military Security division in the al-Masna border area had arrested two individuals from the same family from among those forcibly returned. The statement further stressed that any refoulment of Syrian refugees while the current Syrian regime remains in power, with its current leadership and the structure of its brutal security apparatus intact, is a violation of the customary laws which are binding on all world states, including those states that have not ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. In the same context, the Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency reported on April 21 that repatriation of Syrian refugees is being carried out amid escalating hostility against Syrians intensified by the economic crisis.

On April 25, Amnesty International released a statement asserting: “Lebanese authorities must immediately stop forcibly deporting refugees back to Syria. Amnesty International said today, amid fears that these individuals are at risk of torture or persecution at the hands of the Syrian government upon return.” On a related note, the Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) released two statements on April 18 and April 28 strongly condemning the recent mass refoulment of Syrian refugees by Lebanese authorities. The statement added that these operations are being carried out in an arbitrary manner without consideration for the legal and political situation of returning refugees in Syria, in what constitutes a blatant violation of international human rights law. In the April 28 statement, the ACHR documented approximately 542 arbitrary arrests of returning Syrian refugees that had been carried out in the course of at least 13 security crackdowns. The statement called on the Lebanese government to stop those campaigns and the forced deportation of Syrian refugees. On May 1, Reuters reported that Syrian refugees who had been detained and deported by the Lebanese security forces were arrested and conscripted into Syrian regime forces upon their forcible return to Syria. The news agency revealed that, in the month of April, 450 Syrian were arrested in over 60 raids carried out by the Lebanese military, or at checkpoints, while over 130 individuals were deported in the same month. As the same report noted, some of those deported were officially recognized Syrian refugees who had registered with the UNHCR, and some were unaccompanied minors.

In 2022, the UK government attempted to deport a group of refugees, including Syrian refugees, to Rwanda. On June 14, 2022, the European Court of Human Rights issued a ruling to halt the deportation procedures.
On May 11, SNHR released a joint statement with 20 Lebanese and international organizations noting that hundreds of Syrians had been recently and summarily deported by the Lebanese army to Syria where they face the threat of persecution or other dangers. The statement noted that such deportations were taking place "amid an alarming surge in anti-refugee rhetoric in Lebanon and other coercive measures intended to pressure refugees to return." To that end, the statement called on the international community to fulfill its obligations and increase its assistance.

On May 15, Lebanon’s General Directorate of General Security announced on its official X account that its centers would no longer accept settlement requests by Syrian nationals who entered Lebanon via irregular channels. According to the Directorate, the decision was made to give refugees the chance to directly settle their situation when they voluntarily leave Lebanon at the border centers and departments, in order to avoid a ban on future entry to Lebanon and would enable them to re-enter the country legally through the proper channels, provided that they rectified their situation before June 15, 2023. It is worth noting that most Syrian refugees in Lebanon entered the country illegally without being able to acquire official papers. As such, this decision affected a large proportion of the Syrian refugees in the country.

On May 28, BBC Arabic reported a statement issued by Issam Sharaf al-Din, the Caretaker Minister of the Displaced Affairs, who said that there would be further deportations of Syrian refugees from Lebanon, since their return was a “rightful and necessary goal”. On July 1, Russia’s Sputnik news agency reported a statement by the same official, who said that the Syrian state is prepared to receive 180,000 refugees as a first stage, followed by batches of 15,000 refugees every month. In this context, HRW said on July 5 that the Lebanese army had summarily deported thousands of Syrian citizens, including unaccompanied children, back to Syria in April and May of 2023. The statement read, “Syrians in Lebanon are living in constant fear that they could be picked up and sent back to nightmarish conditions, regardless of their refugee status.” Relatedly, the European Parliament released a statement on July 11, saying that the conditions for a voluntary and dignified return of refugees to conflict-prone areas in Syria had not yet been met. The statement also stressed “the need to provide adequate, predictable and multi-layered funding to agencies working with refugees in order to ensure the full provision of essential services to refugee communities [in Lebanon]” while also emphasizing that the return of refugees “should be voluntary, dignified, and safe according to international criteria.”

On December 8, the al-Modon online newspaper reported that Lebanese military and security units had carried out a raid and arrest campaign in the 700 Syrian refugee camps in the Gaza area of western Beqaa. About 40 individuals were arrested in total, including minors and elders, with the Lebanese forces having already deported some of them back to Syria. This crackdown came after the Lebanese caretaker government obtained Syrian refugees data from the UNHCR following talks between the two bodies that lasted for nearly a year.

In 2023, some European countries tried to transfer some refugees from their own territory to a third country. On this issue, AP reported on August 11 that reported that Cyprus had repatriated 109 Syrian asylum seekers who previously arrived in Cyprus between July 29 and August 2 to Lebanon. The asylum seekers were returned in a boat escorted by Cypriot police officers. Responding to this incident, the AP reported, the UNHCR office in Cyprus noted that deportations between states “without legal and procedural safeguards for persons who may be in need of international protection” violate international and European law. The UNHCR also told the AP that such transfers could lead to people being returned to a country where “they may face the risk of persecution, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.” SNHR condemns these practices that violate customary humanitarian law.
On September 29, HRW released a statement entitled, ‘No, Syria Is Still Not Safe for Refugee Returns’, which was issued as a rebuttal of statements made by Constantinos Ioannou, Cyprus’ Minister of Interior, on September 15, in which he lamented the fact that EU states cannot currently return asylum seekers to Syria, and called for the EU to re-assess whether or not Syria was safe for the return of refugees, so that asylum seekers could be sent back. The statement noted that “Human Rights Watch has documented how Syrian security agencies arbitrarily detained, kidnapped, tortured, and killed refugees who returned to Syria between 2017 and 2021,” stressing that the absence of violence in some parts of the country does not necessarily mean that the country is safe.

On December 13, Najib Mikati, head of Lebanon’s caretaker government, renewed his government’s demands for repatriating Syrians to their country at the Global Refugee Forum 2023. According to Mr. Mikati, Lebanon is no longer able to contain the Syrian refuge issue which he said has cost the country tens of billions of dollars since March 2011.

On December 14, Konstantinos Ioannou, Cyprus’s Minister of Interior made similar comments in an interview with Reuters, in which he noted that his government would ask the EU to declare some parts of Syria as safe and suitable for the repatriation of refugees, with record number of Syrian refugees arriving on Cyprus’ shores. Mr. Ioannou cited a report published in February 2023 by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), which noted that the two governorates of Damascus and Tartus had been assessed as having “no real risk for a civilian to be personally affected by indiscriminate violence.” In this context, it should be noted that SNHR has released numerous reports and statements clearly showing and stressing that Syria is still unsafe for the return of refugees.

The deportation and refoulement of Syrian asylum seekers are violations of customary law. Any governments carrying out such practices bear legal responsibility for any torture, killing, enforced disappearance, and other violations potentially perpetrated by the Syrian regime against forced returnees, in addition, of course, to the Syrian regime’s direct responsibility for those violations.

**The Syrian regime continued in 2023 to seize Syrian dissidents’ properties through laws and legislation promulgated since March 2011 in service of one goal, which is to take advantage of the chaotic climate of an internal armed conflict to accelerate the process of seizing the properties of Syrian dissidents.**

The Syrian regime has taken advantage of the consequences of the popular uprising, which eventually devolved into an internal armed conflict that displaced millions of Syrians due to the violations committed first and foremost by the Syrian regime itself, and secondly by the other parties to the conflict, to exploit the situation in its own favor in regard to the real estate ownership issue. To that end, the regime used the reality and aftermath of the armed conflict to attain as many long-term gains as possible, which explains the regime’s passing a slew of new real estate ownership laws. In this context, the issuing of many real estate laws was closely connected to the developments in the armed conflict on the ground in Syria, whereby the Syrian regime would regularly issue legislative decrees related to real estate regulation.
after taking control of a certain area for the purpose of seizing the vacant properties in that area for the benefit of its allies and supporters. On April 25, 2023, SNHR released an extensive report entitled, "The Laws Introduced by the Syrian Regime to Control Real Estate Ownership and Lands Before and Since the Beginning of the Popular Uprising in March 2011," in which the group noted that, while the laws passed by the regime can theoretically affect every single Syrian citizen, these laws in particular were directly and principally targeted at three main groups, namely: first, the forcibly displaced (both IDPs and refugees), estimated today at 12.3 million Syrian citizens according to the UNHCR; second: the forcibly disappeared, estimated to number at least 112,000 Syrian citizens according to SNHR’s database (It is important to note that the Syrian regime is directly responsible for the disappearance of over 85 percent of this total at least); and third: victims (civilians and fighters alike), who are estimated today to number at least half a million Syrians, the overwhelming majority of whom have not been recorded as dead in the civil registry. Needless to say, the overwhelming majority of the victims were dissidents opposed to the Syrian regime’s autocratic rule, and were victims of the regime which has been continuously committing violation since March 2011. It is clear, therefore, that these laws pose a direct threat to nearly half of the Syrian population.

The report detailed the steps taken by the Syrian regime to take over real estate properties through the legislative decrees it’s issued, whether these are related to the structure of real estate registries or to real estate transactions as a whole. To this end, we found out, that, through building this quasi-legal arsenal, the regime seeks to deny the fundamental rights that returnees, both IDPs and refugees alike, may demand at a certain point in time. Through these actions, the regime is creating a new reality in which most areas are under its direct authority through administrative units, and indirectly through real estate developers who win patronage through their blind, unquestioning loyalty to the regime.

Furthermore, many laws promulgated by the Syrian regime since March 2011 have had major implications for the real estate sphere in Syria. In this, the regime has indirectly linked real estate records and documents with those laws in order to deter any political dissident from attempting to seek to defend their housing, land, and property (HLP) rights afforded by the constitution for fear of risking arrest in light of these laws. Most of the laws and legislative articles promulgated by the Syrian regime since March 2011 all originated from the same malign motivation, namely of taking advantage of the chaos caused by the internal armed conflict to accelerate the process of seizing and stealing the properties of Syrian dissidents, especially those belonging to the three groups identified above. Moreover, not only did the regime construct a legal arsenal to justify the theft of dissidents’ properties, but it also took advantage through the creation of indirectly related legislation such as the ‘Counterterrorism Law,’ in order to prevent dissidents and members of the three aforementioned groups from exercising their rights over their properties in Syria, through the creation of an interminable bureaucratic maze that effectively renders any effort to exercise those rights impossible.

The Syrian regime has used several instruments, aside from the laws and legislative articles it passed, to seize ownership and control of land and real estate properties. Some of the most notable legal instruments are based on taking advantage of the widespread destruction. To that end, it was discovered in dozens of areas attacked by the Syrian regime that the destruction inflicted was not incidental but was a goal in and of itself, to drive people out of those areas and inflict as much destruction as possible so as to enable the regime to easily pillage and loot the destroyed areas and steal the properties of the displaced residents, relying on the laws it had passed to confer a spurious legitimacy on these activities. There are also the
effects of incomplete civilian documents on the real estate ownership issue, where the Syrian regime has denied hundreds of thousands of dissidents their most basic rights afforded by domestic and international laws, including the right to acquire identification documents. One demonstration of this criminality came in the form of the regime’s demand that individuals who have been internally displaced or sought refuge abroad, who justifiably fear that they may be arrested and tortured if they return to their home country, should be physically present before being able to claim ownership. This effectively creates two major problems: firstly, denying the fundamental rights of a whole generation of dissidents displaced, killed, or forcibly disappeared by the regime, and secondly denying the rights of a second generation born during the period of the armed conflict in areas under the control of the opposition, with the overwhelming majority of these children’s births not registered, depriving them of official identification documents.

The mechanisms by which the Syrian regime has used laws to expropriate tens of thousands of homes, properties and areas of land – Homs governorate as a case study

Monitoring HLP rights violations by the Syrian regime at the beginning of the popular uprising, i.e., in 2011 and 2012, leads to the observation that those violations have always taken a punitive form in that the Syrian regime has used them especially to exact revenge against those who took to the streets demanding freedom and democracy. This was the case in Homs governorate in 2012, where HLP rights violations were committed in a focused way against those villages, towns, neighborhoods and areas that opposed the Syrian regime, as well as in areas with sectarian tensions, as in the cases of the two neighborhoods of Bab Amr and al-Inshaat. Subsequently, these practices took a more crystallized, systematic, and calculated form according to which HLP rights violations became a systematized process on their own, in Homs and nationwide, following a set pattern that began with ferocious and concentrated targeted bombardment of certain areas, followed by a brutal military siege lasting months or years under which the targeted area's residents were completely isolated, denied food or medical aid; the people, terrorized and subjected to absolute deprivation, severe starvation and destitution, would be left with no alternative but to flee for survival to safer areas, leaving their homes, land and properties. In the final phase, having forced the people to flee, the regime would direct its forces, clients and allies to enter these areas, plundering them and expropriating and redistributing properties, or, in the worst-case scenario, completely demolishing them under the pretext that they were uninhabitable or damaged beyond repair.

Broadly, this process of systematic violations, which the regime has followed repeatedly in different locations for the past decade, has inflicted incalculable losses and trauma on millions of civilians. In the case of Homs, the regime's seizure of the properties of those forcibly displaced in this horrendous process has also intensified sectarian grudges and resentment in the governorate. This is why monitoring this issue and the mechanisms used by the regime on the ground to seize real estate properties of Syrian citizens in Homs, as well as pinpointing the main phases over which those mechanisms have been implemented and compare them to the developments on the ground, is of the utmost importance. As such, on December 21, 2023, SNHR released an extensive report that sheds light on a 'A Calculated Policy of Destruction Put in Motion by the Syrian Regime to Seize Homes, Properties and Areas of Land Through an Unlawful Quasilegal System,' in which the group attempted to pinpoint the regime's underlying reasoning.
or ‘philosophy,’ so to speak, in destroying neighborhoods and houses in order to seize homes, properties and other real estate, and to investigate the extent to which this has been effective in accomplishing the regime’s goal of emptying Homs governorate of its indigenous population, as well as attempting to provide an understanding of how the trajectory of this process of violations has affected the lives of civilians in Syria generally and the lives of the residents of Homs governorate more particularly. These policies will give the regime the upper hand in any potential reconstruction process, as well as in any process of redistributing private properties in line with its own vision and goals, which boil down to perpetuating the displacement of the native population and replacing them with whomever the regime wishes. This necessarily means that it will be virtually impossible for refugees to return, as long as the Syrian regime continues its practices of seizing HLPS.

The report shed light on two case studies in Homs governorate - Homs city’s Baba Amr neighborhood and al-Qsair city. To that end, the report outlined the most notable violations in both areas, while tracking the seizure of real estate properties owned by the Syrians and giving an idea of the scope of destruction that took place in Baba Amr and al-Qsair. Additionally, the report featured a comparison between the destruction captured by satellite imagery and the actual destruction on the ground, in order to give further insight into the scope of pillage and seizure targeting lands and real estate properties, and the true magnitude of the destruction seen in many cities, villages, and neighborhoods across the governorate of Homs.

SNHR concluded that the maps indicate that the artillery and aerial attacks against many cities, neighborhood, and rural areas in Homs governorate was exceptionally excessive in relation to the anticipated military benefit for the regime or its allies in the ground, which strongly suggests that these attacks had no military purpose, but were carried out in pursuit of other goals, such as destroying and seizing the real estate properties of Syrian citizens by driving their owners out and then eliminating any possibility of them ever returning, paving the way for the regime to take advantage of the properties and lands it seized for the sake of the reconstruction process. This has been the ultimate end goal pursued by the regime regardless of the violation it has committed, the severe material losses it has caused, or the fact that it has impoverished the Syrian people by seizing their properties and lands.

The Syrian regime uses the SARC and the STD as instruments to steal humanitarian aid, and alternative means must be devised to deliver humanitarian assistance to those truly in need in regime-held areas.

The violations committed first and foremost by the Syrian regime and, to a secondary degree by the other parties to the conflict, have plunged the country into an increasingly dire humanitarian situation since 2011. The Syrian regime has misused donors’ funds in economic monopolies through which the key regime figures have added to their personal wealth, while further impoverishing the nation. The regime has also indirectly benefited from UN bids for humanitarian projects established in regime-held areas.
The Syrian regime has used the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and Syria Trust for Development (STD) to take control of the relief sector. In pursuit of this objective, these two organizations have been propped up by the regime as a form of ‘soft power’, assisting in achieving the regime’s goals, and as gateways to taking control of donors’ funds and monopolizing international support, with the regime introducing a requirement that all relief and development funds coming from UN bodies and donor states must go through one of these two organizations. On December 28, SNHR released a report entitled, ‘How The Syrian Regime Uses the Humanitarian Organizations SARC and STD to Steal Humanitarian Aid’, in which we explained how the regime seizes aid funds and channels them to further its agenda and control the fates of their intended recipients, which the regime achieves through controlling the NGOs receiving and managing those funds. The report focused especially on the SARC and the STD because these were the two main front organizations used by the regime to receive relief funds. In fact, the Syrian regime initially forced UN bodies and donor governments to exclusively work with the SARC as the sole body authorized to receive aid funds. The Syrian regime demanded that all international humanitarian agencies should sign agreements and memorandums of understanding with the SARC which dictate that no projects can be implemented, or field visits conducted without first obtaining the SARC’s permission. Subsequently, the STD was added as a second organization authorized to receive aid. The report showed how the Syrian regime has succeeded in transforming NGOs, such as the SARC and the STD, into government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), a common phenomenon among oppressive regimes that aim to undermine the capabilities of civil society and to impose total state control over its institutions to achieve their own political and economic goals. The Syrian regime has also created a civil society organization in the STD whose only purpose in existing is to whitewash and promote the regime’s image. Furthermore, the report highlighted how the Syrian regime has promoted the SARC and the STD to make them exclusive partners with the UN agencies and donor states. These two organizations have been used to support the Central Bank with hard currency and to seize vast sums of money from the international community, despite the sanctions imposed on the regime. The report called on donor states to ensure that aid is delivered to those who truly need it regardless of their political affiliations. This can be achieved by imposing effective control mechanisms over the projects being funded and by communicating with organizations receiving those funds in an independent and impartial way to ensure that those organizations are distributing aid properly, and to ensure that executive partners in projects in Syria are not subject to sanctions, or associated with figures subject to sanctions or figures accused of committing grave human rights violations.
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Most notable violations of human rights in Syria in 2023

This part of the report provides details of the most notable human rights violations that were committed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between January 1, 2023, and January 1, 2024, as outlined in the infographic below.

Nearly 195,000 were displaced as a result of the military operations carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria, including 152,000 who were displaced as a result of the military operations carried out by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces.

As documented by SNHR.
1. Extrajudicial killing

In 2023, SNHR documented the killing of 1,032 civilians, including 181 children and 119 women (adult female) at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria, distributed as follows:

- 225 civilians killed by the Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias (21.80%)
- 74 civilians killed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (7.17%)
- 20 civilians killed by Russian forces (1.94%)
- 17 civilians killed by All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA) (1.65%)
- 16 civilians killed by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (1.55%)
- 5 civilians killed by US-led International Coalition forces (0.48%)
- 1 civilian killed by ISIS (0.10%)

Other Parties:

- 674 civilians killed
  - Gunfire of unidentified source: 189
  - Drowning: 78
  - Turkish Border Guard: 17
  - Lebanese forces: 1

Main Parties:

- 57 children killed
  - Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias: 46
  - Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): 9
  - Russian forces: 8
  - All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA): 6
  - Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): 5
  - Jordanian forces: 2

Other Parties:

- 102 children killed
  - Gunfire of unidentified source: 38
  - Drowning: 26
  - Landmines of unidentified source: 19
  - Killings by unidentified parties: 15
  - Jordanian Border Guard: 5
  - Female Children: 18
  - Male Children: 11
150 females killed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria in 2023

59 individuals died due to torture in 2023
31. 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, hereditary rule, with no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade merely for show. The Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he supposedly presides. 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.

32. Designated as a terror group by the UN.

33. All armed opposition factions founded since 2011 across Syria. Many of those formations are no longer active, and many were not structured around a central command. Towards the end of 2017, the Syrian National Army (SNA) was founded as an umbrella structure incorporating all active armed opposition factions formed to date.
2. Arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention

In 2023, SNHR documented a total of no fewer than 2,317 arbitrary arrests/detentions, including of 129 children and 87 women (adult females), distributed as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces**: 1,063 individuals, including 24 children and 49 women.
- **HTS**: 248 individuals, including four children and seven women.
- **All Armed opposition factions/SNA**: 365 individuals, including 10 children and 25 women.
- **SDF**: 641 individuals, including 91 children and six women.

3. Targeting medical personnel

In 2023, SNHR documented the killing of four medical personnel, including one woman, at the hands of Syrian regime forces.

4. Targeting media workers

In 2023, SNHR documented the killing of three media workers, distributed as follows:
1. **Main parties:**
   - Syrian regime forces: One media worker.

2. **Other parties:** Two media workers.
   - Bombings by unidentified parties: One media worker.
   - Gunfire of an unidentified source: One media worker.

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**5. Attacks on vital civilian facilities**

SNHR documented at least 206 attacks on vital civilian facilities in 2023, including 148 attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces.
1. Main parties:
   - Syrian regime forces: 142 attacks.
   - Russian forces: Six attacks.
   - HTS: One attack
   - All armed opposition factions/SNA: One attack.
   - SDF: 48 attacks.

2. Other parties:
   - Attacks by unidentified parties: One attack.
   - Turkish forces: Eight attacks.

6. Unlawful attacks

In 2023, SNHR documented one attack using incendiary munitions that was carried out by Syrian regime forces in Idlib governorate. The attack resulted in the death of one civilian, as well as injuring about eight others.

We also documented eight attacks using incendiary ammunition, all were carried out by Syrian regime forces. Three civilians were injured in these attacks.

7. Forced displacement

SNHR estimates that nearly 195,000 civilians were displaced in 2023 as a result of the military operations carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria, with 152,000 of these being displaced as a result of military operations carried out by Syrian-Russian alliance forces.
B. Comparison between the most notable patterns of human rights violations in 2022 and 2023

Comparison between civilian deaths at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria that were recorded in 2022 and those recorded in 2023

Comparison between deaths due to torture at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria that were recorded in 2022 and those recorded in 2023
Comparison between arbitrary arrests made by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria in 2022 and those made in 2023

Comparison between the toll of medical personnel killed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria in 2022 and those killed in 2023
Comparison between the toll of media workers killed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria in 2022 and those killed in 2023

Comparison between attacks on vital civilian facilities carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria in 2022 and those carried out in 2023
Comparison between unlawful attacks carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria in 2022 and those carried out in 2023

C. Outline of the most notable violations of human rights at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria in 2023

1. Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, Shiite foreign militias)

A. Violations related to treatment of civilians and hors de combat fighters

i. Massacres and other acts of extrajudicial killing

Syria remains one of the world’s most dangerous countries to live in for civilians, as strongly evidenced by the increased death toll among victims of various forms of extrajudicial killing, ranging from unlawful acts of war to torture, medical negligence, or summary executions.

The year 2023 saw sporadic waves of military escalation by regime forces and their allies, who carried out multiple offensives that resulted in civilian deaths in many areas. We identified a number of characteristics that distinguished the killings carried out by Syrian regime forces in 2023. These include:

• In 2023, Syrian regime forces continued their ground attacks on populated areas under the control of other parties to the conflict. Those attacks resulted in civilian casualties, including children and women. Those attacks were concentrated in a number of areas in the governorates of Idlib and Aleppo in northwestern Syria.

• The first quarter of the year, particularly the desert truffles season, saw many fatal shootings by pro-regime Iranian militias in the areas under the control of regime forces and pro-regime Iranian militias. As we have monitored, Iranian militias do not allow anyone to collect desert truffles without first coordinating with them, with these militias taking the harvested desert truffles from the local people and dictating their prices on the market.

• We documented fatal shootings of civilians, including children, by regime forces in regime-controlled areas.
• We also documented killings by regime snipers.
• We documented killings of refugees/IDPs returning to regime-controlled territories.
• In the last quarter of the year, particularly from the beginning of September onwards, Syrian-Russian alliance forces escalated their military operations in northwestern Syria, with many ground and aerial attacks targeting populated areas far from the dividing lines. From October 5 onwards, Syrian regime forces carried out intensified ground attacks of an indiscriminate nature against areas in northwestern Syria controlled by armed opposition factions and the HTS.
• We documented a cluster munitions attack by regime forces that targeted Termanein town in northern rural Idlib on October 6, killing one civilian and injuring eight others, including one woman.
• In 2023, deaths due to torture and medical negligence in regime detention centers continued, as did summary executions.

In 2023, SNHR documented the killing of **225 civilians** at the hands of Syrian regime forces, including 57 children and 24 women (adult female), with two killed by snipers. Syrian regime forces were also responsible for five massacres in 2023.

Women and children account for approximately 36 percent of the overall civilian deaths at the hands of Syrian regime forces in 2023, another definitive indicator of Syrian regime forces’ deliberate targeting of civilians through indiscriminate bombardment and summary executions.

In comparison, Syrian regime forces killed 196 civilians, including 30 children and seven women (adult female), and carried out two massacres, in 2022.

The graph below shows the distribution of the 225 civilians killed at the hands of the Syrian regime in 2023 by month.

As shown on the graph, civilian deaths at the hands of regime forces saw a significant increase in October as a result of the most recent offensive by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on northwestern Syria.
Some of the most notable cases of extrajudicial killings at the hands of Syrian regime forces

On Friday, February 17, 2023, the bodies of at least 40 individuals, including three children, were found. The victims were killed by pro-Syrian regime Iranian-backed militias in an area 20 kilometers to the east of al-Sakhna town in the eastern rural areas of Tadmur, which is administratively part of Homs governorate in central Syria. This came as a result of disputes over the harvesting of desert truffles which is a vital financial source of income for the residents of the Syrian badiya (desert area) at this time of year. The Iranian militias, however, prohibit the collecting of desert truffles without their supervision, and order that the harvest must be supplied and sold through them, so they can dictate the prices. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces and Iranian-backed militias at the time of the incident.

On Monday, August 28, 2023, Hussein Samir Mohammad Ali Bougha, a man from al-Najiya town in western rural Idlib governorate, was shot dead by a Syrian regime sniper while collecting firewood in a forested area near Al-Zaitoun village in Jabal al-Turkman in northern rural Latakia governorate. The area is under the joint control of armed opposition factions and the HTS but is also exposed to areas controlled by Syrian regime forces.

On Sunday, September 17, 2023, a 10-year-old girl Furat Uqba Shbat was run over and killed by a military vehicle affiliated with the Syrian regime’s 15th Division, while returning home from school in her hometown of al-Sheikh Miskeen in northern rural Daraa governorate. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

In the first hours of dawn on Thursday, October 5, 2023, five civilians from the same family of IDPs, including three women, were killed, while another woman was injured in bombardment by Syrian regime forces who fired two heat-seeking missiles targeting a house inhabited by the IDP family in al-Wasata village to the north of Kafrnouran town in western rural Aleppo governorate. The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.
At around 10:35 local time on Saturday, November 25, 2023, 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, while families were harvesting olives there during the olive season. The first two shells landed in the agricultural lands nearby where the families were working, while the third shell directly struck the site where they were harvesting the olives, resulting in a massacre. As SNHR documented, 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. 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 to and exposed to regime-held areas.

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

“On 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 were 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.”

The families of victims subjected to extrajudicial killing also suffer an additional violation by the Syrian regime. Although hundreds of thousands of Syrian citizens have been killed, ‘disappeared’/ gone missing since the early days of the popular rising in March 2011, they have not been officially registered as dead within the relevant official state departments, namely the Civil Registry Department. The Syrian regime brutally controls the issuance of death certificates, which are not made available to any of the families of its victims, whether they were killed at the hands of the Syrian regime or by other parties, or to the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared. The Syrian 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 Syrian regime's forcing victims’ families to make false statements s blackmauling them into signing reports prepared by the security services stating that ‘armed terrorist gangs’, rather than the Syrian regime, killed their loved ones by withholding death certificates until they sign these false statements. The Syrian regime has not only failed to launch any judicial 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:

- The regime prepares a medical report in which it gives a false cause of death, such as a heart attack for those forcibly disappeared in its detention centers, or claims falsely that the victim died as a result of injuries from war munitions.
- Statements from the local neighborhood headman or ‘Mukhtar’ and from any witnesses, who are asked to confirm the death.
- Acknowledgement of 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 death and those responsible for it.

On August 10, 2022, the Syrian regime government’s Minister of Justice 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.36

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The report goes over this circular and highlights the constitutional and legal breaches it contain and the consequences thereof.
SNHR’s 13th Annual Report:
Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2023

Thanks to the ongoing monitoring, we have been able to record three methods used by the Syrian regime to register limited numbers of the victims who were killed or the forcibly disappeared persons who were killed subsequently. We detailed this matter in a report released 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 should be noted that the vast majority of victims’ families are unable to obtain death certificates from the Syrian regime, for fear of linking their name to that of a person who was detained by the regime and died under torture, meaning that he or she was a dissident who opposed the Syrian regime, or if their loved one being labelled as a ‘terrorist’ if he/she is wanted by the security services; additionally, many victims’ families have been forcibly displaced outside the areas controlled by the Syrian regime.

ii. Arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention

Syrian regime forces have continued to persecute and target Syrian citizens in areas under regime control in connection with their political dissent and expression of opinions, despite the right to both being guaranteed by the Syrian constitution and international law. This once again proves a crucial and inescapable truth which we have reiterated many times in the past: no Syrian citizen can feel safe from arrest since these are carried out without any legal grounds or any oversight by any independent judiciary, being administered by the regime’s security services with no judicial involvement. Following these arrests, detainees are routinely classified as forcibly disappeared persons, and thus the areas under the control of the Syrian regime cannot be considered, even remotely, to be a safe haven for those living in it, let alone for the return of refugees or IDPs.

In 2023, Syrian regime forces, in their areas of control, continued to arrest civilians in a widespread manner. Those arrests are carried out mainly by the regime’s security apparatuses – Military Security Intelligence Directorate, State Security Directorate, Air Force Intelligence Directorate, and the Political Security Directorate- and a number of military formations that work under, or in coordination with regime forces. The regime military, including the Fourth Division and local militias, has also been involved in carrying out a number of the arrests we have documented. Lastly, there is the Criminal Security Directorate which has branches scattered across Syria’s governorates. Most of the arrests have been carried out with no legal grounds and without adhering to the parameters of arrests and detention specified in local laws.  

While arrests made by the regime take place in various contexts, we have noticed that some have assumed a patterned and repeated nature, while others are particularly connected with certain types of incidents. Below are some key observations about the contexts in which arrests by the regime took place in 2023:

- In 2023, Syrian regime forces continued to hunt down and arrest individuals who had agreed to settle their security situation with the regime in areas that saw such settlements. These arrests targeted civilians who had previously (as in, when those areas were under the control of other parties) been activists in the medical and relief fields, individuals who worked with armed opposition factions, and regime defectors. Most of these arrests, which have been concentrated in the governorates of Rural Damascus (Rif Dimshaq), Daraa, Deir Ez-Zour, and Raqqa, took place during campaigns of mass raids and arrests, and at checkpoints. In total, SNHR documented no fewer than 386 cases of arbitrary arrest/detention in 2023 of individuals who had agreed to settle their security situation with the regime.

37. For an outline of the parameters warranting arrest as specified in the Syrian law, please see our periodic reports on arrest and detention in Syria.
• We documented arrests of civilians by regime security agencies in retaliation for these citizens’ voicing criticism of and objections to the methods used by the Syrian regime to distribute the relief aid designated for those affected in the February 6 earthquake which devastated several areas of Syria, causing a humanitarian catastrophe. These criticisms concerned regime-affiliated forces and militias pillaging the aid donated. Some civilians published and shared photos on social media showing some of these acts taking place, namely the theft and unjust distribution of aid intended for earthquake victims. These arrests were concentrated in Latakia and Aleppo.

• We also recorded widespread arrests by the Syrian regime’s criminal security and general security departments of civilians who expressed their demands and voiced criticism of the worsening living situation or rampant corruption in regime-held areas on social media. Those arrested include pro-regime media figures, university students, and government employees. These detainees face charges connected to the Counter-Cybercrime Law. SNHR documented the arrest of 114 individuals, including eight women, on the grounds of violating the Counter-Cybercrime Law in 2023.

• We documented the targeting of civilians in connection with their involvement in the anti-regime movement that took various forms in regime-held areas, including posting videos criticizing the policies of the Syrian regime, writing anti-regime slogans on the walls, distributing pamphlets, and burning photos of Bashar Assad. These arrests were concentrated in the governorates of Latakia, Tartus, Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir Ez-Zour. On August 17, 2023, we released a statement on these arrests:

• We documented multiple arrests/detentions by personnel from regime security branches that we believe were carried out for the purpose of extorting detainees’ families, some of which targeted civilians receiving money transfers from abroad on the pretext of dealing in a foreign currency. These arrests were concentrated in Rural Damascus, Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama, as well as targeting civilian former detainees who had been released some time ago from regime detention centers. Many families told us that these arrests were carried out for extortion and extracting ransom money from families in exchange for the release of their loved ones.

• Syrian regime forces continued to arrest returning refugees and IDPs, specifically targeting refugees who returned via crossings with Lebanon and the Kassab Crossing with Türkiye, as well as those returning by plane, who’ve been detained at Damascus International Airport.

• Relatedly, we recorded that many of those who were forcibly repatriated to Syria from Lebanon as a result of the Lebanon’s General Directorate of General Security and the Lebanese military’s crackdowns, which led to widespread arrests by the Syrian regime’s security authorities of those repatriated, including women and children.

In total, SNHR documented no fewer than 253 cases of arbitrary arrest/detention by regime forces of individuals returning to their original regime-held areas, with those detained including two children and five women (adult female). These cases are divided between:

- 119 returning refugees, most of whom returned from Lebanon.
- 37 IDPs returning from their areas of displacement to regime-held areas.
- 97 of the individuals who were forcibly repatriated from Lebanon, including two children and five women, most of whom were arrested by the Syrian regime’s Military Security Intelligence Directorate in al-Masna border area.
Other pretexts for arrest included being blood relatives of political activists or dissidents, contacting people living in areas under the control of other parties, travelling between regime-held areas and areas under the control of other parties, military conscription, or visiting the regime’s Passport and Immigration Departments to obtain passports and travel documents.

In terms of releases, we documented the release of 284 individuals including four children and two women, in 2023. These releases are divided according to their context as follows:

- 25 releases of detainees, including of one woman, in connection with the amnesty decree promulgated by the Syrian regime on April 30, 2022 (Decree No. 7 of 2022). These 25 detainees were released from the various civilian and military prisons and security branches across Syria.

- In Damascus governorate, we documented the release of 91 individuals, who were mostly originally from the governorates of Rural Damascus, Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, and Idlib, who included one woman. These detainees were released after serving the full term of their arbitrary sentences. As such, these releases were not related to amnesty decrees 7/2022, with these detainees having been imprisoned for an average of one to five years.

- 168 detainees, including four children, who had been held without trial for brief periods of time, ranging from a few days to a few months, without appearing before a court. Most of these detainees came from the governorates of Rural Damascus, Daraa, Homs, and Hama.

- It is worth noting that 2023 saw no releases in connection to the settlements and reconciliation agreements struck by the regime in many areas of Idlib, Daraa, Rural Damascus, and Aleppo.

SNHR has documented that no fewer than 1,063 individuals, including 24 children and 49 women, were arbitrarily arrested by Syrian regime forces in 2023. Of these, 121 have been released, even though most of them did not appear before any court, while many have been taken for military conscription. Meanwhile, 942 of the 1,063, have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance. In 2022, comparatively, we documented that no fewer than 1,017 individuals, including 38 children and 416 women, were arbitrarily arrested by Syrian regime forces.

The 1,063 cases of arbitrary arrest taking place in 2023 are distributed as follows:

SNHR notes that any discrepancies found between its periodic reports and annual reports arise from adding newly documented cases or concluding investigations into incidents and cases of arrest that took place in 2022 which have been added to the figures for their respective months.
As shown in the chart above, August saw the highest number of arrests in one month, as the regime targeted civilians in connection with various types of protests that broke out in areas under regime control and in connection with the Counter-Cybercrime Law. May came second, as regime forces carried out arrests of refugees forcibly and abusively repatriated from Lebanon via the Lebanese-Syrian borders following the crackdowns carried out by the Lebanese military on Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

**Notable cases and incidents of arbitrary arrest:**

On Thursday, January 5, 2023, the Eighth Division, affiliated with the Syrian regime’s Military Security Intelligence Directorate, arrested five civilians from the same family, including a nurse, in a raid on al-Mata’iyya town in eastern rural Daraa governorate. They were taken to an undisclosed location.

Ahmad Hussein Tou’ma, a 36-year-old man from Kanaker town in western Rural Damascus governorate, was arrested on Saturday, January 14, 2023, by personnel from the Syrian regime’s Military Security Directorate at a checkpoint in Drousha town in western Rural Damascus governorate, as he was returning home from work. Ahmad, who had previously agreed to settle his security situation with the regime, was taken to a regime detention center in Damascus city.

Nader Nader and Ihab Nader, two brothers aged 31 and 35 respectively from al-Ghariya town in southern rural Suwayda governorate, were arrested on Sunday, April 23, 2023, by members of the Lebanese Army’s Intelligence service from their place of residence in Qernabel village in the Mount Lebanon area over charges of lacking the necessary legal residence papers in Lebanon. Subsequently, they were deported to the al-Masna Boarding Cross where they were arrested by the members of the Syrian regime’s Military Security Intelligence Directorate on the pretext of failing to perform their military service. They were taken to a regime detention center in Damascus city.

On Friday, May 26, 2023, personnel from the Syrian regime’s Political Security Directorate arrested a 60-year-old woman in al-Karaj area in Homs city as she was trying to cross irregularly into Lebanon via the Syrian-Lebanese border. She was taken to a regime detention center in Homs city.

Sattam Wahid al-Rajab, a 13-year-old boy from Heymar Labda town, which is affiliated with Manbij city eastern rural Aleppo governorate, was arrested on Friday, July 21, 2023, by Syrian regime forces personnel at the Abaja Checkpoint near Abu Hanaya village in al-Salamiya area in eastern rural Hama governorate, while he was returning from Lebanon. He was taken to an undisclosed location.
Firas Ghanem, a man from al-Annaza town, administratively a part of Banyas city in northern Tartus governorate, was arrested by personnel from the Syrian regime’s Political Security Intelligence Directorate after being summoned to a regime detention center in Tartus city on Monday, July 3, 2023. Firas was arrested for voicing criticism on his Facebook page of the dire living conditions and corruption in regime-held areas. He was released on August 24, 2023.

Firas faced charges based on the ‘Counter-Cybercrime’ Law which is used by the Syrian regime as grounds to arrest citizens and government employees for criticizing the poor living conditions and corruption in regime areas.

On Sunday, November 5, 2023, 10 women from the Afrin area of northwestern Aleppo governorate were arrested by soldiers from the Syrian regime’s Fourth Division at a checkpoint in Bab Janban neighborhood in Aleppo city. The women were travelling from their place of residence in al-Shahba area in northern Aleppo governorate to the neighborhoods of al-Sheikh Maqsood and al-Ashrafiya in Aleppo city, both of which are controlled by the SDF. The women were subsequently taken to the State Security branch in Aleppo city.

Bashar Ali Ahmad Najla, from Mazra’et al-Hanifa village in rural Tartus governorate, a former producer with the pro-regime al-Mayadeen TV Channel who was working as a Syrian regime state employee at the Banyas Oil Refinery in northern Banyas city in rural Tartus governorate at the time of his arrest, was detained on Thursday, November 2, 2023, by personnel from the regime’s Criminal Security branch who lured him from his workplace in the oil refinery. Bashar was arrested, in a manner closer to an abduction than a legitimate arrest, over voicing criticism of the living situation and corruption in regime-held areas on his Facebook page. He was taken to an undisclosed location.

Mohammad Qteish, a man born in 1971 who had been living in Jdaihat al Fadel in western Rural Damascus governorate, was arrested on Tuesday, November 14, 2023, by soldiers from the Syrian regime’s Fourth Division at a checkpoint at the entrance to al-Hajar al-Aswad in southern Rural Damascus governorate, while he was on his way to check on his home in the area. He was then taken to an undisclosed location.
iii. Torture in detention centers

The arrest process itself, which is in reality more of an abduction, is a form of torture. Moreover, torture in security branches and detention centers is not limited to a certain range or to certain individuals for committing certain acts. In other words, we cannot state that specific individuals are alone responsible for particular acts of torture since the practice of torture is unrestricted and constant at all levels throughout the duration of victims’ detention which can last for years. Additionally, the detention conditions are exceptionally poor, especially in relation to medical negligence, which is in and of itself a form of ongoing torture that can also last for years. We have released a detailed report documenting the most notable methods of torture used by Syrian regime forces in their detention centers and military hospitals, counting up to 72 methods of physical, psychological, and sexual torture that have all been and are still practiced in a deliberate and widespread manner in regime detention centers. Additionally, no detainee is excluded from being subjected to torture, including women, children, elderly or sick prisoners, and persons with special needs. Torture has been practiced in Syria with the same frequency and using the same methods before and since 2011. We do not believe, nor do we see any indicator or hope that it will be stopped by the Syrian regime without a political change of the regime’s existing leadership, which has never ordered or carried out any serious investigation or engaged in any efforts to hold those involved in practicing torture accountable for their actions. On the contrary, the laws and texts on torture in the current Syrian constitution have failed to stop or alleviate the frequency of the torture being carried out in regime detention centers. 39

On July 12, 2023, the COI released a report entitled ‘No End in Sight’. The report, which covers the period between January 1, 2020, and April 30, 2023, reiterated that arbitrary arrest and ill-treatment continue to be major issues threatening the lives of individuals living in areas under the Syrian regime’s control, including those areas over which the regime regained control in recent years, as well as threatening the lives of Syrian citizens returning to the country. The report underlined this crucial fact amid mounting pressures on Syrian refugees and asylum seekers to return to Syria from their host countries. Even as 2023 ended, we continued to discover and document cases of brutal torture and deaths due to torture. We are gravely concerned for the fate of tens of thousands of forcibly disappeared persons, taking into consideration, as mentioned earlier, the fact that torture is not limited to any certain group. That is to say that it does not exclude women, children, the elderly, sick persons, people with special needs, and returning IDPs and refugees. We have also documented many cases of torture taking place at checkpoints, as well as at the hands of local militias at their informal headquarters after arresting detainees.

Indeed, torture violations are crimes of a systematic and widespread nature. As such, these crimes cannot be carried out by certain regime individuals without this being a central policy implemented by the regime, implicating its highest echelons of power.

In 2023, SNHR documented that no fewer than 34 deaths of individuals due to torture and medical negligence at the hands of Syrian regime forces, including one child and one woman, while 115 deaths due to torture at the hands of regime forces, including of one child and one woman, were documented in 2022. In this context, it should be noted that the clear decrease seen in the number of documented deaths due to torture between 2022 and 2023 is related to the difficulties existing in reporting and documenting cases more than any actual reduction in the frequency or fatality of torture practices in regime detention centers.

Some of the most notable cases of death due to torture and medical negligence

Walid Khaled al-Hussein, from Hatla town in northern Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was 17 years old at the time of his arrest by members of the Syrian regime’s Military Security intelligence service in April 2022 in a raid on his family’s home in Hatla town. He was then transferred to al-Balouna Prison in Homs governorate. He has been classified as forcibly disappeared ever since, with the Syrian regime denying holding him and forbidding anyone, even lawyers, from visiting him. On Wednesday, February 1, 2023. Syrian regime forces informed his family that he had died in al-Balouna Prison, returning his body to them two days later, on February 3, 2023. We can confirm that Walid was in good health at the time of his arrest, indicating a strong possibility that he died due to torture and medical negligence.

SNHR spoke to Mohammad al-Omar, a relative of Walid’s. He told us:

“Around 02:00 after midnight on Friday. Some Criminal Security officers raided Walid’s house and arrested him. He was transferred to Deir Ez-Zour central prison. We learned at some time later he had been transferred to Aleppo Central Prison, and then to al-Balouna Prison in Homs governorate. We contacted many regime officers and offered to pay sums of money in exchange for his release, but to no avail. Subsequently, we were informed that he had died in al-Balouna Prison through Homs Hospital. The body was returned to the family two days later after being informed.”

Moyaed Yahya Shakoush, a 34-year-old man from Jasim city in northern rural Daraa governorate, was arrested on Friday July 7, 2023, by personnel from the Syrian regime’s State Security agency in Tadmur town, also in northern rural Daraa governorate while he was travelling to Quneitra governorate. He was taken to a regime detention center in Nemer town, where he was tortured to death. On Saturday, July 8, 2023, his body was returned to his family in al-Sanamin city’s hospital in northern rural Daraa governorate, bearing signs of torture. Moayed, who had agreed previously to settle his security situation with the regime, held no military status when he was arrested.
Mohammad Abdul Rahman Majjou, a man from Khan al-Assal neighborhood in southwestern Aleppo city who had fled to and been living in al-Atareb city in western rural Aleppo governorate as an IDP, travelled from al-Atareb city to Aleppo city in May, 2023 to seek a security settlement from the Syrian regime, so that he could return to his original place of residence, which is in an area under regime control. On June 15, 2023, however, personnel from the Syrian regime’s Military Security Intelligence Directorate arrested him at his home in Aleppo city. Mohammad, who was his parents’ only son, was married and a father of two children. He had fled Aleppo city to western rural Aleppo governorate earlier to escape the bombardment and clashes taking place in the city between regime forces and armed opposition factions in Aleppo city at that time.

Mohammad’s arrest was carried out without any legal warrant issued by a court or legal authority being presented. Furthermore, no members of Mohammad’s family were informed of his arrest, and he was denied any opportunity to call his family or a lawyer. He was taken to a detention center in Damascus city, and had been classified as forcibly disappeared ever since his arrest.

On Thursday, August 3, 2023, Mohammad’s family learnt that he had died inside a regime detention center in Damascus city. The family learned of Mohammad’s death via informal means, namely through a phone call by a Syrian regime military officer. On August 5, his family was able to recover his body in Aleppo city. According to information obtained by SNHR, Mohammad Majjou had suffered brutal torture, the marks of which were visible on his body, as well as deliberate denial of food, and poor healthcare during his detention. Despite this, however, Mohammad’s family was unable to demand an investigation into his death or to file a complaint to the public prosecutor due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted themselves by the regime’s security forces for their criticism. We have released a statement on this incident.

Khalil Ibrahim Mousa from Izra city in northern rural Daraa governorate, a media activist and Syrian regime serviceman, was aged 32 at the time of his arrest in 2022 by fellow regime troops who detained him at his workplace at a regime military facility in Hama governorate for voicing criticism on his Facebook page of the living conditions in regime-controlled areas and calling for reforms. He had been classified as forcibly disappeared ever since, with the Syrian regime denying any knowledge of his whereabouts and refusing to allow anyone, even a lawyer, to visit him. On Thursday, August 10, 2023, Syrian regime forces informed his family that he had died and returned his body to them. We can confirm he was in good health at the time of his arrest, indicating a strong probability that he died due to torture in a regime detention center.
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 that 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. As of this writing, her body has not yet been returned to her family.

In most cases, the Syrian regime does not notify its victims’ families of their relatives’ death in detention centers on the date of their death. Instead, families learn of their detained loved ones’ deaths long after they take place, finding out about them either through former prisoners or after repeated visits and checks with the Military Police offices in Damascus, or through the civil register offices. In most cases, the families receive this information years after the date of the detainee’s death. In this context, we documented no fewer than nine cases in 2022 in which families had learned of their relatives’ death during visits to the civil registry offices in Syrian governorates. Most of these families confirmed to us that their dead relatives were in good health at the time of their arrest. We believe that all these detainees died due to torture and medical negligence. A prominent such case that took place in 2023 was that of the two sibling activists Qusai and Muath. On November 9, SNHR acquired a document certifying that Qusai and Muath Burhan, two brothers who were prominent activists in the uprising for democracy, had died. According to the document, obtained from the civil registry office in Rural Damascus, Qusai died on January 31, 2014, while Muath died a couple of weeks later on February 16, 2014, with no other details provided, as is the case with the overwhelming majority of death certificates we’ve obtained on forcibly disappeared persons, copies of which are stored of in our records. By cross-checking the data obtained from the civil registry document with the data on their arrests taken from SNHR’s database, we can conclude that Qusai died one month after his arrest, while Muath died 48 days after his arrest and 16 days after his brother as mentioned above. We suspect that Qusai & Muath died due to torture in Branch 227, also known as the ‘al-Manteqa Branch’, in Damascus city, which is affiliated with the Syrian regime’s Military Security Intelligence Directorate, after they had been transferred there from Branch 215. On November 10, we released a report on this incident, noting that no fewer than 1,614 forcibly disappeared persons had been registered as dead on the civil registry records by the Syrian regime, with the fate of 96,000 others still unknown.

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iv. Violations Against Children Rights

Children in Syria have suffered multiple and repeated patterns of violations since March 2011. Those violations vary in their severity and frequency, and in their current and future ramifications for Syria’s children, depending on the nature and type of violation. At SNHR, we focus on the seven gross human rights violations committed against children, which have been practiced in a systematic way - extrajudicial killing; unlawful detention and arbitrary arrest, abduction and enforced disappearance; torture; sexual violence; child recruitment; attacks on educational facilities, such as schools and kindergartens, and on medical facilities, such as hospitals, and the blockage or denial of humanitarian assistance.

For more on violations against children, please refer to our 12th and most recent annual report on violations against children, which is released on World Children’s Day of every year. The report outlines the most notable violations against children in Syria, focusing on 2023.

As we have worked on compiling SNHR’s database for the past 13 years, it has become clear to us that the Syrian regime’s violations against children are, in large part, deliberate and calculated. They aim to inflict as much pain as possible on the families, neighborhoods, and areas that opposed the Assads’ rule and called for long overdue political change. The most notable of those violations of course are extrajudicial killing, and secondly arrest, detention, and enforced disappearance. Children account for over 12 percent of all civilian victims recorded in the past 13 years, which is a significantly high percentage.

We documented regime forces’ continuous killing of children throughout 2023. Most of these killings occurred as the result of ground and aerial attacks, both deliberate and indiscriminate, which were carried out by regime forces against areas under the control of other parties to the conflict. We also documented the killing of children through shootings in regime-controlled areas.

On Sunday, April 9, Ibrahim Mousab Haj Mousa, a 15-year-old boy from Saraqeb city in rural Idlib, was killed in shelling by Syrian regime artillery forces when one of the shells hit an area near the medical dispensary in the center of Sarmin city also in eastern rural Idlib. The shelling also caused slight damage to the dispensary building. Other shells fired that day by the regime hit various neighborhoods in the city, injuring four other children, including a baby, to varying degrees. The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

On Sunday, October 22, 2023, around 13:25 local time, Syrian regime forces stationed in Jourien town in western Hama carried out a ground attack in which they fired an artillery shell, which we suspect was a 130 mm shell, at the northwestern outskirts of Qarqour village. The shell struck a tent set up by a family next to their house, as an alternative residence following the devastating February 6 earthquakes that hit northwestern Syria. The shell struck the tent while six children - four girls and two boys - were playing around a swing in front of it, killing all of them, with the force of the blast dismembering some of their bodies.
Victims' names

SNHR documented the killing of six children, four girls and two boys, in the attack by Syrian regime artillery forces that fired a shell at the site where those six children were gathered in northwestern Qarqour village in western rural Hama governorate on October 22, 2023:

1. Taha Refat Kheid, five-year-old boy from Qarqour village.
2. Jana Refat Kheid, two-year-old girl from Qarqour village.
3. Hazar Refat Kheid, three-and-a-half-year-old girl from Qarqour village.
5. Nour Muhsein al-Muhsein, one-and-a-half-year-old baby girl from Athar village in western rural Idlib governorate.

The burial of one of the children killed in a massacre inflicted in a ground attack by Syrian regime forces on Qarqour village in western Hama - October 22, 2023 | Photo credit: Nedal al-Hmoud SNHR ©
Visual analysis

of the strike site of an artillery attack by Syrian regime forces on Qargour village in western rural Hama governorate that resulted in a massacre, in which six civilians were killed on October 22, 2023.

Strike site of a shell in Qargour village in western Hama. The shell was fired by Syrian regime forces and resulted in a massacre.

As documented by SNHR

October 26, 2023
SNHR spoke with Mohammad Najdat K’eid from Qarqour village, a relative of some of the children killed in the massacre. While Mohammad was walking with his father and uncle beside the Orontes River on the noon of Sunday, October 22, he heard a shell being fired from the nearby regime-controlled town of Jourien. He recalled:

“A few seconds later, the shell landed near me, where I was, beside my uncle’s house that was about 150 meters away from us. The shell landed near a tent that was set up after the earthquake, which was intended for the family to take shelter in since our house was damaged and was no longer safe. My cousins and our neighbor, who lives near us, were in the tent. We rushed there, and the first thing we saw were children’s body parts that were everywhere, among the olive trees and on the houses’ walls. I saw two of my cousins’ dead bodies. The first was decapitated, and the second had its leg cut off. The rest were unrecognizable body parts.” Mohammad told us that they collected the dead bodies in plastic bags. Ambulances and Civil Defense teams were unable to access the village since it is close to the dividing lines. “After the massacre, Syrian regime forces fired multiple shells at the vicinity of the village to block and target any vehicles trying to access the location. We were advised by everyone not to take the risk, and we transferred the dead bodies of four of the children on motorbikes to Frayka village where we buried them. We then returned to the massacre site to look for a missing girl, our neighbor’s daughter. We found her brother Hosam’s body as dismembered parts, while we only found some parts of her body.”

On Saturday September 2, 2023, Yaman Munther Baydoun, a six-month-old baby, was killed in an artillery attack by regime forces on Sarmin city in eastern rural Idlib governorate, when one of the shells hit Yaman’s family’s home, killing him and injuring three other civilians. The area was under joint control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

Besides these aforementioned gross violations, which are mentioned in the relevant Security Council resolutions, there are also the issue of the laws promulgated by the Syrian regime in relation to children, which are marred by many defects, the most critical of which is the fact that these laws exist solely on paper, having no real or genuine effect in promoting the protection of children. Even though there are some laws that, on the surface, appear to address the rights of the child, such as Law No. 21 of 2021, and the Law on juveniles, our monitoring of their implementation shows that children have been subjected to a wide range of violations, especially in relation to the laws on measures aimed at children, and at juveniles in detention. As we have monitored in the past years, the Syrian regime has referred children for trial in exceptional courts such as the Military Field Court and the Counterterrorism Court without assigning them a special juvenile judge.43

42. Via WhatsApp on October 23, 2023.
43. The juvenile judiciary is, under Syrian law, the sole apparatus authorized to try juvenile offenders in terms of its individual, quantitative and spatial jurisdiction. The juvenile judiciary is an independent apparatus, with no other court qualified to try juvenile offenders even in the case of an exceptional court with a special mandate established by a special law. See: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (2023, November 20). On World Children’s Day: SNHR’s 12th Annual Report on Violations Against Children in Syria. https://snhr.org/?p=61756
The **Children’s Rights Law of 2021** which was promulgated by the Syrian regime prohibits children from joining political parties, while the use of children in politics and political propaganda constitutes a violation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides for the protection of children against maltreatment, harmful effects, and exploitation; despite this, however, the Syrian regime has forced children to join organizations founded by, and affiliated with a political party, namely the ruling Baath Party, such as the Ṭalāʻiʻ al-Baath’ ['The Seeds of the Baath'], and ‘Shabybah althawrah’ ['The Youth of the Revolution']\(^4\) This persisted in 2023. Children are enrolled in these organizations automatically and by default, since every child in school is a member of those two organizations by law. As part of this indoctrination, children in public schools repeat the slogans of those two organizations every day and all public schools are required to hang pictures of the head of the Syrian regime and teach his sayings and mantras.

**V. Violations against women rights**

Over the past 13 years, Syrian women’s fundamental rights have been violated on all civil, political, social, economic, and health and mental levels, as women have been stripped of all forms of protection against the ramifications of the conflict. Even more alarming, we have documented increasing rates of violence against females, including and especially extrajudicial killing, torture, enforced disappearance, and sexual violence that have reached record levels and rates worldwide. Needless to say, the effects of this on Syrian society have been catastrophic. As of the end of 2023, no fewer than 8,493 women (adult female) of those arrested by regime forces since March 2011 are still under arrest and/or forcibly disappeared. Those women are suffering the cruelest torture practices.

Syrian women still lack the most basic levels of protection and safety. Many violations have been committed specifically against women because of the very fact of their being women, even though most international instruments, texts, and conventions give special protection to women, including the Geneva Conventions and its two protocols, international humanitarian law, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Right. Our annual report, ['On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women: SNHR’s 12th Annual Report on Violations Against Females in Syria'](https://snhr.org/en/12th-annual-report-violations-against-females-in-syria/) outlined the most recent violations and incidents involving women in Syria, with a special focus on 2023.

Syrian regime forces’ strategy of violence and widespread killing targeting females has also had numerous other dangerous ramifications, manifested in the form of tearing families apart and undermining the foundations of society. Orphaned children have been left with no support or care, with all these phenomena having a profoundly traumatizing emotional, psychological, and social effect. Furthermore, wider Syrian society has tragically been deprived of these female victims’ massive potential. Syrian regime forces continued to commit gross violations against women, with SNHR documenting numerous women’s deaths as a result of the aerial and ground attacks carried out by the regime against areas under the control of other parties.

**Radayya al-Othman** died on July 5, 2023, of wounds sustained the previous day, July 4, in artillery shelling by Syrian regime forces, who fired multiple shells at the southern neighborhood of her hometown of al-Bara in Jabal al-Zawiya in southern rural Idlib governorate. The area is under the control of the control of armed opposition factions and the HTS.

\(^4\) Since seizing power in the 1970 Coup, the Syrian regime has abused its position of power to force children in schools to join partisan affiliate organizations such as Ṭalāʻiʻ al-Baath’ ['The Seeds of the Baath'], and ‘Shabybah althawrah’ ['The Youth of the Revolution'], founded in 1974 and 1970 respectively.
A woman and a girl, identified respectively as Hayfa Redwan al-Kinj and Jihan Abdou al-Zain, were killed on October 7, 2023, in an artillery attack by Syrian regime forces who fired multiple shells at their hometown of Ihsim in Jabal al-Zawiya in southern rural Idlib governorate. Three other children were wounded in the attack, which also destroyed a number of civilian homes. The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and the HTS at the time of the incident.

### b. Violations related to the conduct of hostilities

#### i. Unlawful military operations attacks

**1. Artillery and aerial bombardment**

We monitored a decline in the rates of aerial attacks throughout 2021 and 2022, with regime forces relying more on ground attacks, a pattern that continued in 2023, with regime forces carrying out military ground attacks in many areas in Syria, which were mostly concentrated in the Idlib area in northwestern Syria. Those attacks targeted populated areas far from the dividing lines. In those attacks, Syrian regime forces failed to respect the principles of distinction and proportionality established in international humanitarian law. As such, these attacks resulted in civilian deaths and injuries, and destruction of vital civilian facilities, with some resulting in massacres.

In many regime artillery attacks, we noticed that Russian reconnaissance aircraft could be seen hovering over the area at the time of the attack.

**Meantime, no barrel bombs attacks were documented in 2023 for the third successive year.**

On Wednesday, January 18, 2023, Bassam Mustafa al-Othman was killed in a regime artillery attack that targeted a public road in his home village of al-Bara in Jabal al-Zawiya in southern rural Idlib. The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

On Monday, May 15, 2023, Suleiman Mohammad al-Salim, a 40-year-old man, was killed in a regime artillery attack on his home village of Kafr Aweed in southern rural Idlib. The area, which is under the joint control of armed opposition factions and HTS, is located near the dividing lines with territories controlled by Syrian regime forces.

On Saturday, October 7, 2023, Syrian regime artillery forces fired shells at al-Atareb city in western rural Aleppo governorate, killing one IDP from Hama governorate, and wounding others, as well as destroying a number of houses. The city was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

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45. “The parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants. Attacks may only be directed against combatants. Attacks must not be directed against civilians…”

- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Rule 1* of the international humanitarian law.

46. “Launching an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, is prohibited…”

- International Committee of the Red Cross, *Rule 14* of the international humanitarian law.
2. Siege and threats of military operations

Throughout 2023 and up to the current date, Syrian regime forces have continued to enforce a siege on the two neighborhoods of al-Ashrafiya and al-Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo city and the areas of al-Shahba area in northern Aleppo, all areas under the control of the SDF. In doing so, regime forces blocked the entry of food supplies and fuel and imposed ‘fines’ on civilians, even blatantly confiscating money from traders and other civilians. The siege began over a dispute over transporting fuel from SDF-held areas to regime-controlled areas that intensified at the end of the past year. On January 24, Amnesty International published a press released insisting that the Syrian regime force “must lift a brutal blockade on civilians in predominantly Kurdish areas in the northern Aleppo region.” Since the siege was first imposed on the neighborhoods of al-Sheikh Maqsoud and al-Ashrafiya, as well as on over 50 villages in the Shahba region back in August 2022, the statement noted, tens of thousands of civilians, including IDPs, had faced “severe shortages of fuel and aid. Medical supplies are now all but exhausted and people are burning household items and plastic to try and keep warm in freezing temperatures.” In April, Syrian regime forces tightened their blockade on al-Shahba district of Aleppo city, blocking the entry of food supplies and fuel, reducing the working capacity of hospitals in the area, and leading to power cuts in the camps in the area. In the last quarter of 2023, military checkpoints manned by personnel from the Syrian regime’s Fourth Division blocked the entry of food and fuel supplies to al-Shahba area, and the two neighborhoods of al-Ashrafiya and al-Sheikh Maqsoud, effectively suspending the functioning of bakeries and main hospitals in the areas, and exacerbating the already horrendous suffering of these areas’ residents especially those in camps. Towards the end of 2023, Syrian regime forces deployed military enforcements to surround and block off all the entrance roads to Jasim city in northern Daraa, erecting checkpoints, and preventing anyone, except university students, from entering or leaving the city. This lasted for about three days. Subsequently, a number of meetings between regime forces and a delegation from Jasim city yielded an understanding under which the roads in and out of the city were reopened and the regime troops deployed in its vicinity withdrew in exchange for an agreement from the delegation that regime forces would be able by to inspect agricultural areas surrounding the city.
On May 24, Syrian regime forces deployed reinforcements to the vicinity of Talbisa city in northern rural Homs. These reinforcements established themselves at the Katibat al-Ghantou [al-Ghantou Brigade] base, while military checkpoints were set up along the al-Sa’n al-Asswad road to the east of the city, all in tandem with the construction of berms and further fortification of the existing checkpoints both in Talbisa city and on its outskirts. This followed a meeting between a number of regime intelligence officers in Homs city and a delegation of local dignitaries held at al-Safir Hotel in Homs city on May 17 which aimed to address security issues in the city. The regime officials specified a set of demands related to drug-trafficking and abductions which had mostly been taking place in Homs city and on the Homs-Hama international highway. The regime threatened that there would be a city-wide security crackdown and that all those refusing to comply with those demands would be deported to northern Syria if the dignitaries failed to fulfill these demands within 15 days. On May 23, the Talbisa city’s dignitaries issued a statement following a series of meetings with representatives of families living in the city. The statement explicitly stressed that all drug-dealing activities are banned, and called for combating organized and non-organized crimes, as well as ending the presence of arms and associated anarchy in Talbisa city. The statement also mentioned the formation of a task force of local people to protect the entrances and exits of the city, as well as the highway. On June 20, the regime opened a settlement center in the city council building, following a meeting a week earlier on June 13 between a regime security delegation, headed by Liwa (Major General) Hosam Luqa, the head of the Syrian regime’s General Intelligence Directorate, and dignitaries from the city.

ii. Protected individuals and objects

1. Medical sector

The Syrian regime has recognized the vital role played by humanitarian workers in easing civilians’ suffering, reacting to this with a methodical persecution and arrest of workers in the humanitarian field. We have noticed that the targeting of medical sector personnel, and of their equipment and facilities, has been a calculated tactic adopted by the Syrian regime since the first days of the popular uprising in March 2011. Medics, hospitals, and doctors, who provided medical assistance for protesters wounded by regime forces while participating in peaceful demonstrations, were targeted. This was also applied to anyone who worked to secure medical supplies or medications for treatment. As SNHR’s database reveals, at least 3,367 medics of those arrested since March 2011 up until the end of December 2023 are still under arrest and/or forcibly disappeared at the hands of Syrian regime forces. Furthermore, the Syrian regime and its allies have deliberately targeted medical teams, hospitals, and medical facilities in their aerial and ground attacks in a widespread and systematic manner. In many cases, the regime’s and its allies’ bombardment of civilian areas and massacres have been carried out in tandem with the targeting of medical and relief centers in order to prevent those teams from providing help at the times when it is most urgently needed. This was extremely noticeable in the offensive launched by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces on northwestern Syria in the last quarter of 2023.

Also in 2023, we noticed a rise in the number of operations targeting medical personnel and medical facilities from 2022. In total, SNHR documented the killing of four medical personnel at the hands of regime forces in 2023, while no such deaths were recorded in 2022. We also documented no fewer than 12 attacks on medical facilities by regime forces, compared to 2022’s one attack by the same forces.
On Sunday, February 19, 2023, Lilyan al-Ouda, a female pharmacist, was killed when the Syrian regime’s air defense systems stationed in Mount Qasyoun and al-Mazza Military Airbase fired rockets to fend off Israeli airstrikes that targeted a residential building in Kafrsousa area in Damascus. This resulted in some of the rockets landing in residential neighborhoods in Damascus, including al-Mazra’a Square in the center of the Syrian capital, which killed a number of civilians, including Lilyan.

On Monday, October 30, 2023, a nurse, identified as Abdul Hamid Fatah Zaywani, 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, where a Turkish military point is located, while a doctor and the car driver were injured. 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 near 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.

At around 13:00 local time on Sunday, October 8, 2023, Syrian regime forces used a rocket launcher to target a hospital building, known as the Idlib University Hospital, consisting of six stories aboveground, and two underground (basement) levels, and which is located on a public road connecting al-Siyasiya roundabout and al-Zera’a roundabout. The building houses the University Hospital (affiliated with the Salvation Government), the Ibn Sina Children Hospital and the Maternity Hospital (both of which are supported by the Syrian-American Medical Society/SAMS), as well as a center for heart surgery (operated by a medical organization working in Idlib). The rocket struck the building’s perimeter fence at the ambulance entrance, killing a civilian who was inside a car at the entrance, as well as partially destroying the fence and heavily damaging the building itself. Another rocket directly struck the building of the National Hospital (affiliated with the Salvation Government), located near the University Hospital building, which consists of two aboveground stories and a lobby. The building, whose top floor also houses the central aid network, was partially destroyed, with its equipment damaged to varying degrees. The city was under the joint control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the attack.
SNHR spoke with Abdullah Hallaq, a medical staff member at the National Hospital in Idlib city, who told us that he had heard an explosion while he was in the break room, with the blast caused by a rocket that landed in front of the University Hospital’s entrance. He continued:

A second rocket struck the clinics corridor in the National Hospital some meters away from where we were. The rocket penetrated the wall of the hospital and landed on the first floor. Patients started screaming, and we rushed to evacuate the hospital. We carried seven patients who were in the clinics wing outside, and then the medical staff came out. After we made sure the attack had ended, about half an hour later, we evacuated the wounded and went down to the basement in fear of another attack.” Abdullah said that they did not hear the sound of the rocket, and were surprised by the explosion, which he described as “very strong”. Abdullah also noted that he noticed that the remnants that fell in the hospital came from a rocket. He added: “A young man who was in his car in front of the University Hospital died while waiting for a relative who was a patient. The destruction amounted to a hole in the wall and [another] in the floor. The worst damage was in the clinics wing, since the rocket landed in a bathroom and a washroom near the nephrology clinic.”

47 Via WhatsApp on October 9, 2023.
As SNHR’s database attests, Syrian regime forces arrested six medical personnel in 2023, while nine medical personnel were arrested by regime forces in 2022.

**Abdul Hamid Atallah al-Jasim**, a nurse from Hatla village in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was arrested on Wednesday, September 14, 2022, by Syrian regime forces in a raid on his house. He was taken to an undisclosed location.

With medical personnel finding themselves under the threat of death or arrest/enforced disappearance, hundreds have opted to flee Syria. This means that the country has not only lost those medics who were killed or forcibly disappeared, but that large numbers of its remaining medical personnel also fled to save their own and their families’ lives, which has had catastrophic, ongoing ramifications that will last for decades to come.

Moreover, the Syrian regime has made no serious efforts to rehabilitate the medical facilities that had been destroyed in the areas that the regime regained control of after 2019.

### 2. Educational sector

In 2023, we noticed a significant increase in the rate of attacks on educational facilities from 2022. In total, SNHR documented no fewer than 44 attacks on educational facilities (43 schools and one kindergarten) by regime forces in 2023, while only two such attacks were recorded in 2022 by the same forces.

On Sunday, October 22, 2023, at around 21:53 local time, Syrian regime forces used a rocket launcher, suspected to be stationed near Saraqeb city in eastern rural Idlib, to fire multiple rockets at Ariha city in southern rural Idlib governorate. One of the rockets struck the Ahmad Sablou Elementary School on the east side of the city. The rocket landed in a classroom, partially destroying its roof and moderately damaging the interior furnishings. It should be noted that the school provides education for about 450 students.
SNHR spoke with a resident of Ariha city, who told us about the bombardment targeting the city on October 22, 2023, and recounted what he saw when he visited the school:

“While I was at home in Ariha city at night, a number of rockets landed, causing strong explosions through the city. I learned that the school had been targeted after the Civil Defense examined the area. On the morning of the following day, we headed to examine the site targeted. We arrived at the school, which is an elementary school, and we saw that the rocket had landed from above on a classroom creating a hole in its roof and damage to its contents. The people running the school removed the rubble and officially resumed education.”

Visual analysis

of the strike site of a rocket that struck Ahmad Sablou School in Ariha city in southern rural Idlib as part of a ground attack by regime forces that targeted multiple sites in the city’s east side – October 22, 2023

As documented by SNHR

3. Places of worship

The Syrian regime has targeted places of worship in bombardment of areas outside their control. In doing so, the Syrian regime has shown no respect for the sanctity of places of worship, including both mosques and churches. Even worse, the regime has repurposed many places of worship in its territories into centers of a military nature. Moreover, the regime has utilized places of worship as instruments of politicization used to lavish praise on the ruling family and indoctrinate the people into unquestioning acceptance of one-party hereditary rule.

In 2023, we recorded a significant increase in the numbers of attacks on places of worship. In total, SNHR documented no fewer than 30 attacks on places of worship in 2023, in comparison to the three such attacks we documented by the same forces in 2022.

On Thursday, January 12, 2023, Syrian regime artillery forces fired a shell at the Omar bin al-Khattab Mosque in the center of Kafr Ta’al village in western rural Aleppo governorate. The mosque’s building was partially destroyed, while its interior furnishings were moderately damaged. The village was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

On the noon of Wednesday, October 4, 2023, Syrian regime forces used a rocket launcher to bomb al-Masjid al-Kabir, the ‘Grand’ or ‘Old’ Mosque in the main market in the middle of Sarmin city in eastern rural Idlib governorate, partially destroying the mosque building and moderately damaging its cladding materials. The city was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

4. Media workers

The Syrian regime, which controls the Syrian state, bears the primary responsibility for Syria’s disastrous rankings worldwide in terms of freedom of the press and media work, and through this, for defaming the image of Syria and Syrians. Indeed, the Syrian regime has committed various types of violations against journalists and media workers, with SNHR documenting multiple types of gross violations against media personnel, including extrajudicial killing, arrest/enforced disappearance, torture, and attacks on facilities, as well as promulgating laws that restrict the freedom of the press, opinion, and expression.
In 2023, the Syrian regime continued its general policy of censoring independent media outlets. The Syrian regime has maintained absolute control over state media and rigorously censors any freedom of expression by media workers and citizens on the grounds of laws\(^{49}\) (either decrees\(^{50}\) or legislation passed through the People’s Assembly which is completely controlled by the regime) that explicitly contradict international human rights law and alarmingly restrict the freedom of the press and of expression.\(^{51}\)

The most recent laws passed by the regime imposing further restrictions on the freedom of press, opinion, and expression is Law No. 20 of 2022\(^{52}\) on cybercrime, which was passed by the head of the Syrian regime Bashar Assad on April 18, 2022. The law provided for an overhaul of the punitive legal rules regarding cybercrime, as specified by Legislative Decree 17/2012.\(^{53}\) The new law contains vague articles with no clear definitions. We believe that this law violates the right to freedom of the press, opinion, and expression, and threatens digital rights and online privacy. The 50-article law also imposes harsher punishments in regard to publishing content online should the authorities find it dissident in nature. Furthermore, the law imposes a fine and prison sentence on anyone found to be publishing digital content online with the aim of “toppling or changing the ruling regime in the state”, or “undermining the prestige of the state or affecting national unity.” On August 18, 2023, SNHR released a report entitled, “Law No. 20 of 2022 Promulgated by the Syrian Regime Further Perpetuates the Oppression of Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and Has Been Used as Grounds for Dozens of Cases of Arbitrary Arrest and Torture”, in which we provided a legal and technical analysis of the texts of this law, and more importantly its implementation on the ground and how it reflects on the lives of the Syrian people, as well as how it further restricts freedom of opinion and expression and violates fundamental human rights. The report also gives an outline of the toll of arrests/detentions and deaths due to torture resulting from the Counter-Cybercrime Law as recorded by SNHR’s team and since its entry into force. The figures included in the report only includes those cases that we documented which were related to the law and to individuals facing charges on the grounds of said law that were related to restrictions specifically on freedom of opinion and expression. That is to say, we excluded cases in connection to the Counter-Cybercrime Law that are of a criminal nature, such as fraud, violation of privacy, using the internet to deal in narcotics, use of malware, and other similar charges. As SNHR’s database attests, the proportion of those detained by the regime in connection with the Counter-Cybercrime Law account for about 14 percent of all arrest cases we recorded in 2023. Sixty percent of the arrests made in connection with this law were journalists/citizen journalists and other media personnel. SNHR reiterates that the effects of the texts of this law only perpetuate the regime’s policy of

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49. For example, Article 12 of the Media Law has five paragraphs detailing what cannot be published, including “any and all content that would be deemed a threat to the national unity and security, or an insult to Abrahamic religions, religious beliefs, or instigating sectarian or creed grudges.” Paragraph 5 also bans “any and all slight to the symbols of the state”. All those terms are undefined and can be used to ban almost everything.

The law also gives the regime’s National Council for Media the right to regulate the media sector. The Council, according to Article 20 of the same law, is composed of “nine members, including the head of the Council and their deputy, and must be Syrian nationals. And they shall be appointed through a decree issued by the Head of the Syrian Regime for a term of three years renewable once.” As such, the Syrian regime perpetuates individual hegemony over all arms of the state, eliminating any sense of independence and impartiality that any true media should have.

50. On May 7, 2012, Legislative Decree No. 17 on Implementing the Rules of Social Media and Counter-Cybercrime Law was issued. According to Article 20, the minimum sentence specified in the applicable criminal laws is doubled in the event that the internet, a computer, or an information system was used in the commission of the criminal acts mentioned. Paragraph C of the same article names multiple forms of the crime punishable by law, including “promoting terrorism using information technology,” it is well known that the Syrian regime defines all Syria’s dissidents, and anyone who publishes any information exposing its practices and violations as a “terrorist”.

51. “Media outlets are prohibited from publishing… 1. Any and all content that would be deemed a threat to the national unity and security, or an insult to Abrahamic religions, religious beliefs, or instigating sectarian or creed grudges… 5. Any and all slight to the symbols of the state.” - People’s Assembly of Syria, Article 12 of Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011, known as the Media Law.

“A. The council shall be composed of nine members, including the head of the Council and its deputy. The members shall be chosen based on their experience in the fields of media, communication, intellect, culture, and the technical specialties related to the media, and must be fully naturalized Syrian nationals… C. The head of the Council and its deputy shall be appointed through a council, which also specifies their compensation, for a term of three years, renewable once.” - People’s Assembly of Syria, Article 20 of Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011, known as Media Law.

52. For the full text of the Cybercrime Law (Law No. 20 of 2022), see: https://moct.gov.sy/news-0015

53. People’s Assembly of Syria, Legislative Decree No. 17 on Implementing the Rules of Social Media and Counter-Cybercrime Law
restricting freedom of opinion and expression and expand the scope of the already-vague, broad charges created by, and used as grounds by the regime since March 2011 to legitimize the widespread arrests it made and to grant free rein to its several security apparatuses.

On May 3, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) unveiled its World Press Freedom Index for the year 2023, with Syria again being ranked among the world’s 10 worst countries with regard to press freedom (now occupying 175th place out of 180 countries), a further regression from its 171st place in last year’s index. The RSF noted that Syria remains one of the world’s most dangerous countries for journalists, who often find themselves “caught in the crossfire between Bashar al-Assad’s murderous army, militias, and Turkish interventions.” RSF further revealed that Syria continues to be the country where the most journalists are held hostage.

In 2023, SNHR documented the killing of one media worker at the hands of regime forces, the same number documented as being killed in 2022 by the same 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, prior to 2018 when regime forces took control of Daraa city, had worked in the relief and educational fields. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

As documented on SNHR’s database, in 2023, the Syrian regime was responsible for the arrest/detention/enforced disappearance of no fewer than nine journalists and media workers, whereas the same forces were responsible for the arrest/detention/enforced disappearance of 23 journalists and media workers, including four women, in 2022.

Rami Raul Fetali, a blogger and social activist born in 1977 from Latakia city, was arrested on Monday, March 13, 2023 by members of the Syrian regime’s Criminal Security after he surrendered himself to the Criminal Security branch in Latakia city over claims made against him related to charges of “insulting the internal security apparatus”, following a post he made on his Facebook page back in 2021 demanding that an investigation be launched into the beating which a person had been subjected to in a regime police station in relation to charges of theft (the post in question was posted before the promulgation of the Counter-Cybercrime Law). On March 27, 2023, a judge sentenced Rami to prison over charges of “undermining the image of the state, insulting its administrative apparatus, and dealing in illegal foreign money transfers”. He was released on August 1, 2023.
iii. Use of unlawful weapons

1. Cluster munitions

We documented one cluster munitions attack by regime forces in 2023 that took place in Idlib governorate, the same number we documented by the same forces in 2022.

On Friday, October 6, 2023, Syrian regime forces used a rocket launcher to fire a number of rockets at Termanein town in northern rural Idlib. We were able to determine that at least one of the rockets was a Uragan 9m55k rocket carrying 9N235 or 9N210 cluster submunitions. The rockets exploded in the sky, with one of them, as we documented at the time, striking the town’s southeastern neighborhood, killing one civilian, identified as Sami Abdul Fattah Bakrou, and injuring another eight civilians. The town was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

2. Incendiary ammunition

In 2023, SNHR documented attacks involving the use of incendiary weapons, which had not been used in the previous two years, 2022 and 2021. All such attacks we documented in 2023 were carried out by Syrian regime forces and targeted areas in northwestern Syria under the control of other parties to the conflict. All of these attacks were also carried out in October as part of an offensive launched by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the area. As we have noted, all these attacks targeted populated areas far from the dividing lines and from any military targets. In fact, we recorded no military movements of any land forces in tandem with those attacks, which supports our belief that these attacks were carried out solely for the purpose of inflicting material and human damage, and had no military goals at all.

In 2023, we recorded no fewer than eight attacks involving the use of incendiary weapons, with three civilians injured in these attacks.

On Sunday, October 8, 2023, Syrian regime forces used a rocket launcher to fire multiple rockets carrying incendiary substances at al-Abzemou town in western rural Aleppo governorate. Three civilians were injured in the attack, which also ignited a number of fires. The town was under the control of armed opposition factions and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham at the time of the incident.
2. Russian forces

Since the beginning of the popular uprising, Russia has consistently provided the Syrian regime with all kinds of logistical, political, economic, and of course military support. Russia has invariably sided with the Syrian regime, not only serving as a very reliable shield for the regime within the UN Security Council’s chambers by blocking any resolutions using its veto powers, but also providing a lifeline for the regime in the form of its military intervention that was officially launched on September 30, 2015. Over the course of its intervention, Russia has directly bombarded large swathes of Syrian territory. We, at SNHR, believe that Russia’s military intervention is wholly illegitimate due to many reasons which we have detailed in numerous past reports. Moreover, Russia has committed gross violations of international law, with some of these violations, such as killing and forced displacement, constituting crimes against humanity and war crimes. In 2023, Russia was responsible for a number of violations that fall into these categories. SNHR summarized some of the most notable violations perpetrated by Russia in its eighth annual report on the most notable Russian violations in Syria since the beginning of the military intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015.

In addition to Russian forces subjecting large areas of Syrian territory to bombardment, Moscow has directly backed regime forces in their own military operations, not to mention providing them with technical and logistical support. On January 10, for instance, the Russian news agency Sputnik quoted a statement by Sergei Shoigu, Russia’s defense minister, who said that training plans should be set in place and equipment should be supplied to the Russian Armed Forces based on the expertise gained in Syria and Ukraine. On January 24, the Russia Today news agency cited a statement by the Russian Ministry of Defense revealing that Russian forces and Syrian regime forces had jointly restored the al-Jarrah Military Airbase eastern Aleppo. “Russian and Syrian servicemen restore Jirah airfield destroyed during operations,” the statement by the ministry read, adding, “Joint deployment of Russian and Syrian aircraft at the Jirah airfield allows protection of the State border, and ensures safety of civilians in the northern and north-eastern areas of the Syrian Arab Republic.” The same agency also published a video from the ceremony showing Russian warplanes flying overhead and paratroopers bearing the flags of the Syrian regime, Russia, and the flags of the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Syrian regime’s Ministry of Defense carrying out parachute landings. On July 7, the Russian News Agency RIA Novosti reported on joint aerial training exercises conducted by Russian forces and Syrian regime forces. According to the agency, the exercises focused on joint aerial operations, aerial defense strategy, and the use of cyberwarfare in deterring aerial attacks.

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Russia’s support also extended to include justifying the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons and questioning the validity of the OPCW’s reports, as well as exploiting cross-border humanitarian assistance, and using its media mouthpieces to spread pro-Syrian regime propaganda and polish the image of the regime’s violations.

Russia’s support for the Syrian regime to seize UN humanitarian aid intended for northwestern Syria and how it continued to use to this issue, namely humanitarian aid, in its political extortion in favor of the Syrian regime at the UN Security Council was no more blatant in 2023 than in the aftermath of the devastating February 6 Earthquakes that struck northwestern Syria, and sharply exacerbated residents’ suffering and need for aid. On April 27, Vassily Nebenzia, Russia’s Permanent Representative to the UN, said at a Security Council session that if Western countries continued to disregard the fact that Security Council resolutions were being sabotaged by “terrorists”, then Russia would “draw the necessary conclusion” in crafting its position regarding the upcoming extension of the cross-border mechanism in July of that year.

On July 11, Russia used its veto powers in the UN Security Council to block a draft resolution to extend the cross-border mechanism to deliver humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria by nine months, as proposed by Switzerland and Brazil. In relation to this very issue, at the start of 2023, on January 9, SNHR released a report entitled, ‘Russia’s Veto Blocking UN Cross-Border Relief Aid is Unlawful and its Only Aim is to Seize UN Relief Aid’ in which we reiterated our calls for putting an end to Russia’s years-long exploitation of UN relief aid. In the statement, we also reiterated our legal position which we have stated for years, that delivering UN cross-border humanitarian assistance is legal, and does not require a permission from the Security Council, since relief aid is being delivered under the aegis of the UNGA and the OCHA.

Meanwhile, Russia’s air force carried out new airstrikes in 2023 targeting areas in northwestern Syria under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS. These attacks were concentrated in western rural Idlib and in areas far from the dividing lines in southern rural Idlib and rural Latakia. We also documented incidents of bombardment carried out by warplanes believed to Russian that targeted buildings sheltering IDPs, with these attacks resulting in civilian casualties. Moreover, we documented airstrikes by the Russian air force in support of Syrian regime ground assaults against areas under the control of other parties, especially in the course of the Russian-Syrian offensive on northwestern Syria that was launched in early-September and continued in October. Additionally, Russia has deployed reconnaissance aircraft in tandem with regime ground attacks that resulted in civilian deaths and injuries, while Russian air force planes also carried out several airstrikes targeting vital civilian facilities which resulted in severe material losses.

a. Extrajudicial killing

In 2023, we recorded the killing of 20 civilians, including six children and five women (adult female), at the hands of Russian forces, who were also responsible for one massacre. In 2022, by contrast, Russian forces were responsible for the killing of 17 civilians, including eight children and one woman (adult female), in addition to perpetrating two massacres.

The graph below shows the distribution of the 20 civilians killed by Russian forces in 2022 by month:

Some of the most notable incidents of extrajudicial killing

On Saturday, June 24, 2023, fixed-wing warplanes believed to be Russian fired multiple missiles targeting Basbat village in western rural Idlib governorate. The bombardment directly targeted civilian homes in the area, as well as agricultural land, with two brothers, identified as Abdou Mustafa Sino and Osama Mustafa Sino from Mar’ and village in western rural Idlib governorate, being killed, while they were harvesting their wheat crop. Two other civilians were also wounded in the bombardment, which heavily destroyed many houses. The area was under the control of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham at the time of the incident.
On Tuesday, October 24, 2023, at around 12:17 local time, fixed-wing warplanes believed to be Russian fired missiles at al-Masbah IDPs Camp, also known as Ahl Saraqeb Camp, which is located amidst agricultural land on the southwestern outskirts of al-Hamama town, administratively affiliated with Jisr al-Shoghour city in western rural Idlib governorate. The airstrike killed six civilians from the same family - two children, three women, and one unborn baby - and wounded five others, including three children, to varying degrees. The air raids also heavily damaged seven IDPs tents in the camp, as well as damaging camp facilities. The area was under the joint control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

b. Targeting medical personnel and medical facilities

We documented one attack on a medical facility by Russian forces, but no deaths among medical personnel as a result of attacks by Russian forces in 2023. In comparison, we documented no attacks on medical facilities by Russian forces or deaths among medical personnel as a result of Russian attacks in 2022.

On Friday, October 6, 2023, fixed-wing warplanes believed to be Russian fired a missile that landed near the medical dispensary in Bdama town, administratively affiliated with Jisr al-Shoghour city in western rural Idlib governorate. The missile landed about 100 meters from the dispensary, partially destroying its surrounding perimeter fence and slightly damaging the equipment inside. The town was under the joint control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

c. Targeting educational facilities

In 2023, we documented one attack on an educational facility by forces believed to be Russian. With Russian forces also committing one attack on an educational facility in 2022.

On Saturday, October 21, 2023, fixed-wing warplanes believed to be Russian fired a missile that landed near al-Quneitra Elementary School in al-Quneitra village in western rural Idlib governorate, slightly damaging the school building and the surrounding perimeter fence. The village was under the joint control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.
3. ISIS (the self-proclaimed ‘Islamic State’).

Extrajudicial killings, which we believe were committed by cells affiliated with ISIS, were among the most prominent violations documented by SNHR in 2023. Still, the rate of ISIS’ violations has dramatically fallen since the end of March 2019, when the group lost control over large swathes of territory across Syria.

Despite the declining rate of ISIS attacks, however, an ongoing issue of crucial importance that must be highlighted is that of determining the fate of the people forcibly disappeared by ISIS, which has seen no real progress despite the passage of years since their disappearance. Even four years since ISIS’s downfall in Syria, the fate of 8,684 people still classified as forcibly disappeared by the terrorist group remains unknown to this day. The fate of these victims has still not been revealed, even after ISIS lost control of all the territory it controlled and the detention centers it ran there. It should also be noted that the communities which fell under the terror group’s control are still grappling with the catastrophic aftermath of ISIS’s widespread violations in those areas.56

SNHR documented the killing of one civilian at ISIS’ hands in 2023. By contrast, we documented the killing of nine civilians, in addition to one massacre, by ISIS in 2022.

4. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (an alliance of Fateh al-Sham Front and a number of armed opposition factions)

a. Extrajudicial killing

In 2023, SNHR documented the killing of 16 civilians, including two children and five women, by HTS. By contrast, the group was responsible for the killing of 11 civilians, including two children and two women, in 2022.

The graph below the distribution of the 16 civilians killed by the HTS by month:

56. For more details on this subject, you can read a report released by SNHR in early 2022 entitled, ‘The Most Notable ISIS Violations against Syrian Society and ISIS: Contribution to Distorting the Popular Uprising Calling for Freedom and Dignity’ outlining the most notable violations by ISIS that we have documented since the group’s emergence in April 2013.
**Most notable killings by HTS:**

On December 9, 2023, HTS used a rocket launcher to fire multiple shells at the towns of Nebbel and al-Zahra in western rural Aleppo governorate, killing two women and a child, and injuring 22 other civilians. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces and pro-regime militias at the time of the incident. HTS claimed responsibility for the attack on its official channels. It should be noted that this attack was launched in retaliation for a regime rocket launcher attack that targeted Idlib city and Sarmin town, killing nine civilians and injuring dozens of others.

**b. Arbitrary detention/enforced disappearance**

In 2023, HTS continued to target activists, humanitarian workers, local dignitaries, and lawyers through detentions, with the number of detentions for which the group was responsible in 2023 increasing from 2022. Most of these arrests/detentions took place after these individuals voiced criticism of the group’s policies in areas under its control. Additionally, some were arrested over various charges including allegations of treason or suspicious links with HTS’ adversaries. These detentions were carried out in arbitrary ways, including conducting raids and entering homes by force, wrecking these houses’ contents, and seizing phones and laptops, or by abducting detainees from the street, or at temporary checkpoints that separate the different territories, especially those separating HTS’s areas of control from those under the SNA. **Below are some observations concerning the arrests made by the HTS in 2023:**

- We recorded arrests targeting civilians over accusations of their being affiliated with the ‘Hurras al-Din’ [Guardians of the Faith] group. These arrests, which were concentrated in the village of Arab Saed in rural Idlib governorate, involved surrounding the village and enforcing an hours-long curfew there.

- Similarly, the group carried out widespread arrests targeting individuals accused of being either members or supporters of the extremist, anti-HTS Tahrir Party, which mostly took place in the form of raids and mass arrests, or at checkpoints. Those arrests were concentrated in the governorates of Idlib and Aleppo.

- There were also detentions of many individuals, including women, who objected to the arrest crackdowns and tried to move from HTS-held areas to SNA-held areas in Aleppo governorate.

- We also documented the detentions by HTS of a number of civilians in rural Idlib governorate for refusing to leave their homes and residences there and move to IDPs camps.

Additionally, there have been numerous cases in which the HTS ‘Salvation’s Government’s’ Media Directorate summoned male and female media activists over posts they had published on their personal social media pages, or over their participation in discussions in virtual groups on various social networking apps in which they’d expressed criticism of the group’s policies; many of those summoned told us that they had been pressured into apologizing and signing pledges to avoid such criticisms or accusations in the future under the threat of legal prosecution by HTS’s courts.
In 2023, we documented that HTS detained no fewer than 248 individuals, including four children and seven women. Of these, 62 have been released, either after completing their sentence, paying money, or through the intervention of local intermediaries. Meanwhile, 186 of the 248 have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance. In 2022, comparatively, we documented that 202 individuals, including 13 children and three women, were detained by the group.

The graph below the distribution of the 248 detentions carried out by HTS in 2023 by month:

As shown on the graph, the number of arrests carried out by the HTS saw a sharp increase in May and June, which is explained by the group carrying out crackdowns on supporters or members of the extremist anti-HTS Tahrir Party, as well as carrying out widespread detentions targeting fugitives wanted by the group. It should be noted that we have not been able to verify whether or not those detained were in reality associated with the anti-HTS Tahrir Party, since the group bans contact with any human rights groups and threatens detainees’ families who it believes might do so.

Some notable incidents and cases of arbitrary arrests

Mohammad Talloush, from Arab Saed village in western rural Idlib governorate, was arrested/detained on Monday, March 13, 2023, by members of the HTS’ General Security division during a raid and arrest campaign by the group in the village over accusations of his being affiliated with the Hurras al-Din [Guardians of the Faith] group. The arrest took place in tandem with HTS surrounding the village and enforcing a curfew there for many hours. He was then taken to an undisclosed location.

Ahmad Omar al-Dal', a 14-year-old boy from Deir Hassan village in northern rural Idlib, was arrested/detained on Tuesday, May 9, 2023, by HTS personnel, in a raid and arrest campaign in the village over accusations of his participation in an anti-HTS demonstration held by the al-Tahrir Party. He was taken to an undisclosed location.
Ali Alolou, born in 2001, a media worker and reporter with the Khabar News Agency, from Kelli town in northern rural Idlib governorate, was arrested on Wednesday, May 10, 2023, by HTS members who raided his home and assaulted him over his filming an anti-HTS demonstration held by the extremist al-Tahrir Party in his hometown. He was taken to an undisclosed location.

Abdul Aziz Darwish, a lawyer and member of the Free Lawyers Association in Aleppo governorate, from Tadil village in western rural Aleppo governorate, was arrested on Friday, June 16, 2023, by HTS personnel at a checkpoint set up at the al-Gazzawiya intersection which separates areas under HTS’ control in Idlib governorate from those controlled by the SNA in northern Aleppo governorate. We documented that he was released the next day.

c. Torture in detention centers

HTS uses various methods of torture in its detention centers. We have been able to learn the most notable methods of torture used by the group, which are largely similar to those used by the Syrian regime, in addition to 22 methods unique to the HTS. This similarity also extends to the torture strategies used to extract confessions from a detainee, who is then tried based on confessions extracted under torture. Many former detainees have told us that they have been subjected to torture even before being taken for interrogation. We also were told by former detainees that the HTS gives detainees the choice of simply confessing to the charges made against them, regardless of these charges’ falsity, or suffering torture until they confess.

In 2023, we recorded an increase in the number of deaths due to torture at HTS’ hands from 2022. It should be noted that HTS’ torture practices can be fatal. Also, in most cases, a detainee will be subjected to more than one torture method.

In 2023, SNHR documented the deaths of no fewer than eight individuals, including one woman, due to torture and medical negligence at HTS’ hands. By contrast, the group was responsible for the death of one individual due to torture in 2022.

Abdul Karim Ahmad al-Shbeib, a 33-year-old man from Mardbakh village in eastern rural Idlib governorate, was arrested in November 2021 by HTS personnel who raided his place of residence in the Atma camps group near Atma village in northern rural Idlib governorate. On Sunday, March 12, 2023, his family learnt that HTS had transferred Abdul Karim’s body to the forensic clinic in Idlib city.
5. All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA)

a. Extrajudicial killing

Armed opposition factions/SNA have been responsible for many unlawful killings that occurred in the course of infighting between different factions, leading to civilian deaths. Ground attacks by those groups targeting areas under the control of other parties have also led to civilian deaths, including of children. In 2023, we documented the killing of 17 civilians, including five children and one woman (adult female) at the hands of all armed opposition factions/SNA, while in 2022 we documented the killing of 24 civilians, including seven children and five women (adult female) at the hands of these groups.

Distribution of the 17 civilian deaths that occurred in 2023 at the hands of all armed opposition factions/SNA by month

![Graph showing distribution of civilian deaths by month]

Some notable incidents of extrajudicial killing

Ayyoush Mohammad al-Azzoum a 55-year-old woman from al-Danah village in eastern rural Aleppo, was killed on Sunday, April 16, 2023, by members of the ‘Fereq al-Hamza’ [al-Hamza Squads], an SNA faction, who opened fire at the car she was travelling in in al-Sukarriyat village in eastern rural Aleppo while she was heading for an SDF-controlled area. The area was under the control of the SNA at the time of the incident.

Abdul Rahman Hamid al-Ahmad and Hassan Ali al-Ibeid, two boys aged 11 and 14 respectively, were killed along with police officer Ismail al-Jaad’ an al-Abboud on Wednesday, July 5, 2023, when they were caught in crossfire at an SNA checkpoint in Ras al-Ein city in rural Hasaka governorate during armed clashes between personnel from the SNA’s ‘Ferqat al-Sultan’ [Al-Sultan Squad], and the civilian police officers manning the checkpoint. The area was under the control of the SNA at the time of the incident.
b. Arbitrary detention/enforced disappearance

In 2023, all armed opposition factions/SNA carried out arbitrary and widespread detentions and abductions, including of women and children, which were carried out on a mass scale. These detentions and abductions primarily targeted individuals traveling from regime-controlled areas to visit their relatives or to cross into Türkiye, with the SNA claiming that it was arresting these individuals to check their backgrounds. Those detained in this way were held for periods ranging from weeks to months without being charged with any offence or put on trial. We also documented detentions of an ethnic character, with these incidents concentrated in the areas under the control of the armed opposition factions/SNA in Aleppo governorate. Most of these arrests occurred without judicial authorization, and without the participation of the police force, which is the sole legitimate administrative authority authorized by the judiciary to carry out arrests and detentions, and without any clear charges being brought against the detainees. As we have noted, these arrests were carried out by various armed opposition factions as a means of pressurizing or intimidating civilians, or to seize their properties. The SNA has also arrested civilians on the pretext of their allegedly working with the SDF.

SNHR also documented raids and arrests carried out by the armed opposition factions/SNA targeting civilians who were on their way to participate in a sit-in held in front of the home of civilians shot dead on March 20, 2023, by members of the SNA’s Jaish al-Sharqiya [Army of al-Sharqiya] faction, as the victims were trying to build a fire in celebration of the Kurdish New Year, known as Nowruz, in Jendeires town which is administratively a part of Afrin city Aleppo governorate.

Additionally, the SNA’s civilian police arrested a number of activists and civilians over their objection to changing the names of schools in the SNA-controlled city of al-Bab in eastern rural Aleppo governorate. Some SNA personnel also targeted citizens in retaliation for their demands that their properties be returned to them after some members of the SNA’s Ferqat al-Sultan faction had confiscated these properties. The detained citizens were released only after pledging to give up their claims of ownership of their homes. These arrests were concentrated in some villages that are administratively part of Afrin city in rural Aleppo.

Furthermore, members of the Jaish Suriya al-Hurra [Free Syria Army], an armed opposition faction, carried out a raid and detention campaign targeting various civilians, including chiefs of the Homs tribes, in al-Rukban Camp on the Syrian-Jordanian borders in eastern Homs governorate.

In 2023, we documented that all armed opposition factions/HTS detained no fewer than 365 individuals, including 10 children and 25 women. Of these, 93 have been released. Meanwhile, 272 of the 365, have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance. In 2022, we documented that 369 individuals, including four children and 28 women, were detained by these groups.

Distribution of the 365 detentions carried out at the hands of all armed opposition factions/SNA in 2023 by month:
As shown on the graph, November saw a significantly high number of arrests due to armed opposition factions/SNA carrying out widespread detentions, targeting dozens of civilians on the pretext of their working with the SDF, as well as in connection with freedom of expression over their participation in demonstrations held on a Friday that was dubbed by activist as the ‘Lan Nusaleh’ [We Will Not Make Peace] Friday in rural Aleppo governorate.

**Some notable cases and incidents of arbitrary arrest**

On Saturday, February 18, 2023, members of the Jaish Suryia al-Hurra [Free Syria Army], an armed opposition faction, arrested five civilians, including one child, in a raid and arrest campaign in al-Rukban Camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border in eastern Homs governorate. Three of those arrested were released on March 3, 2023, while the fate of the other two remains unknown.

A statement released on February 21, 2023, by the Tribal Council of Palmyra condemning the arrests in al-Rukban Camp.

**Asia Ahmad Haydar,** a woman from Ketekh village (administratively a part of Afrin city) in northern rural Aleppo governorate, was arrested on Wednesday, April 5, 2023, by SNA members who raided her house in her home village over her participation in a sit-in demonstration held in front of the home of the four civilians shot dead on March 20, 2023, by members of the SNA’s Jaish al-Sharqiya [the Army of the East] faction, as they were trying to build a fire as part of the celebrations for the Kurdish New Year, known as Nowruz. We documented her release the following day.

On May 24, 2023, the SNA’s Military Police arrested three civilians, including one woman, from the same family in a raid and arrest campaign on Kafrdali village, administratively a part of Afrin city, in northern rural Aleppo governorate over accusations of their working with the SDF. All three were taken to an SNA detention center.

**Lazkin Saleh,** a cardiologist from Kourzileh village, administratively a part of Afrin city, in northern rural Aleppo governorate, was arrested on Tuesday, September 5, 2023, by SNA personnel who raided his home in Afrin city. He was released on September 28, 2023.
Emad Hassan, a 49-year-old man from Khalniza village, administratively affiliated with Afrin city in north-western Aleppo governorate, was arrested/detained on Wednesday, November 15, 2023, by personnel from the SNA’s Military Police over his demanding the return of his house in the village which had been seized by the SNA’s al-Sultan Murad faction.

c. torture in detention centers

In 2023, some armed opposition factions/SNA continued their torture practices against civilian detainees in their various detention centers.

In 2023, SNHR documented the deaths of three individuals due to torture and medical negligence at the hands of all armed opposition factions/SNA, the same number whose deaths by the same causes they were documented as being responsible for in 2022.

Bassil Mohammad Jakish, from Salamiya city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate, was arrested on May 19, 2023, by personnel from the SNA’s Military Police in Izaz city in rural Aleppo governorate as he was attempting to travel from regime-held areas to SNA-held areas in rural Aleppo governorate on his way to irregularly cross into Türkiye. He was taken to an SNA detention center in Izaz city. On Saturday, May 27, 2023, SNHR received information confirming that he had died in Izaz city’s National Hospital after the SNA transferred him there. SNHR can confirm that he was in good health at the time of this arrest, indicating a strong possibility that he had died due to torture and medical negligence.

6. Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (mainly composed of the Democratic Union Party, known as the PYD)

The SDF’s policies saw no changes in 2023 in relation to its management of areas under its control. That is to say that the group continued to commit gross violations against civilians, ranging from killing, arrest, and torture, to siege and conscription. The group also continued its oppressive policies against residents of the territories under its control, who are denied freedom of expression and freedom of movement. Regarding the latter, the SDF has restricted freedom of movement by establishing military checkpoints within its territories or on the border separating SDF-controlled territories with those controlled by other parties.

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57 In July 2012, some groups affiliated with the PYD emerged in Syria and began taking over some areas of Syrian territory. Subsequently, those groups were rebranded as the Kurdish Self-Administration, which was officially established in January 2014. At the request of the US-Led International Coalition against ISIS, in particular the US administration, the PYD unveiled a restructuring of its forces on October 10, 2015, by enlisting Arab and Assyrian components, and announced the formation of the ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’ (SDF), which managed to take over northeastern Syria with the help of the US-led International Coalition. Since its foundation, the SDF has carried out indiscriminate bombardment against other parties’ territories, and been involved in clashes in populated areas. In many cases, we recorded SDF members indiscriminately opening fire from checkpoints, in markets, or during raids. We’ve also documented the deaths of a number of victims at the hands of SDF snipers, in addition to documenting summary and arbitrary executions carried out by SDF personnel in areas controlled by the group.
a. Extrajudicial killing

In our daily monitoring, we identified a number of patterns that marked the extrajudicial killings carried out by the SDF in 2023. These include:

- We documented a number of killings by SDF personnel, including some carried out during the pursuit of civilians, with some of the victims of these incidents being children.

- We recorded the killing of a number of civilians during clashes between the SDF and the Deir Ez-Zour Council, which is supported by Arab tribes.

- The indiscriminate bombardment carried out by the SDF resulted in civilian deaths and injuries, including of children and women. We have also documented instances of the group targeting IDPs camps in SNA-controlled areas, which also resulted in casualties. Furthermore, there have been incidents in which the SDF targeted IDPs as they were fleeing areas under its control.

- We documented the killing of a number of civilians by SDF-operated drones. The incidents we were able to document have been concentrated in Deir Ez-Zour.

- We also documented killings by SDF snipers.

SNHR documented the killing of 74 civilians, including nine children and 10 women (adult female) at the hands of the SDF in 2023. Of those killed by the SDF in 2023, four civilians, including one woman, were killed by snipers. By contrast, in 2022, 76 civilians were killed by the SDF, including 11 children and six women (adult female), while the group committed one massacre, and one civilian was killed by an SDF sniper.

**Distribution of the 74 civilian deaths at the hands of the SDF by month:**

[Graph showing distribution by month]
Some notable civilian deaths at the hands of the SDF

On Monday, January 16, 2023, Zahra Ali al-Hassan, a woman born in 1987, was shot dead by an SDF sniper in her home village of Hazwan in eastern rural Aleppo. The village, situated to the west of al-Bab city, was under the control of the SNA at the time of the incident, and is located close to the dividing lines between areas under the SNA’s control and those controlled by the SDF.

On Sunday, May 14, 2023, Turki Abdul Rahman, a 15-year-old boy from al-Mrouh village to the south of Manbij city in eastern rural Aleppo, died when he fell into a well in Abu Kahf village to the southwest of Manbij city in eastern Aleppo governorate, as he was trying to flee SDF personnel who caught him carrying a fuel container which he was trying to smuggle from the regime-controlled al-Tayha area to an area controlled by the SDF. The area was under the control of the SDF at the time of the incident.

On Wednesday, August 9, 2013, SDF personnel used a rocket launcher to fire multiple rockets targeting the Kuwait al-Rahma IDPs Camp, located near an area known as Harsh al-Khaldiya near Tranda village in Jabal al-Ahlan area in the southeast of Afrin city in northwestern rural Aleppo governorate. The bombardment killed one civilian, identified as Sameh Mahmoud Tabbakh, and injured five others, including three children and one woman. The bombardment also partially destroyed a number of IDPs’ residences, in addition to causing a state of panic among the camp’s residents. The area was under the control of the SNA at the time of the incident.

b. Arbitrary arrest/enforced disappearance

In 2023, SDF personnel continued their policies of arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance which did not exclude women and children, with these arrests carried out in raids or at checkpoints. Most of the SDF’s raids and detentions are accompanied by random indiscriminate gunfire, as well as physical beatings of civilians, and breaking into and looting homes.

The SDF’s arrests targeted civilians, activists, politicians, students, teachers, and workers at some of the SDF’s own institutions. Some of these arrests were carried out on the pretext of combating ISIS, with international coalition forces taking part in some of these operations. Others were arrested for voicing criticism of the living and service conditions in SDF-controlled areas, with arrests concentrated in the governorates of Hasaka, Deir Ez-Zour, and Raqqa. Those arrests also involved the SDF seizing sums of money and mobile phones belonging to the detainees.

We also documented the SDF’s arrest of a number of civilians upon their return to their homes in SDF-held areas following the destruction of their asylum residences in Türkiye in the February 6 earthquakes.

Furthermore, we documented the SDF’s arrest of a number of teachers after they took part in a strike calling for improved wages and the cancelation of the conscription policies imposed by the SDF in areas under its control.

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58 Established on September 1, 2015, the Kuwait al-Rahma IDPs Camp is a collection of concrete-built residences housing around 250 IDPs, which is run by the humanitarian group Sham al-Kheir.
The SDF has also targeted members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (PDK-S), with these arrests being concentrated in Hasaka governorate. The SDF also detained some of the civilians who took part in the demonstrations against the group after it raised fuel prices, with these arrests being concentrated in the areas under the group’s control in rural Aleppo governorate.

The SDF also arrested civilians on the pretext of their alleged involvement in ongoing clashes between the SDF and Arab tribes in Deir Ez-Zour governorate, as well as detaining civilians for conscription, with these detainees taken to SDF military training camps. These arrests have been concentrated in Manbij city and affiliated villages in Aleppo governorate.

SDF personnel also continue to abduct children for the purpose of military conscription, taking these children to military training camps where they are not allowed to contact their families, and refusing to disclose their fate.

SNHR documented the SDF’s arrest of no fewer than 641 individuals in 2023, including 91 children and six women. Of these, 118 were subsequently released, mostly as part of understandings with local tribes, while 523 were subsequently categorized as cases of enforced disappearance. In 2022, meanwhile, SDF personnel were responsible for the arrest of at least 633 individuals, including 93 children and 10 women. It should be noted that some of this and every other year’s SDF arrests have exhibited an ethnic character.

**Distribution of the 641 arrests/detentions by the SDF by month:**

As shown on the graph, SDF arrests reached their highest levels this year in the months of September and November, which is explained by the group carrying out widespread arrests during these months, most of them on a mass scale, targeting civilians in areas under the SDF’s control on the pretext of their involvement in clashes between the group and Arab tribes in Deir Ez-Zour governorate. The group also carried out arrest campaigns in which civilians were detained and taken to SDF military training camps.
Some notable incidents and cases of arbitrary detention

On Sunday, April 9, 2023, SDF members, backed by an international coalition helicopter, carried out a raid and arrest/detention campaign in Abu al-Netal village in northern rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of three civilians from the village, who were taken to an undisclosed location.

On Saturday, May 20, 2023, SDF personnel carried out a raid and arrest campaign in the Hawayej Boums’a and Mheimda IDP camps in western rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of 12 civilians from Deir Ez-Zour city, who were taken to an undisclosed location.

**Barzan Hussein Layani**, born in 1973, a media worker from Ma’bada town in northeastern rural Hasaka governorate, who’s employed by the KDP-S, was arrested in his hometown on Tuesday, August 15, 2023, by SDF personnel in a raid on his workplace there. He was released on September 30, 2023.

A 70-year-old man, identified as Mudres Moushid Hammou Beerou, from Halnaj village, administratively affiliated with Ein al-Arab city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate, was detailed in the village on Wednesday, September 20, 2023, by personnel from the SDF’s al-Shabiba al-Thawriya, (Revolutionary Youth) faction, also known as the ‘Joanne Schurchkar’. Mudres was taken to an SDF detention center over his participation in an anti-SDF demonstration held over the group increasing fuel prices in Ein al-Arab city. While the al-Shabiba al-Thawriya released Mudres Moushid Hammou Beerou later the same day, his family had to transfer him to al-Amal Hospital in Ein al-Arab city to receive medical attention following his release, as he had sustained multiple fractures to his right hand and foot in detention. SNHR has acquired a number of photos, now archived on our database, showing clear signs of brutal torture on different parts of his body, which were clearly the result of him being subjected to various methods of torture.

Three brothers, identified as Najeh, Khalaf, and Bassam al-Bashir al-Saeed, were arrested on Thursday, October 19, 2023, by SDF personnel in a raid on Najeh’s house in his hometown of al-Jarthi in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate over accusations of bombing an SDF military vehicle in the town a few days before. The three were then taken to an undisclosed location. The SDF also demolished Najeh al-Saeed’s house following his arrest. We documented the release of Bassam and Khalaf al-Bashir al-Saeed on October 23, 2023, while Najeh’s fate remains unknown.
On Wednesday, November 1, 2023, the SDF’s Military Police intensified their arrests/detentions at check-points in the city of Manbij and in surrounding villages in eastern rural Aleppo governorate for the purpose of military conscription. SNHR documented the arrest of 11 civilians, who were taken to an undisclosed location.

Majd Hussein al-Hmoud, was arrested/detained on Wednesday, November 22, 2023, by the SDF at a check-point in his hometown of al-Hawayej in eastern Deir Ez-Zour governorate on the pretext of being affiliated with the Arab tribal forces, and taken to an undisclosed location.

c. Torture in detention centers

In both 2022 and 2021, we noticed a significant rise in the number of victims who died due to torture at the hands of the SDF. Indeed, this is evidenced by the fact that the group has returned some of its victims’ bodies to their families bearing signs of torture.

In 2023, we again documented more deaths due to torture and medical negligence in SDF detention centers, with these violations further proven by the fact that the group returned some of its victims’ bodies to their families clearly bearing signs of torture.

The SDF routinely uses torture in its detention centers against detainees and abductees as a mean of extracting confessions. In many cases, this torture is marked by a vengeful and ethnic character. While the methods of torture used by the SDF vary, they are largely similar to those used by Syrian regime forces. According to the accounts we have collected, the SDF’s detention centers are heavily overcrowded with prisoners who are held in extremely poor conditions in terms of healthcare, sanitation, and food. In fact, many of those released from SDF detention centers in 2023 exhibited signs suggesting severe malnutrition and poor physical and mental health.

SNHR documented no fewer than 10 deaths, including one child, due to torture and medical negligence in SDF detention centers in 2023. By contrast, we documented 14 deaths due to these causes in SDF detention centers in 2022.

It should also be noted that the SDF continues to hold tens of thousands of Syrian citizens, including children, in al-Hawl Camp in an isolated desert area, along with thousand others from other nationalities, without any legal justification and without presenting any judicial warrants, with most having been held in the camp for years. Indeed, the harsh detention conditions, as well as the abysmal living conditions, including lack of food and medical care, constitute various forms of psychological and physical torture.

Some notable deaths due to torture

Walid Mansour al-Mhemid, a 40-year-old man from Homs governorate who was living and working in Manbij city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate as an elementary school teacher, was arrested on Saturday, August 5, 2023, by SDF personnel following a verbal dispute between him and a clerk at the ‘kafala’ (sponsorship) renewal office (the SDF requires that IDPs living in areas under their control have a sponsor) in al-Serb neighborhood in Manbij city. He was then taken to al-Maliya Prison in Manbij city, where he was tortured to death. On Tuesday, August 8, 2023, the SDF informed his family of his death and returned his body to them.
Ibtahim Mesleh al-Medad, was arrested on Monday, June 24, 2019, by SDF personnel near his house in his home city of al-Shahil in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour governate. He was imprisoned for nearly four years by the SDF until his release on Thursday, March 16, 2023. The photos below shows the obvious differences in his physical condition and the deterioration of his state of health before and after his detention.

Safwan Belal al-Hebel, from Jdeed Ekidat town in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was arrested by the SDF in 2018 over accusations of being affiliated with ISIS. He was taken to an undisclosed location and imprisoned for five years.

On Friday, March 17, 2023, he was released by the SDF from al-Kum al-Sini Prison in southern Hasaka governate. The photos below shows the clear differences in his physical condition and the deterioration in his state of health before and after his detention.

d. Protected persons and objects

i. Medical sector

SNHR has documented no fewer than four attacks on medical facilities at the hands of the SDF in 2023. By contrast, we documented two attacks on medical facilities at the hands of the SDF in 2022.

On Saturday, September 2, 2023, SDF gunmen raided the dispensary in al-Hreija town in northern rural Deir Ez-Zour governate, and stationed personnel around it, using it as a military base. On the morning of Tuesday, September 5, they withdrew from the dispensary after pillaging all of its equipment. The town was under the control of the SDF at the time of the incident.

It should be noted that this raid took place in the context of clashes between the SDF and the Deir Ez-Zour Council backed by Arab tribes that initially broke out across rural Deir Ez-Zour governate on August 27, 2023.

We also documented the SDF’s detention of a number of medical personnel in 2023. Some of these arrests were carried out during raids on medical facilities. In this context, we documented no fewer than four detentions of medical personnel at the SDF’s hands.
On Sunday, September 10, 2023, Ahmad al-Yousef, who was working as a security guard at Hajin Hospital in his home city of Hajin in eastern Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was arrested by SDF personnel in a raid on the hospital, as a way to pressurize his brother into surrendering himself to the SDF. Ahmad was then taken to an undisclosed location.

**ii. Educational sector**

SNHR has recorded no fewer than 31 attacks on educational facilities by the SDF in 2023. By contrast, we recorded five attacks on medical facilities by the SDF in 2022.

Between Tuesday 5 and Thursday, September 7, 2023, SDF personnel took over the al-Hamdan, al-Swyejien, and al-Hasayya schools in Theyban town in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate and turned them all into military bases. The town was under the control of the SDF at the time of the incident.

It should be noted that this incident took place in the context of clashes between the SDF and the Deir Ez-Zour Council backed by Arab tribes that broke out across rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate on August 27, 2023.

**iii. Places of worship**

SNHR documented no fewer than two attacks on places of worship by the SDF in 2023. By contrast, we documented one attack on a place of worship by the group in 2022.

On Wednesday, September 6, 2023, an SDF artillery detachment fired multiple shells that struck the Omar bin al-Khattab Mosque in Oulshalli village to the northwest of Manbij city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate. The bombardment partially destroyed the mosque’s building and heavily damaged its interior furnishings. The attack also injured three medical workers who had gone into the mosque to take shelter from the heavy bombardment targeting the village at the time. The village was under the control of the SNA at the time of the incident.
7. **US-led International Coalition forces**

a. **Extrajudicial killing**

Launched on September 23, 2014, the US-led International Coalition entered its tenth year in 2023. However, ever since the Coalition announced its elimination of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from al-Baghouz town, ISIS’ last stronghold in the country, in March 2019, the coalition’s operations have declined in scale, largely shifting to raids carried out jointly with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to eliminate the remaining ISIS cells.

We documented the killing of **five civilians** at the hands of the US-led International Coalition in 2023, while we documented no civilian deaths at the Coalition’s hands in 2022.

On Wednesday, May 3, 2023, Lutfi Hassan Mastou, a 60-year-old man, was killed by an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), commonly known as a drone, believed to have been operated by the US-led International Coalition. The drone fired a rocket that targeted Lutfi while he was herding sheep on the outskirts of his home village of Qurqaniya in northwestern rural Idlib. The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time. On May 18, 2023, Michael Lawhorn, a spokesman for the Coalition’s Central Command (CENTCOM), acknowledged that officials were aware of reports about a civilian casualty, saying that they were assessing the situation, and adding, “CENTCOM takes all such allegations seriously, and is investigating to determine whether or not the action may have unintentionally resulted in harm to civilians.”

8. **Other parties**

SNHR’s documentation comprises various categories of violations perpetrated in 2023, including victims killed in bombings by unidentified parties, by gunfire by unidentified assailants, by landmines and by shells of unidentified source, as well as victims killed by unidentified parties or by drowning, and those killed by Jordanian, Turkish, or Lebanese forces.

Within this category, SNHR documented the killing of no fewer than **674 civilians** in 2023, including 102 children and 74 women (adult females), as well as two media workers and four deaths due to torture, while no fewer than 14 massacres were committed by other parties in 2023. By contrast, we recorded the killing of **724 civilians**, in 2022, including 193 children and 73 women (adult female), as well as one media worker and six medical personnel, in addition to six massacres.

The bombings and attacks classified within this category included about nine attacks on vital civilian facilities, including one attack on a medical facility. By contrast, other parties were responsible for about 37 attacks on vital civilian facilities in 2022, including three attacks on medical facilities and five on educational facilities.
Some notable civilian deaths

On Friday, January 6, 2023, Mahmoud al-Ibeid, a boy from al-Zafar village which is administratively affiliated with Abu al-Thoghour in eastern rural Idlib, was killed by the explosion of a 23-mm machine gun shell left over by previous bombardment by unidentified parties, while he was harvesting potatoes on agricultural land near Zardana town in northern rural Idlib. The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

On Wednesday, January 18, 2023, the body of Shahd Assad al-Ghnami, a seven-year-old girl from al-Sayyal village in the rural areas of al-Boukamal in eastern Deir Ez-Zour governorate, was found by local residents bearing signs of torture and burn wounds in an abandoned house in al-Masaken area in al-Boukamal city. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

On Saturday, February 11, 2023, a young Syrian civilian man died after he was assaulted by personnel from Turkey’s Gendarmerie who used metal bars to beat him in the Der Sawwan area of northern Izaz city in northern rural Aleppo, on the Syrian-Turkish borders. The young man, who had been trying to illegally cross over into Turkey, died in the hospital. The area was under the control of the SNA at the time of the incident.

On Thursday, March 23, 2023, the bodies of seven civilians were found by local residents in the area between Jarf Marina and Hariba in eastern Athriya rural Salamiya in the eastern ‘badiya’ or desert area of Hama in eastern rural Hama. The victims had been killed while they were searching for desert truffles. It is suspected that they were killed either by regime personnel and Iranian militias or by ISIS-affiliated groups. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces and Iranian militias at the time of the incident.

On Monday, April 3, 2023, 23-year-old media worker Ahmad Fa‘our al-Saa’di was shot dead by unidentified gunmen near his house in al-Mzayreeb town in western Daraa. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident. Ahmad was a member of an armed opposition faction before the Syrian regime took over Daraa governorate in 2018, since which he had worked as a media activist with the Shahed Media Agency, and most recently as a reporter with the local news website 18 Athar (18 March).

On Sunday, July 9, 2023, five civilians, including a child, were killed, and three others, also including a child, were injured by a car bomb whose source we have not yet been able to identify, which exploded immediately after the vehicle to which it had been affixed stopped in front of a car repair workshop in Shawa village in al-Ra’ie area in eastern rural Aleppo. The area was under the control of SNA at the time of the incident.
On Sunday, July 16, 2023, a Ahmad Mohammad al-Salim al-Abd al-Safira, a 16-year-old boy from Ma’dan town in the rural Raqqa governorate, was killed by the explosion of a landmine whose source we have not yet been able to identify that exploded under the car he was in, along with his father, while they were on their way to their work as shepherds in al-Qasabi’ badiya’ (desert) in western rural Deir Ez-Zour governorate. The explosion also wounded the boy’s father. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

On Wednesday, August 9, 2023, 38-year-old Firas Ghassan al-Aqayla, who worked as a reporter for the pro-regime Sama TV Channel was killed along with four others when a vehicle they were travelling in with a number of regime servicemen was targeted using an IED planted by unidentified parties in al-Shayyah area in southern Daraa city. The vehicle was returning from the Syrian-Jordanian border where they had been filming footage for a report on Syrian regime forces protecting the borders and combating drug trafficking to neighboring countries. Firas, originally from al-Sheikh Maskin city in northern rural Daraa, was a resident of Daraa city at the time of his death. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

On Friday, August 25, 2023, four children, two of them siblings, were killed by the explosion of a landmine whose source we have not yet been able to identify, while they were harvesting shaflah (caper berries) near their home village of Qart Weran located to the northwest of Manbij city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate. The area was under the control of the SDF at the time of the incident.

On Tuesday, September 26, 2023, the body of Mohammad al-Hussein al-Abdul Razzaq, the mukhtar (headman) of Mahkan town in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour, was found bearing gunshot wounds by other local residents near the bank of the Euphrates River in the town. The area was under the control of Syrian regime forces at the time of the incident.

**Some notable attacks on vital civilian facilities**

On Friday, June 16, 2023, artillery forces believed to be Turkish, who were stationed at one of the Turkish medical clinics spread across the SNA-controlled areas in northern Aleppo governorate, fired multiple shells at Tal Ref‘at city in northern rural Aleppo governorate. A number of these shells landed near Tal Ref‘at Hospital on the southern outskirts of the city, injuring four individuals, moderately damaging the hospital’s building and its cladding materials and shattering the glass windscreen and windows of one of the ambulances. Tal Ref‘at city was under the SDF’s control at the time of the incident.
III. Most Notable Political, Military, and Human Rights Developments and Investigations on Syria in 2023

This is an attempt to show how political developments were linked with the developments on the ground in order to better understand the reality in Syria. This is, however, in no way a justification for any human rights violation no matter what form these have taken.

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A. Noteworthy political developments in 2023

On January 3, Ned Price, the spokesperson for the US Department of State, said in a press briefing, “We do not support countries upgrading their relations or expressing support to rehabilitate the brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad.” Price also noted that the US’s position remained firm on supporting a Syrian-led political resolution in line with Security Council resolution 2254.

On January 28, the EU issued a statement strongly condemning the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons. The statement added that the findings of the previous report by the OPCW’s Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) confirmed that the Syrian regime has systematically failed to comply with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and Security Council resolution 2118. The statement further noted that the professional reporting by the OPCW’s IIT is an “important contribution to efforts to end impunity for the use of chemical weapons.”

On January 28, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement noting that Türkiye would continue to support the efforts towards ensuring accountability in Syria, especially those of the UN and the OPCW.

On January 28, Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement affirming that the State of Qatar expressed its full support for the international efforts that aim to hold the Syrian regime accountable for its horrifying crimes against the Syrian people, and to ensure that war criminals in Syria are brought to international justice. The statement added that any political resolution in Syria would not yield successful and sustainable outcomes unless those who are involved in committing such horrific crimes are held accountable.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates released a statement on January 28 rejecting the OPCW’s latest report completely, and asserting that the report “lacks any scientific and objective evidence.”

On February 2, Al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper published an interview with Catherine Colonna, France’s Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, in which she revealed that the Syrian regime was stubbornly refusing to negotiate on the basis of sustained peace proposed in the UN Security Council. She added that France was not keen to normalize relations with a regime that had been once again been found responsible for using chemical weapons in Douma city on April 7, 2018, and which had dismissed and rejected the impartial findings reached by investigations conducted by independent experts.

On February 3, the official Twitter account of the EU mission to Syria tweeted, “There will be no normalizing, no lifting the sanctions, and no reconstruction until Damascus agrees to be involved in a political transition process and fully implement Security Council resolution 2254.”

On February 7, the OPCW’s Director-General, Fernando Arias, briefed the Security Council on the findings of the OPCW’s IIM published in its third report released on January 27 regarding the chemical attack in Douma city, Damascus suburbs on April 7, 2018. Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, noted that the efforts made by the OPCW’s Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) to settle the 20 outstanding issues with relation to the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapon program had made no progress since the previous UN Security Council meeting on this issue. In the aftermath of the OPCW Director-General’s briefing, eight states, namely the US, UK, France, Switzerland, Japan, Malta, Albania, and Ecuador, issued a joint statement stressing that “impunity for the use of chemical weapons, by anyone, in any circumstances, cannot and will not be allowed.”
On February 9, the US Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued a resolution authorizing, for 180 days, any transactions related to the earthquake relief efforts in Syria, which had been prohibited under the US sanctions laws. On February 22, the US Department of Treasury published on its official website a compliance guide clarifying which transactions are authorized in relation to the earthquake relief efforts.

On February 15, Ned Price, the spokesperson for the US Secretary of State, said in a press conference that US did not support the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime. “We are not changing our approach to the Assad regime,” he noted. “The humanitarian situation on the ground is our overriding focus at the moment. It is the humanitarian situation that has been made all the more dire and urgent by the earthquake. It’s a humanitarian situation that in large part has its roots in the Assad regime’s treatment of its own people.”

On February 23, the Council of the European Union released a statement in which it noted that, in light of the serious humanitarian crisis made worse by the earthquake, the Council had decided to amend the restrictive measures in place regarding Syria to facilitate the speedy delivery of humanitarian aid.

On March 1, the UN Security Council published the 113th report by the Director General of the OPCW on the elimination of the Syrian regime’s chemical weapon program. The report noted that the efforts by the OPCW’s Secretariat to arrange the next round of consultations between the OPCW’s DAT and the Syrian regime continued to yield no results, adding that the Secretariat had concluded that the Syrian regime’s deceleration of work on its chemical weapon program could not be considered accurate and complete in accordance with the CWC.

On March 7, Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in a statement read before the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council that Syria represents a microcosm of the tragedies that human rights violations can inflict. The earthquakes of the previous month, he added, had also created further tragedies. He also stressed that the only path forward must be through respecting human rights, and ensuring proper accountability for all those who have committed atrocity crimes. Moreover, he expressed his full support for a new institution focused specifically on clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, and providing support to victims.

On March 6, Syrian regime head Bashar Assad hosted a meeting with Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. SANA reported that Mr. Grandi stated that the UN refugee agency would intensify its efforts and work in Syria “to support the humanitarian response of the Syrian state in the face of the earthquake catastrophe and the massive human and material damages resulting from the earthquake.”

SNHR stresses that sending relief aid through the Syrian regime and the organizations founded by the regime’s security agencies might shift the actions of donor states and organizations involved from the status of humanitarian work to that of supporting and funding the terrorism and crimes against humanity that the Syrian regime had committed and was and is still committing against its people. We have released several reports on this matter.

On March 10, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, released a statement stressing that no progress towards sustainable peace could be made in a climate of impunity for the perpetrators of violations.
On March 16, the US Department of State released a joint statement with the governments of France, Germany, and the UK, marking the twelfth anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria. The statement stressed that the international community should work towards holding the Syrian regime and other perpetrators of violations accountable for their crimes. In closing, the statement reiterated that the signatory states would not normalize relations with the Syrian regime, nor would they fund any reconstruction process until there is real and sustainable progress towards a political resolution.

On March 17, OHCHR released a statement noting that, 12 years into the conflict, Syria remained deeply divided, with the people being bombed by the regime, in addition to many other forces and active parties committing violations against the country’s people. The statement concluded by stressing that the interests of the Syrian people must be prioritized and every effort should be made to reach a peaceful, negotiated resolution in order to put Syria on a path towards a stable, preposterous, and just future for all Syrians.

On March 20, under the auspices of the European Union, the International Donors’ Conference for the people of Türkiye and Syria was held in the Belgian capital, Brussels. The conference was attended by 60 delegations from EU member states, and EU partners, including the UN, international and European financial institutions, but with no Syrian representatives. In the concluding statement, the attendants pledged to raise €911 million for Syria without specifying how those funds would be distributed between the regime-held areas and the areas outside the Syrian regime’s control in northwestern Syria. In any case, the statement noted that the funds would be used to cover humanitarian needs and support early recovery and resilience.

On March 23, the US Department of State released a joint statement with the governments of Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Norway, Qatar, KSA, UAE, the EU, and the League of Arab States, following a meeting held in Amman, Jordan on March 21 to discuss the situation in Syria in the wake of the earthquakes that hit the country. The statement reads, “We encouraged the international community to provide humanitarian assistance - including both emergency response and early recovery projects - to all Syrians in need, especially those in the worst affected areas.”

On March 28, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, called for creating a new body to reveal the fate of missing persons in Syria. Mr. Guterres stressed that Syrians deserve to know what happened to their loved ones, underscoring the importance of such a mandate for justice and for bringing about peace and reconciliation.

On April 15, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement following a meeting held by the Gulf foreign ministers, and their Jordanian, Egyptian, and Iraqi counterparts. On Syria, the statement said that the ministers had agreed on the importance of bringing about a resolution to the humanitarian crisis, fostering a suitable environment to deliver humanitarian assistance to all parts of Syria, creating the necessary conditions for the return of Syrian refugees and IDPs to their areas, ending their suffering, and enabling them to return safely to their home country, and taking more action towards stabilizing the situation in all of Syria. The statement said that a political solution is the only viable solution to the crisis in Syria.
On May 10, a quadrilateral meeting was held in Moscow by the foreign ministers of Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and the Syrian regime. The attendees agreed to commission the deputies of each foreign minister to devise a roadmap to further develop relations between Turkey and Syria in coordination with each of the four states’ ministries of defense and intelligence. The attendees also underscored the importance of advancing the political process in Syria in line with Security Council resolution 2254 and establishing the necessary infrastructure for the safe return of Syrian refugees.

On May 20, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the US released a joint statement emphasizing the G7 states’ position of refusing to normalize relations with the Syrian regime or contribute to the reconstruction process as long as no progress has been made with respect to the political resolution process. Paragraph 59 of the G7 Hiroshima Leaders’ Communiqué asserts that the G7 states “remain firmly committed to an inclusive, UN-facilitated political process consistent with UNSCR 2254 in Syria.” The statement further warned that the international community “should only consider normalization and reconstruction assistance once there is authentic and enduring progress towards a political solution.” Moreover, the G7 states expressed their continued support for the OPCW’s work as well as their commitment to holding accountable those responsible for the use of chemical weapons and violations of international law.

On May 23, the Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency reported a statement by Catherine Colonna, France’s Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, asserting that the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad, should be tried for his responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of victims and the use of chemical weapons. Ms. Colonna asserted that it was “not planned” for Europe to lift sanctions on the Syrian regime, as Paris would not change its position towards the regime.

On June 14-15, the EU held its Seventh Brussels Conference on ‘Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region’. On the conference’s second day, a total of 57 state representatives and figures from over 30 organizations, including the UN, as well as EU agencies, attended the ministerial meeting. The Conference’s closing statement revealed that donors had pledged €5.6 billion “for 2023 and beyond, including €4.6 billion for 2023 and €1 billion for 2024 and beyond.” It is worth noting that this year’s pledges fell far short of the previous year’s €6.4 billion. We have expressed our disappointment on numerous occasions about the fact that the Brussels Conference has been turned into a charitable fundraising event for the Syrian people that ignores the political and human rights issues, which were one of the conference’s goals in its initial format. As such, the conference failed to take any serious action to help ensure safety for civilians or to put pressure on the active parties towards actualizing a political transition process or to make progress with respect to accountability.

On June 18, the EU released a statement stressing that the conditions for the EU to restore relations with the Syrian regime and change its position on Syria had not been met. The statement drew upon SNHR’s data which confirmed that violations continue to be perpetrated daily in the country.

On June 18, Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative, issued a joint press release with Ahmed Aboul Gheit, the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, reiterating that the EU’s position on the Syrian regime will not change until the regime makes progress in line with Security Council resolution 2254. The statement further revealed that “the [Sixth Ministerial Meeting between the EU and the Arab League] had to be postponed. It was scheduled for this week, and it had to be postponed due to the readmission of Syria to the League of Arab States.”
On June 20-21, the 20th round of the Astana talks was held in the Kazakhstani capital Astana, featuring representatives from the guarantor states (Turkey, Russia, and Iran), and a delegation from the Syrian regime, as well as another from the Syrian opposition. On its official website, the Kazakhstani Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a joint closing statement by the guarantor states.

On July 3, Russia’s TASS News Agency reported a statement by Sergey Naryshkin, the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), who claimed that the US was doing everything possible to sabotage the Arab world’s normalization of relations with the Syrian regime in order “to discredit the Syrian leadership.” He added that “toward this end, false flag attacks are being prepared, including with the use of chemical warfare agents,” claiming that these attacks were to be carried out in Idlib city in collaboration with Hurras al-Din, which Naryshkin referred to as the ‘local CIA-controlled branch of al-Qaeda.’ It should be noted that this is not the first time Russia has promoted implausible claims about military attacks by other parties to serve its own political agenda.

On July 3, Alena Douhan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, released her report on her visit to Syria that took place between October 30, 2022, and November 10, 2022. The report was submitted and included on the agenda of the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council in September and October 2023. In the report, Ms. Douhan described the sanctions against the Syrian regime as unilateral measures imposed without the authorization of the Security Council that prevented the much-needed rebuilding and reconstruction of the country. On July 29, SNHR released a statement stressing that the UN Special Rapporteur should have called on the Syrian regime to end all forms of violations, which it emphasized is the only way to ensure sanctions are lifted.

On July 4, the French Senate passed an amendment with majority support from the National Assembly removing the requirement for ‘dual incrimination’ in cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity, expanding the jurisdiction of the French judiciary so as to allow it to prosecute war criminals in Syria without their having to meet the two previous requirements of the defendant being a “habitual resident” of France, and the act in question being also criminalized in the Syrian Penal Code. SNHR has welcomed this decision that supports the path of justice for victims and creates an opportunity to file lawsuits in French courts against individuals who committed human rights violations in Syria.

On July 8, the Syrian regime’s Ministry of Media announced that it would be cancelling the BBC’s media accreditation due to what it called a “misleading report” by the BBC. According to the BBC, this decision followed the network’s publication of a news report entitled, ‘From Within the Drug States’ on June 27.

On July 11, Russia used its veto powers in the UN Security Council to block a draft resolution to extend the cross-border mechanism to deliver humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria by nine months.

On July 11, Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, announced that he had cancelled his visit to Syria, which was scheduled to take place on July 9, because of the Syrian regime’s lack of full cooperation. SNHR welcomed the decision to cancel the visit, reiterating that the Syrian regime has not the slightest inclination to provide secure infrastructure and basic essential services to the country’s citizens.
On July 14, the Syrian regime sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General and the President of the UN Security Council informing them of its decision to grant permission to the UN and its agencies to use the Bab al-Hawa Crossing to deliver humanitarian assistance with full collaboration and coordination for a period of six months starting on July 13.

On September 7, Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, said in a briefing to the UN Security Council that, despite the fact that the Syrian regime had received a list of pending declaration, the OPCW’s Technical Secretary had yet to receive any of the documents requested. Ms. Nakamitsu stressed in her briefing that “Considering the identified gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies that remain unresolved, the Technical Secretariat assesses that Syria’s declaration still cannot be considered accurate and complete.”

On September 19, the US Department of State released a joint statement with the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in which the states asserted their commitment to bringing about a comprehensive resolution in Syria in line with Security Council resolution 2254. The statement also stressed “the need to create secure conditions for the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons consistent with UN standards.”

On September 21, Michael McCaul, Chairman of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, condemned China’s welcome of Bashar Assad whom Mr. McCaul describes as a “brutal war criminal who has murdered thousands of Syrians with backing from Russia and Iran”, stressing that this visit underscores the threat posed by China and its allies in Russia, Iran, and Syria.

On September 24, the Jordanian Ammon News Agency reported on a statement by Ayman al-Safadi, Jordan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said that out of every three attempts to smuggle narcotics from Syria to Jordan, one succeeds. Following dialogue with Syrian regime officials, Mr. Safadi stressed that drug smuggling had risen on the ground, which, he added, is not only a threat to Jordan but also to the Gulf countries and other states.

On September 27, Linda Thomas Greenfield, the US Ambassador to the UN, said, in a briefing to the UN Security Council on the political and humanitarian situation in Syria, that the renewed protests in the country underlined the importance of reaching a Syrian-led political resolution. “And we continue to advocate that implementing Resolution 2254 remains the only viable path to ending the conflict,” she added, further asserting, “And U.S. sanctions will remain in place until, at minimum, there is concrete, measurable progress toward a political solution.”

On October 5, Geir O. Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy to Syria, released a statement expressing his grave concern at the escalating violence in Syria.

On October 6, the spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, released a statement expressing the Secretary-General’s deep concern about the attack that took place on October 5 during a graduation ceremony at the Military Academy in Homs, which resulted in a number of casualties, including civilians. The statement adds that Mr. Guterres was “alarmed over reports of retaliatory shelling on multiple locations in north-west Syria and emerging reports of heavy casualties.”
On October 6, Adam Abdelmoula, the UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, and Muhannad Hadi, the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis released a joint statement expressing their concern at the renewed wave of hostilities in northern Syria.

On October 11, Mathew Miller, a spokesperson for the US Department of State, noted that the US is still concerned about military activity in northern Syria and how this impacts the civilian population and infrastructure, as well as being concerned at its impact on the effectiveness of US operations to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS.

On October 12, the White House announced on its official website that US President Joe Biden had renewed the national emergency status regarding the threat posed by the situation in Syria to US national security and US foreign policy. Under the state of national emergency, a US administration can seize the assets and impose sanction on those whose involvement in the continuation of instability in Syria is proven, which includes denial of an entry visa to the US or of any financial loans.

On October 30, Edem Wosornu, OCHA Director of Operations and Advocacy, stressed, in a briefing before the UN Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, that northwestern Syria was seeing the largest escalation of hostilities since 2019, with over 120,000 people displaced in Idlib and western Aleppo between October 5-18, in addition to the 2.9 million IDPs already living in northwestern Syria. Ms. Wosornu added that “the hostilities also damaged critical infrastructure and service. Attacks, including airstrikes and artillery shelling have continued on a near-daily basis, with reports of more people being killed and injured in the past week.”

On October 30, Linda Thomas Greenfield, the US Ambassador to the UN, said, in her briefing to the UN Security Council, that the Syrian regime had allowed Iran and its militias, including Hezbollah, to use its airports for military purposes, putting civilian passengers at risk. “The protection of civilians must be at the forefront,” she remarked. “We are outraged by the relentless attacks carried out by the Assad regime, and by Russian attacks in northern Syria,” which she noted had killed dozens of civilians and damaged the infrastructure. The US diplomat also added that, in the previous week alone, Syrian regime forces or their Russian allies had bombed an IDP camp, killing innocent children, while underlining that the Syrian regime and Russia did not even attempt to give a plausible explanation for the atrocities that they had been perpetrating, as their strategy has, for years, been to “deny, deflect, and disinform.”

On November 2, AP reported a statement by Liza Abou Khaled, the spokesperson for the UNHCR Office in Lebanon, in which she announced that the UNHCR and the WFP would have to reduce the number of families receiving cash assistance in Lebanon in 2024 by 88,000, citing “significant funding reductions.” The spokesperson added that the programs that provided additional assistance for some families in the winter to cover the costs of heating fuel would also be halted. “That aid was critical for vulnerable families to survive the winter season,” Abou Khaled noted.
On November 13, commenting on the Syrian regime’s agreeing to extend the delivery of humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria via the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Ra’ie border crossings with Türkiye by three months, Ann Snow, the UK Special Representative for Syria, stressed that this consent-based model is not a reliable nor a sustainable system to provide aid to Syrians in need. “The UK will continue to press for secure, transparent and predictable aid access, which is a vital element of the humanitarian response for the 4.1m people in need in north-west Syria,” she added. In this context, SNHR reiterates its legal position on this issue, which it first declared three years ago, namely that the delivery of UN humanitarian assistance does not require permission from the UN Security Council. SNHR also emphasized the imperative need to find a coordination mechanism among donor states to avoid the regime’s attempts to control and steal any aid that goes through it.

On November 15, the member states of the UN General Assembly voted on draft resolution A/C.3/78/L.43, condemning the Syrian regime’s continuation of gross, systematic, and widespread violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The resolution was passed with a majority of 86 states voting in favor, while 15 states voted against and 73 abstained from voting. The resolution holds the regime responsible for the systematic use of enforced disappearance, which, as the resolution adds, constitutes a crime against humanity. On November 18, SNHR released a statement welcoming this resolution.

On November 18, the US Embassy in Syria welcomed the ICJ’s order, describing it as a “key step toward holding the Assad regime accountable for the reported torture.” The Embassy further noted that victims, survivors, and the families of both groups, deserve justice and accountability for those who perpetrated atrocities against them and their loved ones. Additionally, the US Embassy declared, “We must push for a political solution to achieve justice.”

On November 28, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US Ambassador to the UN, said, in a briefing to the Security Council, that the Syrian regime’s escalating criminal behavior was unacceptable and did not help in addressing the harsh economic and oppressive conditions being endured by Syrian civilians. Ms. Thomas-Greenfield stressed that the UNSC should not allow the Syrian regime to draw its attention away from the needs in Suwayda, further noting, “We welcome the provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice earlier this month, which order Syria to prevent acts of torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment, and prevent the destruction of evidence of such acts. This is a vitally important step in holding the Assad regime accountable for acts of torture.” In that context, the US diplomat called on the Syrian regime to release the over 150,000 arbitrarily arrested detainees and forcibly disappeared persons currently detained in its prisons, or to clarify their fate at the very least.

On November 30, the US Department of State released its ‘Country Reports on Terrorism’ for the year 2022. The report described Syria as a “State Sponsor of Terrorism”. The report also added that the US had pledged $107 million dollars to support infrastructures and other vital projects in Iraq and northeastern Syria. Furthermore, the report noted that ISIS had expanded its activities in 2022. On Iran, the report said that Tehran supports terror acts on a regional level in countries like Syria through partner groups such as the Lebanese group Hezbollah.
On December 5, the Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council released a final statement at the conclusion of its 44th session held in Doha, Qatar. On Syria, the Supreme Council reaffirmed its steadfast positions regarding the preservation of the unity of the Syrian Arab Republic’s territories, respect for its independence and sovereignty over its lands, rejection of regional interventions in its internal affairs, support for the United Nations’ efforts to reach a political solution in Syria in line with Security Council Resolution 2254, support for the efforts of its Special Envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, and support for the efforts to care for Syrian refugees and displaced persons, and work towards their voluntary and safe return to Syria in accordance with international standards, and rejection of any attempts to bring about demographic changes in Syria.

On December 6, the Syrian regime’s SANA news agency reported that Ayman Soussan and Maher Baddour had been sworn in before Bashar Assad, the head of the Syrian regime, ahead of their appointment as ambassadors to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria respectively. SNHR reiterates once again that, according to international law, restoring relations with the Syrian regime without fulfilling any of the conditions requested, including revealing the fate of forcibly disappeared persons, is a form of support for the violations that have been, and are still being committed by the Syrian regime against the Syrian people, since fighting gross violations that constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes is a core part of the responsibilities of the world states given their ratification of the Geneva Conventions.

On December 10, the Qatari Capital Doha hosted a session entitled, Considering Pathways Towards Resolving Syria’s Crisis as part of the Doha Forum 2023. During the session, Geir O. Pederson, the UN Special Envoy to Syria, stressed that the Syrian crisis requires urgent international intervention with the engagement of Iran, Russia, Türkiye, and the US as key players in the Syrian crisis. Meanwhile, Brigitte Curmi, France’s Ambassador to Syria, called, in her speech, for devising solutions for dealing with the Syrian regime that has been ignoring any viable solution. Ana Snow, the UK’s Special Representative for Syria, also tried to shed light on the negative impact of the 13-year-long Syrian conflict, stressing that about half a million people had died in the conflict so far, while over 13 million people had been displaced, in addition to the widespread destruction to Syria’s infrastructure and economy.

On December 22, Adedeji Ebo, the UN Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, noted, in a briefing to the UN Security Council, that following a hiatus of over two-and-a-half years, a meeting had finally been held between the OPCW’s DAT and the Syrian regime’s Syrian National Authority between October 30 and November 5, 2023. Following the meeting, the OPCW expert team was deployed in Damascus to conduct its analysis. On the same day, the UN Security Council issued a press release following its session on Syria, entitled “Gaps, Inconsistencies and Discrepancies Persist in Syria’s Dossier on Dual-Use Chemical Agents, Security Council Told in Briefing” in relation to the elimination of the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons program.

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59. This was an international session entitled ‘Salwa’, which aimed to analyze the developments in the popular uprising for democracy in Syria that began in 2011 and the ensuing conflict, with a particular focus on 2023’s developments regarding some states restoring relations with the Syrian regime, while others remain committed to their position on isolating it. The session featured: Geir O. Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy for Syria; Brigitte Curmi, the French Special Envoy for Syria from France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Ann Snow, the UK’s Special Representative for Syria.
Attempts to restore relations with the Syrian regime that is involved in crimes against humanity against its people

The year 2023 saw a number of states and international organizations taking some steps to restore relations with the Syrian regime, building on similar efforts made in 2021 and 2022. A notable development on this front was the participation of the Syrian regime’s delegation in the Arab League’s meetings, ignoring the regime’s horrific violations that constituted crimes against humanity against the Syrian people. Such attempts also turn a blind eye to the fact that the Syrian regime has insulted the Arab League and violated all of its initiatives proposed to resolve the Syrian conflict, which the regime obviously did not commit to.

The Syrian regime has been committing gross violations against the Syrian people, some of which constitute crimes against humanity, since March 2011. SNHR underlines that the reasons that led to the regime’s dismissal of the Arab League, the state of isolation imposed by the democratic states of the world, and the imposition of sanctions on the regime are still very much present, and have actually further accumulated for nearly 13 years, with mounting deaths and a vastly increased magnitude of atrocities. On April 20, SNHR released a statement stressing that restoring relations with the Syrian regime which continues to commit crimes against humanity against the Syrian people is a violation of international law and of the rights of its millions of victims. The statement added that attempts by some Arab states, or any other states for that matter, to reestablish any form of relations with the Syrian regime are grievously insulting, first and foremost to those states deciding to take such action, and secondly sends a wrong message to its people that it choose to side with said regime which sits atop the backs and skulls of its millions of victims. “Therefore,” the statement added, “any such restoration of relations constitutes an expression of support for all the Syrian regime’s previous and continuing violations against the Syrian people, this is particularly shocking since opposing such horrific violations which are classified as crimes against humanity and war crimes is, under international law, a core part of the responsibilities of all the world’s states as ratifiers of the Geneva Convention.”

On January 4, SANA reported that Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, had met with the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad, in Damascus. Talks during the visit touched upon various subjects, SANA added, including “ways to develop economic and trading relationships.” On a related note, SANA reported on January 5 that Lana Zaki, UAE’s Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN, said in a Security Council meeting regarding the dossier on chemical weapons in Syria that this remains one of the most politicized issues in the Security Council. Zaki called on all parties to work in line with the principles upon which the OPW was founded in its technical sense, which include consensus and abstinence from politicizing issues, SANA said.

On February 16, Jordan’s Al-Mamlaka TV News Channel reported that Ayman al-Safadi, Jordan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, met with Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, and Faisal al-Meqdad, the Syrian regime government’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. The channel reported that the two ministers discussed “the efforts made to bring about the proper conditions for a voluntary return for refugees and rid Syria of terrorism.”
On February 20, the pro-regime SANA news agency reported that the Syrian regime head, Bashar Assad, had visited Oman, where he met with the Sultan of Oman, Haitham bin Tariq. On February 27, SANA reported that Assad met with Sameh Shoukry, Egypt’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, who relayed a message from the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in which, SANA reported, he stressed that “Egypt stands with Syria and is prepared to continue to support the Syrians facing the effects of the earthquake.”

On February 28, HRW said in a statement that many Arab states had rushed to normalize relations with the Syrian regime since the earthquakes hit Turkey and Syria on February 6, without putting any pressure on the regime for the sake of holding it accountable for the crimes it perpetrated, or to force it to carry out the crucial necessary reforms essential to achieve a sustained peace and bring about prosperity in Syria in the postwar period. The statement added that those states should be aware that the Syrian government in power today is the same one that has forcibly disappeared tens of thousands of individuals and committed other serious human rights violations against its citizens, even dating back to before the uprising. The statement also noted that the Syrian regime continues to weaponize humanitarian aid, diverting it from areas that oppose the regime’s rule.

On March 19, SANA reported that Syrian regime head Bashar Assad and his wife Asmaa had arrived in the UAE on an official visit.

On April 1, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) posted a tweet revealing that Rola Dashti, the Executive Secretary of the ESCWA, has visited Asma Assad, the wife of Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, to discuss the support t ESCWA could provide to promote entrepreneurship opportunities for youngsters. It must be noted that Asma Assad is one of the most prominent figures involved in pillaging humanitarian relief directed to Syria and diverting it to fund the Syrian regime. Asma Assad is involved in crimes against humanity and is on the US and EU sanction lists.

On April 1, Reuters reported that Faisal al-Mekdad, Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian regime’s government, had arrived in the Egyptian capital Cairo in the first visit of its kind since the start of the popular uprising in Syria.

On April 12, Faisal al-Mekdad, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian regime’s government, began an official visit to Saudi Arabia during which he met with Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Furhan Al-Saud, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, according to the state’s Saudi Press Agency. This was followed by a visit by Prince Faisal bin Farhan to Damascus, marking the first official visit by a Saudi state representative in 12 years, during which he met with the Syrian regime head Bashar Assad. The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, in an official statement, that during this meeting, the two sides “went over the necessary steps to achieve a comprehensive political settlement of the Syrian crisis that would end all its repercussions, achieve national reconciliation, and contribute to the return of Syria to its Arab fold and the resumption of its natural role in the Arab world.”
On April 15, Faisal al-Mekdad, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian regime’s government, began a two-day official visit to Algeria, during which he met with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and other Algerian officials. During the visit, al-Mekdad hailed the way in which Algeria, at both the public and leadership levels, had stood with Syria’s regime during what he called all the challenges that the country faced in the past period.

On April 17, Faisal al-Mekdad, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian regime’s government, arrived in Tunisia on an official visit, during which he met with Tunisian President Kais Saied and a number of ministers. This visit followed the release of a joint statement by the two sides on April 12 revealing that, in reciprocating the Tunisian President’s initiative to appoint an ambassador to Damascus, Syria had decided to reopen its embassy 12 years after the severance of diplomatic ties between Damascus and Tunis.

On May 1, the foreign ministers of Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Syrian regime held a consultative meeting in the Jordanian capital Amman as part of Jordan’s proposal to initiate an Arab role to solve the Syrian crisis on the basis of “a step-for-step” approach.

On May 3, the President of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, arrived in Damascus with a delegation of senior Iranian regime officials for a two-day visit. Raisi met with the head of the Syrian regime and a number of regime officials. It should be noted that this was the first visit of an Iranian president to Syria since 2010. According to Raisi, the Iranian delegation signed 15 documents during the visit. Iran remains one of the Syrian regime’s most important allies, backing and supporting the regime in committing multiple violations both politically and militarily. On April 26, Mehrdad Bazrpash, Iran’s Minister of Roads and Urban Development, revealed during a technical discussions session held by the economic Syrian-Iranian joint committee in Damascus that eight special committees had been formed to establish vital relations between the two countries, one of which is a committee charged with following up on loans and debts due for repayment in order to conduct an accurate investigation of the actual sum of incurred loans. According to the pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper, Mr. Bazrpash revealed that understandings were reached in the past to satisfy those loans in the form of granting land to Iran, affirming that while Tehran is understanding of Syria’s current conditions, there are legal requirements to be met in Iran. The results of such meetings only serve to advance Iran’s vision of completely absorbing all vital sectors in Syria, taking advantage of the Syrian regime’s complete subservience to Tehran, especially with Syria’s mounting public debt to Iran’s regime.

On May 7, the Council of the Arab League held a meeting at the level of foreign ministers to discuss developments in Syria. A statement released following the meeting revealed that the Council of the Arab League had decided that Syrian regime delegations would resume participation in the Arab League’s meetings, after Syria’s membership had been suspended for 12 years in line with a resolution issued on November 12, 2011. In a comment on this decision on May 8, reported by AFP, a US Department of State spokesperson asserted, “We will not normalize relations with the Bashar Assad regime”, further confirming that US sanctions on the Syrian regime still apply in full. The AFP report also revealed that Qatar had opposed the decision to readmit Syria into the Arab League. Majed bin Mohammad Al Ansari, the spokesperson for Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asserted that Qatar’s position towards the Syrian regime remained unchanged, and that any normalization between Doha and the Syrian regime would be “conditional first and foremost on making progress with a political solution that meets the aspirations of the Syrian people.”
On May 9, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior reported that Baghdad had hosted an International Conference on Combating Narcotics, which featured representatives from eight states, including a Syrian regime delegation. The ministry added that the conference aimed to consolidate efforts to address the drug epidemic and examine the available figures and information. It is worth noting the incongruity in the Syrian regime attending such events despite many reports which confirm that the regime itself is one of the most prominent suppliers of the amphetamine Captagon, most of whose profits go to feed the regime’s own networks.

On May 10, AFP revealed that Saudi Arabia had decided to resume the work of its diplomatic mission in Syria, a decision made over a decade since Riyadh closed its embassy in Damascus. Citing a statement released by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AFP reported that this decision was made while taking into account the decision of the council of Arab foreign ministers to readmit Syria into the Arab League. The AFP report also stated that the Syrian regime had reciprocally decided to resume the work of its diplomatic mission in Riyadh. Furthermore, the AFP report revealed that the Syrian regime head, Bashar Assad, had received an official invitation from Nayef bin Bandar Al-Sudairi, Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to Jordan, to participate in the Arab Summit. According to the AFP report, this was the first invitation of its kind since the Syrian conflict began in 2011.

On May 18, the 32nd Arab Summit at the level of leaders began in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The two-day summit was attended by a Syrian regime delegation, presided over by Bashar Assad, the head of the Syrian regime, for the first time in nearly a decade. The regime’s participation came after an official invitation was issued by the King of Saudi Arabia on May 10. Following the summit, a statement entitled the ‘Jeddah Declaration’ was issued by the participants. On the same day, SNHR released a statement entitled, ‘Readmitting the Syrian Regime into the Arab League Does Not Mean that Syria is Safe for the Return of Refugees Since the Regime is Still Committing Crimes Against Humanity’, in which the group stressed that the Syrian regime had given no indications of goodwill towards the Syrian people, with approximately 136,000 Syrian citizens still imprisoned in regime detention centers. The group expressed serious concerns that any restoration of relations with the Syrian regime would lead to Syrian refugees being forced to return to Syria. In fact, SNHR had already documented the refoulment of no fewer than 753 Syrian refugees from Lebanon. The statement further revealed that the refoulment and forced repatriation of Syrian refugees constitute blatant violations of customary international law. Any governments carrying out such practices bear legal responsibility for the torture, killing, enforced disappearance, and other violations that would potentially be perpetrated by the Syrian regime against these forcibly returned refugees. On September 6, the French Newspaper Le Monde reported that, despite the attempts made by Arab states to normalize diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime, 80 percent of Syrians are still living under the poverty line. The newspaper added that three months after the Syrian regime had been granted readmission into the Arab League, protests against the regime broke out in southern Syria. The newspaper also criticized the Syrian regime’s readmission into the Arab League for lacking any initiative to revitalize a comprehensive political process, pointing out that this only protracts the suffering of Syrians, as the regime’s political maneuvering has failed to conceal its inability to maintain any form of genuine internal stability.
On June 1, Faisal Mekdad, the Foreign Minister in the Syrian regime’s government, met with Corinne Fleischer, the WFP Regional Director for the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe. As reported by SANA, the meeting discussed the WFP’s activities and projects in Syria, including the early recovery projects. This was not the only visit by a UN official to Damascus in June. SANA reported that, on June 26, Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, met with Bashar Assad, the head of the Syrian regime, with the meeting featuring discussion of the efforts to mobilize support for early recovery programs related to the return of Syrian refugees and the requirements for these, and how best to keep the issue of refugees within its humanitarian and moral framework. It is worth noting that this visit came one day after a Russian airstrike targeting Jisr al-Shughour city in western Idlib that resulted in civilian fatalities, which provided further categorical proof of the Syrian regime’s and its allies utter disregard for securing a safe environment, which remains the main obstacle impeding the return of refugees.

On July 16, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, the Iraqi Prime Minister, conducted an official visit to Damascus accompanied by a senior delegation, during which they met with the head of the Syrian regime and other Syrian officials. The two sides held a joint press conference, at which al-Sundai proclaimed, ‘Iraq supports the steps taken to lift the sanctions imposed on Syria’. This was the first such visit by an Iraqi prime minister to Syria since 2010.

On August 15, the Syrian regime’s SANA news agency reported that Faisal Mekdad, Minister of Foreign Affairs in the regime government, had participated in a meeting of the ‘Arabic Communication Committee on Syria at the Ministerial Level’, in the Egyptian capital Cairo. The agency reported the meeting’s final statement.

On September 21, the Syrian regime’s state news agency, SANA, reported that regime head Bashar Assad had begun an official visit to the Republic of China accompanied by his wife. The visit, which was the Assads’ first since 2004, went on until September 26. It should be noted that China was one of the first countries to offer support for the Syrian regime and its violations against the Syrian people after the outbreak of the popular uprising in March 2011. China has consistently supported the Syrian regime on the international stage. We have also documented China’s repeated abuse of its veto powers to shield the Syrian regime at the UN Security Council on 11 occasions in order to protect the regime’s impunity. China has also voted 35 times against all resolutions condemning the violations of the Syrian regime at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). In other words, in every session in which China was a representative at the HRC, it chose to vote against the Syrian people and in favor of the Syrian regime that has committed numerous violations which amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.
On November 11, Syrian regime head Bashar Assad delivered a speech at the Joint Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit that was held to address the Israeli offensive on Palestine’s Gaza Strip, having been officially invited to attend the summit which was held in the Saudi capital Riyadh. SNHR stresses that the Syrian regime’s participation is a grotesque insult to the summit and to the participating states. It is patently absurd that such a summit, held to address such events, features a dictator whose own forces have been perpetrating heinous violations against the Syrian people since 2011, with most of these violations constituting crimes against humanity and war crimes. In fact, SNHR has documented the killing of 201,110 civilians, including 22,998 children and 11,981 women (adult females) at the hands of Syrian regime forces and pro-regime militias since March 2011 up until October 2023. In July 2020, we released a report, in which we noted that no fewer than 3,196 Palestinian-Syrians have been documented killed at the hands of Syrian regime forces since March 2011, while outlining the numerous violations by regime forces against Palestinian refugees in Syria who chose to side with the rightful demands of the Syrian people following the outbreak of the popular uprising for democracy.

B. Noteworthy military developments in 2023

In January, we recorded clashes on the dividing lines between Syrian regime forces and HTS in southern Idlib and northern Latakia, which involved each side targeting the other in shelling operations.

On March 23, the US Department of Defense released a statement revealing that an American contractor had been killed, and five American service members and another contractor injured, in a drone attack that hit a maintenance facility in an International Coalition military base near Hasaka in northeastern Syria. According to an intelligence assessment, the statement added, the UAV in question was of Iranian origin. On March 24, the US Central Command revealed in a tweet that it had carried out retaliatory attacks on facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran’s so-called Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

On May 8, al-Jesri village in the al-Laja area in eastern Daraa was targeted by a Syrian regime artillery squad stationed in al-Jbab town in northern Daraa. The area also saw clashes between Syrian regime forces and unidentified gunmen.

On July 8, a shootout broke out at a checkpoint manned by the SNA’s civilian police between the SNA’s al-Sultan Squad and civilian police officers manning the checkpoint in Ras al-Ein city in rural Hasaka governorate. Three civilians, including two children, were killed, as they were caught in the crossfire.

On August 21, the Syrian regime government’s Ministry of Defense claimed that it had shot down three drones which it claimed belonged to “terrorist groups in rural Idlib and rural Homs.” The Ministry of Defense also claimed that the drones “were carrying explosive ammunition and were attempting an attack on safe nearby villages and towns.”
On August 27, clashes broke out between the Deir Ez-Zour Military Council and the SDF. The clashes followed the SDF’s arrest of the head of the Military Council, Ahmad al-Kbeil, and other senior council heads in Hasaka city. The clashes, which had primarily been taking place in the villages and towns of eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour, resulted in the deaths of dozens of civilians and fighters since their early days. As the clashes continued throughout September, they extended to areas in the Deir Ez-Zour’s northern rural areas, which involved both sides indiscriminately killing civilians. For instance, we have documented that SDF-operated drones have carried out attacks on villages in rural Deir Ez-Zour, resulting in civilian casualties.

On September 3, the US Embassy in Syria revealed on its X account that Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the US Department of State’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), and Major General Joel B. Vowell, Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) Commander, had met with the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and tribal leaders in Deir Ez-Zour. According to the brief statement, all sides agreed on the importance of de-escalation as soon as possible and of addressing the grievances of Deir Ez-Zour residents, as well as avoiding civilian deaths and injuries.

September saw similar clashes between Arab tribes and SDF detachments in rural areas of Manbij in eastern Aleppo governorate, with the former trying to take over those areas. These rounds of clashes also involved the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and artillery attacks by the SDF. On September 14, Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, released a statement warning of the consequences of these clashes in northeastern Syria and the security concerns that these hostilities could lead to further exacerbation of the already-dire humanitarian situation in the region. The statement further revealed that “dozens have been arrested by the SDF for their alleged involvement in the hostilities. As a result, thousands of civilians have fled their homes.”

The intensity of the clashes receded somewhat in October, however, yet they continued sporadically until the end of the year, being concentrated in eastern Deir Ez-Zour. In the course of these clashes, the SDF seized dozens of civilian facilities and properties, mostly schools and medical facilities, and turned them into military outposts.

On September 5, we recorded intensified regime ground attacks in tandem with airstrikes by Russian forces on villages and towns in the western sector of Jabal al-Zawiya, as the regime attempted to recapture a number of locations that armed opposition factions and the HTS had successfully taken control of at the end of August.

On September 20, infighting erupted between the pro-regime National Defense militias and Syrian regime forces inside what is commonly known as the ‘security square’ 60 in Hasaka city. The clashes, which lasted for days, ended with Syrian regime forces taking over the house where the commander of the National Defense militias in the city had been hiding. The clashes led to the displacement of many families who lived in the security square, who fled to other, SDF-controlled, neighborhoods in the city. Furthermore, schools and other government departments in the security square suspended operations until further notice. On September 21, a mortar shell fired by Syrian regime forces hit a house in al-Nasra neighborhood in Hasaka city center, killing an IDP child from Deir Ez-Zour.

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60. This is an area under the control of Syrian regime forces containing a number of neighborhoods and interconnected streets in Hasaka city center, where many regime security branches and headquarters buildings are located.
From September 20-27, infighting erupted between two sub-factions within Ahrar al-Sham’s Eastern Branch. The two groups engaged in hostilities when one of them announced its intention to join the SNA’s Second Division, in opposition to the pro-HTS faction. The clashes extended across multiple areas in eastern Aleppo, including the villages of al-Nu’man, Ihteimlat, and Souran Izaz, as well as reaching the outskirts of al-Bab city. The root of the infighting was a dispute over the control of al-Hamran Crossing[61] that connects SNA-controlled areas with areas under the control of the SDF. Both sides suffered fatalities and injuries in the fighting, while three civilians were wounded by stray gunfire. The infighting also caused an additional displacement wave, with dozens of families fleeing the areas close to the frontlines.

In December, we documented shells striking military bases operated by US-led International Coalition forces, with this shelling originating from sites within regime-controlled territories where Iranian militias are stationed. In retaliation, the US-led International Coalition carried out rocket attacks on those militias’ sites in eastern Deir Ez-Zour. We also documented drone attacks targeting both coalition bases and Iranian militias’ enclaves in eastern rural Deir Ez-Zour. However, we have not yet been able to conclusively identify the parties responsible for these attacks as of this writing.

On December 25, several rocket attacks were carried out by drones, which we suspect were operated by Turkish forces. The attacks targeted Ein al-Arab (Koubani) city, with most being directed at military sites belonging to the SDF, which controls the city, although some caused damage to civilian facilities in the vicinity of these military sites. The last week of the year also saw intensified drone attacks which we suspect were carried out by Turkish forces on SDF military sites and in their vicinity in Hasaka governorate. Some of those attacks caused damage to civilian service facilities where SDF personnel were stationed.

None of the attacks mentioned above have led to any lasting or clear change in territories. The map below outlines the geographic distribution of territories of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria as of the end of 2023. The map was designed by SNHR’s graphics team based on the maps found on the liveumap website.

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C. Noteworthy human rights developments in 2023

On January 2, the OCHA released a joint statement with several UN and humanitarian bodies, in which it called on the Security Council to keep the aid lifeline alive, in the form of the mechanism for cross-border aid delivery in northwestern Syria, which would be achieved through extending the mechanism without delay. The statement stressed that without the UN cross-border operations, millions of people, especially IDPs, would not have access to food and shelter. The statement also stressed that cross-line aid delivery could not cover the same scope and volume covered by cross-border operations.

On January 27, the OPCW’s IIT released its third report that focused on the chemical weapons attack on Douma city in Rural Damascus governorate that took place on April 7, 2018. The report concluded that there are “reasonable grounds” to believe that at least one Mi-8/17 helicopter dropped two cylinders that hit two apartment buildings in an area in the center of Douma city, Rural Damascus governorate, between 19:10 and 19:40 on the evening of April 7, 2018, as part of a military attack by Syrian regime forces. The report noted that the helicopter flew from al-Dumayr Airbase, and that it was part of the Russian-backed Tiger Forces. As the IIT’s report revealed, the attack killed 43 individuals, including 19 children and 17 women, who died as a result of inhaling high concentrations of chlorine gas for prolonged periods of time, with dozens of others also injured. On January 28, SNHR released a statement welcoming the report, noting that we contributed to it through providing data and facilitating contact with eyewitnesses. Furthermore, SNHR’s statement called for urgently referring the case to the Security Council which it asserted should intervene under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, since a Member State had used a weapon of mass destruction, which surely threatens international peace and security, and should implement the relevant UN resolutions.

A number of foreign ministries around the world reacted to the OPCW report, most notably:

On January 27, the US Department of State issued a joint statement with the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, France’s Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, and Germany’s Federal Foreign Office, in which the four governments condemned the Syrian regime’s repeated use of chemical weapons in the strongest possible terms. The statement also called on Russia to stop shielding the Syrian regime from facing accountability for its use of chemical weapons, and further emphasized the four states’ commitment to hold accountable all perpetrators of chemical weapons attack in Syria and beyond.

On January 27, Switzerland’s Federal Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement stressing that all those responsible for crimes against international law in Syria must be held accountable. In the statement, Switzerland said it supported all international efforts that aim to document such crimes and to hold their perpetrators accountable, including the efforts being made by UN bodies such as the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM), as well as Syrian NGOs.

On January 31, Transparency International released its Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for the year 2022. Syria was ranked in last place among the MENA states and second-to-last globally.

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62 Those are the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

63 Introduced in 1995, the CPI is a prominent index that measures corruption in the public sector. The index includes 180 states and territories around the world using data from 13 external sources, including the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, and private consultancy firms, risk assessments, think tanks, and others.
On March 2, Catherine Russell, the CEO of UNICEF, revealed that 3.7 million children in Syria’s affected area were facing “growing and potentially catastrophic dangers”, following the devastasting earthquakes that hit southern Türkiye and northern Syria on February 6. She added that the earthquake’s psychological impact on children, as well as the threat of contagious, contact-transmitted, and waterborne diseases faced by displaced families, all while the most vulnerable families had no access to basic services following 12 years of the conflict, posing a danger of inflicting continued and exacerbated catastrophes on the children affected.

On March 13, the COI released its periodic report on Syria covering the period between July 2022 and December 2022.

On March 15, SNHR released a report marking the twelfth anniversary of the start of the popular uprising for freedom in Syria. The report outlined the most notable violations committed by the main active parties in Syria since March 2011, and called for ending any refoulment of Syrian refugees to Syria, since the situation remains unsafe, calling on the international community to instead bring pressure towards bringing about a political transition that ensures the safe return of millions of refugees.

On March 15, SNHR held an event marking the twelfth anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria. Sponsored by the US, Germany, Qatar, and the Netherlands, the event focused on discussion of the ongoing human rights violations that Syrians had suffered for 12 years, and of how the international community can promote the efforts of justice and accountability in order to hold accountable those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity that were and are still being perpetrated in Syria by the parties to the conflict, most notably by the Syrian regime. SNHR released a statement on the event.

On April 4, the UN Human Rights Council adopted resolution A/ HRC/52/L.16 on the human rights situation in Syria. The resolution provided for the renewal of the mandate of the COI for a year. SNHR welcomed the decision to renew the COI’s mandate in its report released by the group on this development.

On April 5, Amnesty International and HRW released a joint statement revealing that Türkiye’s police and Gendarmerie forces (the police service responsible for rural areas in Türkiye) had committed violations against individuals suspected of committing crimes. These violations include brutal and prolonged beating and arbitrary and informal detention. In many cases, the victims were Syrian refugees, with these attacks exhibiting signs suggesting the existence of additional xenophobic motivation.

On April 27, HRW released a report which noted that “Turkish border guards are indiscriminately shooting at Syrian civilians on the border with Syria, as well as torturing and using excessive force against asylum seekers and migrants trying to cross into Turkey.” HRW’s statement stressed that Türkiye’s government should launch an investigation and hold the individual border guards responsible for these violations accountable, and put an end to the long-standing impunity for such violations.
On June 4, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor released a statement stressing that the Danish government had abandoned a Danish child who has been left in “arbitrary and unlawful” detention for years in a prison camp in northeastern Syria, describing the situation as “heartbreaking”. The statement called on the Danish government to act to end the detention of the child and his mother, and to evacuate them immediately.

On June 12, the COI released a paper entitled ‘Gendered Impact of the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on Women and Girls’.

On June 23, HRW published a joint letter with 102 Syrian and international organizations, including SNHR, stressing that UN member states must vote to establish a humanitarian body to reveal the fate of missing persons in Syria, in order to provide Syrians with long-awaited answers about the fate of their loved ones who have been missing for too long. The letter added that “in addition to supporting its creation in the General Assembly vote, UN member countries should ensure that it is fully funded out of the UN’s regular budget and has all the support and resources necessary to fulfill its mission.”

On June 26, SNHR released its 12th annual report on torture in Syria, marking the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. The report stresses that torture practices continue in Syria with no accountability for those involved. The report also revealed that a total of 15,281 individuals had been documented as having died due to torture between March 2011 and June 2023, including 198 children and 113 women (adult female).

On July 12, the COI released its latest report, entitled ‘No End in Sight’. The report, which covers the period between January 1, 2020, and April 30, 2023, focused on the issue of torture and ill-treatment in Syria. On July 26, SNHR released a statement welcoming the findings and recommendations of the COI’s report, and reiterating our continuing support for the COI’s work based on our belief in the vital importance of its mandate as gross violations continue to be perpetrated in Syria, especially and particularly at the hands of the Syrian regime.

On July 13, the UN Human Rights Council, in its 53rd session held in Geneva, adopted a resolution calling on the Syrian regime to “meet its responsibility to respect and protect the human rights of all persons within its jurisdiction in a manner consistent with the applicable international law obligations of the Syrian Arab Republic.”

On July 13, SNHR released a statement revealing that the OPCW’s Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) issued a report on June 28 disproving the Syrian regime’s allegations concerning two incidents which were reported by the Syrian regime’s government to the OPCW’s Technical Secretariat on October 26, 2017. In its submission to the OPCW, the Syrian regime alleged that regime army personnel stationed in Kharbit Massasneh village in rural Hama were targeted using mortar shells loaded with a toxic gas on July 7 and August 4 of 2017. The statement stresses that findings of this report prove, yet again, that the Syrian regime has no shred of credibility, and has already lied dozens of times about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Working closely with its allies Russia and Iran, the regime is conducting a systematic misinformation campaign to distort the well-established facts about its use of chemical weapons in Syria.
On July 27, SNHR released a joint statement with a number of human organizations calling on the Turkish authorities to respect their obligations under customary international law which strictly prohibits refoulement. The statement stressed that, it is only because of the unconscionable oppression and persecution that have been taking place since March 2011 that Syrians have found no recourse but to flee this harrowing reality in their country.

On August 9, SNHR released a joint statement with a number of Syrian and international civil society organization applauding the Netherlands’ and Canada’s institution of legal proceedings at the ICJ against the Syrian regime based on the application of the Convention against Torture. The joint statement stressed that the “initiation of proceedings against the Syrian regime on State Responsibility for acts of torture complements continuing accountability efforts under Universal Jurisdiction. It also paves the way for further recognition of the Syrian regime’s state policy of torture.” The statement expressed surprise and concern, however, at the three-month postponement of the public hearings on provisional measures, given the urgent need to address ongoing violations of the Convention against Torture.

On August 30, the International Day of the Disappeared, SNHR released its 12th annual report on enforced disappearance in Syria, noting that no fewer than 155,604 of the people arrested by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and August 2023, including 5,213 children and 10,176 women, remained under arrest and/or enforced disappearance.

On August 30, Amnesty International released a statement insisting that the Syrian regime and armed groups involved in the conflict in Syria must reveal the fate and whereabouts of tens of thousands of people forcibly disappeared or abducted since the beginning of the crisis in 2011.

On September 4, Amnesty International stressed that the Syrian regime must ensure that the right to housing is protected for the residents of earthquake-affected buildings in Aleppo amid concerns over potentially unlawful demolitions of buildings deemed unsafe in the wake of the February 6 Earthquakes, as well as reports of there being bureaucratic obstacles placed in the way of those trying to repair their homes. “Even before the earthquakes, Aleppo had suffered widespread damage due to the Syrian and Russian forces’ unlawful bombing campaign between 2012 and 2016,” the statement added.

On September 12, the COI released its latest report on the human rights situation in Syria, covering the period from January 1, 2023, until June 30, 2023.

On September 21, SNHR held an event, in collaboration with the US Department of State’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), on the sidelines of the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly. Sponsored by the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Qatar, the event, entitled, ‘Twelve Years of Suffering: Examining Human Rights Abuses and Opportunities for Accountability in Syria’ discussed the ongoing human rights violations and abuses faced by Syrians and explored how the international community can advance justice and accountability efforts for perpetrators, as well as discussing issues related to displacement, refugees, and enforced disappearance.
On October 23, ReliefWeb published a global study conducted by Fionnuala Ni Aolain, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, on the impact of counterterrorism on civil society. The study also shed light on the systematic violations of human rights as relates to practices of detention in the course of countering terrorism. In this context, “Ni Aolain highlighted ongoing egregious violations of the rights of the child in multiple closed camps, prisons and detention facilities [in northeastern Syria]”. The study also shed light on “practices of enforced disappearances, torture, ill-treatment, and incommunicado detention for men, women and children in detention facilities in Northeast Syria”, stressing that “the scale, scope and extent of these practices may reach the threshold for crimes against humanity under international law.”

Another finding highlighted was the mass arbitrary separation of pre-pubescent and adolescent boys from their mothers, which also takes place inside camps, with these practices described as “egregious and harmful,” particularly due to “the trauma and violence these boys have experienced over the course of their young lives…” Moreover, Ms. Ni Aolain stressed that “Northeast Syria is the largest detention site for children on the grounds of terrorism in the world.” The study further reveals that around 5,000 men and 700 children are being held inside the Panorama (Sina’a) Prison, where “extreme violations of human rights and humanitarian law including rampant starvation and tuberculosis” are taking place. It should be noted that SNHR is in regular communication with the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, with the group regularly briefing the rapporteur on cases of arbitrary arrest and enforced or involuntary disappearance, in keeping with certain parameters that primarily require contacting the victims and their families to build comprehensive files on each case.

On October 24, Paulo Pinheiro, the chair of the COI, stressed in his briefing to the UNGA that Syria was currently experiencing the largest escalation of hostilities in four years. In October, Mr. Pinheiro added in his briefing, in “just four days of ground shelling over greater Idlib some two hundred civilians were killed and injured” while medical facilities, schools, and markets were all once again attacked, with tens of thousands displaced once more. The briefing also shed light on the attacks by Turkish forces on the SDF-held Hasaka governorate, which rendered power and water stations out of commission. Elsewhere in the briefing, the COI Chair stressed that Syria is still the world’s largest refugee crisis, adding that living conditions in Syria were deteriorating at an alarming rate, with over 90 percent of the population living under the poverty line.

On October 27, OCHA released a report stressing that casualty numbers are continuously rising in north-western Syria as the bombardment and aerial attacks on Idlib and western rural Aleppo have continued since October 5, with over 2,300 sites affected by the attacks since then.

On November 3, SNHR released a statement noting that some of the states on the General Committee of the OPCW’s 28th Conference of the State Parties had rejected SNHR’s application to attend the conference, which is held annually at the Hague with the objective of overseeing the implementation of the CWC, promoting the Convention’s objectives, and reviewing compliance with the treaty. SNHR believes that the application was rejected by totalitarian states supporting the Syrian regime. It should be noted that this was the second time an SNHR’s application to attend an OPCW conference had been rejected.

64. A service provided by the OCHA that covers developments in the humanitarian field worldwide.
On November 15, criminal investigative judges at a French court issued arrest warrants for Syrian regime head Bashar Assad and his brother, Maher Assad, the commander of the regime’s Fourth Division, over charges of complicity in crimes against humanity in the form of carrying out chemical weapons attacks using sarin gas against Eastern Ghouta and Mu’adamiyat al-Sham in Western Ghouta in Rural Damascus governorate on August 21, 2013. SNHR stresses that this decision is binding on all states that have extradition agreements with France. In this sense, this is a landmark decision because it targets the head of the Syrian regime and is based on intensive investigations carried out by magistrates leading to the official issuance of those arrest warrants. Warrants were also issued for two other regime generals.

On November 16, the Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) group issued a press release welcoming the international arrest warrants issued against Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, his brother Maher Assad, and two senior regime military officers for their involvement in the chemical weapons attack against civilians in 2013. The statement asserted that these warrants constitute “a crucial first step towards justice for the many victims of the Syrian government’s gross human rights violations.”

On November 20, SNHR released its 12th annual report on violations against children in Syria in observance of World Children’s Day. The report documented the killing of 30,127 children in Syria since March 2011 up until the date of the report’s release. The report called for providing protection and assistance for forcibly displaced children, both IDPs and refugees, especially girls, and for ensuring that children’s needs are met, particularly in regard to protection.

On November 30, the OPCW’s CSP-28 adopted the decision ‘Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use and the Threat of Future Use’. A total of 69 states voted in favor of the decision, and 10 voted against, while 45 states abstained. The decision, which was proposed by 48 states, stresses that “Continued possession and use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Arab Republic, and its failures to submit an accurate and complete declaration and to destroy all its undeclared chemical weapons and production facilities, have caused serious damage to the object and purpose of the Chemical Weapons Convention.” As such, the decision recommended a host of collective measures pursuant to Subparagraph 21(k) of Article VIII, and Paragraph 3 of Article XII of the Convention. SNHR welcomed this decision, asserting our agreement with its contents, as it calls on all State Parties to act on all levels to deter the Syrian regime and to sever all forms of cooperation with it. SNHR also called for further steps to be taken to address the Syrian regime’s contraventions of the Convention, similar to the case brought against the regime at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the application of the UN Convention Against Torture. Moreover, SNHR condemned in the strongest possible terms the decision of some states to vote against the decision, which was, in effect, a vote in support of the Syrian regime’s continuing use of chemical weapons. On November 28, SNHR released a report entitled ‘29 Morally Bankrupt Governments, Headed by Russia, Voted Against the OPCW’s Resolutions’, summarizing the decisions adopted by the OPCW on Syria at the time of its release, and an analysis of the states that voted against the OPCW’s decisions, and in favor of the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons, which further emboldened the regime to keep using chemical weapons. The report noted that these states share a number of common characteristics, such as dictatorial and oppressive leadership, opposition to fundamental human rights, and, in some cases, absolute loyalty to Russia and Iran, i.e., the Syrian regime’s two main allies. Still, however, those states constitute a minority which has been consistently defeated many times in votes. In total, 29 states have voted against one or more OPCW decisions.
On December 4, the OCHA released a humanitarian update on Syria, shedding light on developments in the humanitarian and human rights situation throughout 2023.

On December 11, Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, launched the UN’s 2024 global appeal from Doha, Qatar. In his remarks, Mr. Griffiths underscored the role played by humanitarian diplomacy in delivering UN cross-border humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria after the UN Security Council’s authorization had lapsed. As he put it, “...diplomatic outreach, enabled bilateral understandings to ensure aid could continue”, stressing that these understandings are still fragile and must be observed carefully. Mr. Griffiths also stressed that the renewal of [delivering humanitarian assistance] through the Bab al-Hawa Crossings remains the direct aim, without which the UN “will be operating at minimum”.

On December 11, Fadel Abdulghany, SNHR Executive Director, was named as the winner of the 2023 Franco-German Prize for Human Rights. Mr. Abdulghany received the award from Brigitte Curmi, France’s Special Envoy for Syria, on behalf of the French and German governments, in recognition of Human Rights Day, which is observed annually worldwide on December 10, to celebrate the landmark adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on that date in 1948. On December 12, SNHR released a statement on this event that shed more light on the details of the award.

On December 16, the UNRWA released its “Syria, Lebanon and Jordan Emergency Appeal 2023 Progress Report”, in which it confirmed that humanitarian conditions continued to deteriorate in the first half of 2023 in light of the many interconnected crises in Syria. It estimated that 438,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria were facing the same unprecedented social and economic challenges as Syrians in the country, due to the conflict having entered its 13th year. The report also noted that around 420,000 of those 438,000 Palestinians rely on emergency aid supplied by the UNRWA, especially for cash and food aid. The report further noted that the February 6 earthquakes had created an additional humanitarian crisis for the residents of those areas, including 46,500 Palestinian refugees.

D. Noteworthy investigations on violations in Syria

On April 10, the New York Times published an investigative report revealing that no fewer than 84 individuals have been killed so far in 2023 while searching for desert truffles in desert areas in central and eastern Syria. According to the report, Syrian regime forces were forcing truffle harvesters to ‘request’ the help of regime forces to protect them from attacks as they collected desert truffles. In this context, Syrian regime forces would reveal information about the locations of landmines in exchange for receiving the largest share of profits from selling the desert truffles harvested. The investigation also revealed that those refusing the ‘protection’ of regime forces and refusing to split the profits with them face the risk of being killed by landmines, abducted, or attacked by unidentified gunmen. The report voiced suspicion suspected that those ‘unidentified’ gunmen are actually regime troops and regime militia members sent to attack truffle collectors who refuse to share their profits to deter others from making the same decision.
On April 12, Reuters published a report revealing that Iran’s regime had taken advantage of humanitarian aid missions in Syria to supply weapons and military equipment. According to the report, hundreds of air flights from Iran landed in the airports of Aleppo, Damascus, and Latakia, supposedly carrying humanitarian aid supplies for seven weeks following the earthquake, with their cargo including weapons, advanced communication devices, radar batteries, and spare parts. SNHR had warned in previous reports of the Syrian regime’s allies using the earthquake as cover to attain political and military gains in the regime’s favor.

On April 12, the French newspaper Le Monde reported that Saudi Arabia was still seeking to restore relations with the Syrian regime despite the latter’s control of Captagon production and smuggling of the drug to the KSA in particular. The report added that the Syrian regime head Bashar Assad had managed to find a workaround to evade the effects of international sanctions through the methodological development of Captagon production and trade.

On April 24, the Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) organization released its annual Explosive Violence Monitor, documenting violence resulting from explosions for the year 2022. The report confirmed that Syria was the third worst country globally in terms of the number of documented cases of explosives-related violence against civilians in the year 2022.

On July 4, the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) released a report containing documents that, according to the investigators, showed how “the highest levels of the Syrian Regime planned, organized, instigated and deployed paramilitary groups [i.e., ‘shabiha’] in order to assist the state’s crackdown on the opposition” since the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria in 2011. The report referred to nine massacres perpetrated by these militias, detailing the connection between them and the ‘Central Crisis Management Cell’ founded by Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, which regularly submits reports to him. Since the very first years of the popular uprising, SNHR has shed light on the issue of local militias founded and supported by the Syrian regime, issuing numerous reports detailing the most notable massacres perpetrated by them, many of which have exhibited a sectarian character.

On July 10, the British Guardian newspaper published an investigative report on the June 14 incident of a migrant boat sinking near the Greek coast. The report found that the Greek Coast Guard’s attempts to tow the boat may have caused it to sink.

On August 8, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, the graduate school of international affairs of Tufts University in Massachusetts, USA, jointly released a report entitled, ‘Children on the Margins’, in which it noted that over 1.7 million children are living in northwestern Syria, most of them forcibly displaced. The report added that, with the war and ongoing hostilities entering their 13th year, many of these children are suffering a plight that has not received its due attention, namely the denial of access to their right of nationality and legal identity, which “results in children experiencing a slew of deprivations of their basic rights and entitlements, including not being able to access healthcare, humanitarian aid, education, and travel outside the area, even to reunite with their family.”

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65. A non-profit organization based on London that focuses on the effects of armed violence worldwide, by examining the causes and effects of weapon-based violence, with special focus on the effects of explosive weapons that have widespread devastating effects in populated areas.
On November 24, the Protection Monitoring and Analysis Working Group (PMAWG) together with its partners, released a comprehensive survey-based study on the IDP camps near the dividing lines and military bases in northwestern Syria. The study was based on a survey that gathered information from 206 “key informant interviews” in 60 camps.

On December 12, US Congressman French Hill stressed in an article published by The Hill entitled “Shining a light on Syria” that, since Vladimir Putin assumed Russia’s presidency, none of the carnage he’s inflicted, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, has been comparable to what the Republican Congressman described as the “systematic, targeted slaughter in Syria”. Congressman Hill noted that Bashar Assad, whom he described as “a second-generation dictator and murderer”, has been propped up by Putin together with Iran’s regime. Congressman Hill also revealed that he had travelled to Türkiye and northern Aleppo via the Bab al-Salama Crossing last August to “see the horrifying death and destruction of Assad’s partnership with Russia and Iran for myself.” Elsewhere in his article, Congressman Hill condemned the decision of some states to re-normalize relations with the Syrian regime.

66. Affiliated with the Global Protection Cluster (GPC).
IV. Path of Accountability

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A. Slow progress on the path of accountability

Despite the many gross human rights violations that constitute war crimes, which have been committed in the 13 years since the beginning of the popular uprising for democracy, the steps taken on the path of accountability are still insufficient to deter the perpetrators and hold them accountable. However, the year 2023 saw a significant and commendable step forward on this front, namely the case brought by Canada and The Netherlands, as members of the Convention Against Torture, before the ICJ against the Syrian regime on the application of the convention against torture.

Besides that, 2023 saw many small steps taken to file complaints and bring cases against perpetrators of violations in Syria, which unfortunately still fall short of meeting the hopes of the Syrian people. Still, it is our hope that 2024 will be better than the years preceding it, as we reiterate our commitment to the path of accountability through universal jurisdiction that we have pursued since the start.

Below are some noteworthy developments regarding progress towards accountability over the course of 2023

On January 11, the Austrian newspaper Kronen Zeitung reported that the court of Graz, in Graz city, southeastern Austria, had sentence a Palestinian former member of the Syrian regime-affiliated Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to 15 years in prison on charges of premeditated murder for shooting protestors in Damascus in 2011.

On February 2, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Hungarian government must pay a fine of €39,600 to the brother of a Syrian refugee who died as a result of the actions of Hungarian Border Guards in 2016, when the victim and other refugees were trying to traverse the Tisza River towards Hungary, and were attacked by Hungarian Border Guards who tried to forcibly return them to Serbia using tear gas and throwing rocks at the defenseless refugees, as well as unleashing police dogs against them. The court found that Hungarian authorities had failed to launch the necessary investigations into the victim’s death.

On February 23, AP reported that the Berlin district court in the German capital had found a Palestinian-Syrian defendant guilty of a war crime and murder in Syria in 2014, when the convicted man, identified only as Moafak D., used an anti-tank weapon to fire a grenade into a crowd of civilians in the al-Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp in Damascus as they queued for the distribution of aid from the UNRWA, killing four individuals and seriously wounding two others. The defendant was sentenced to life imprisonment. The news agency added that the defendant was affiliated with the pro-regime Free Palestine Movement.
On February 28, the US Congress passed Resolution H. Res. 132, which condemned the Syrian regime’s efforts to “exploit the [earthquake] disaster to evade international pressure and accountability, including by preventing the United Nations from providing assistance through border crossings between Türkiye and Syria.” The resolution called for ensuring that no US-funded aid would be transferred to the Syrian regime.

On March 2, the US Department of State’s DRL announced that it had selected the case of the forcibly disappeared Syrian woman Rania al-Abbasi and her six children for its Without Just Cause Political Prisoners Campaign which sheds light on some of the prominent cases of enforced disappearance from around the world. This choice of a Syrian case was made as part of the coordination and collaboration between the DRL and SNHR as the group revealed in a statement released the day after the announcement.

On March 6, the US Department of State released a press statement revealing that it has added Amjad Yousef, the Syrian regime intelligence officer who was behind the al-Tadamun neighborhood massacre that took place in Damascus on April 16, 2023, to the US sanction list for Syria. The statement added that Amjad Yousef’s wife, as well as his first-degree relatives, had also been added to the sanction list. SNHR provided information on the regime officer to the US Department of State. On March 8, the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) released a statement revealing that Amjad Yousef had also been added to the UK sanctions list for Syria, noting that these sanctions include an assets freeze.

On March 7, the EU imposed sanctions and restrictive measures on nine individuals and three entities, including the Syrian regime’s Syrian Republic Guard. The statement revealed that many victims had reported incidents of rape and torture during their arbitrary detention by those forces. The statement also noted that the practices of the Syrian Republic Guard are part of a systematic approach by the Syrian regime that incorporates the use of sexual violence and gender-based violence to intimidate and oppress the Syrian people, particularly women and girls.

On March 18, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, issued a decree adding 300 individuals and 141 entities to the list of Ukrainian sanctions in relation to the war in Ukraine. The list included Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, Hussein Arnous, head of the Syrian regime’s government, and Faisal al-Meqdad, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian regime’s government. The sanctions include a number of restrictive measures, such as an assets freeze, and a ban on those officials entering Ukraine. Those measures are set to remain in effect for 10 years.

On March 28, the US Department of Treasury announced that, in collaboration with the UK, the US had imposed sanctions on six Syrian and Lebanese individuals and two Lebanese entities over their involvement in the Captagon trade in Syria and Lebanon. On the same day, the UK’s FCDO released a statement noting that it had imposed sanctions on individuals responsible for the illicit caption trade in Syria, including “senior regime officials facilitating the trade to the manufacturers of the drug and key Hizbollah associates responsible for trafficking it across the Middle East.”
On April 4, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) released a statement revealing that, on March 29, 2023, the judges affiliated with the war crimes unit of the Paris Judicial Court had ordered the indictment before the Paris Criminal Court of three senior Syrian regime officials: Ali Mamlouk, advisor to the head of the Syrian regime on security affairs, Jamil Hassan, Director of the Syrian regime’s Air Force Intelligence Directorate, and Abdel Salam Mahmoud, head of the Interrogation department at the Air Force Intelligence Directorate’s branch in Damascus, for their complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity in the ‘Dabbagh’ case.67

On April 11, the US Department of State released a statement revealing that Sami Mahmud Mohammed al-Uraydi had been designated on the global terrorism list for his leadership role with the group ‘Hurras al-Din’ [Guardians of the Faith]. The statement adds that the group has been responsible for “killings, kidnappings, and violence targeting members of religious minority groups.”

On April 24, the Council of the EU revealed in an official statement that it had added 25 individuals and eight entities to its restrictive measures list in view of the situation in Syria. Those individuals and entities, the statement explained, had been added to the list over their responsibility for the production and trafficking of narcotics, notably Captagon. The statement added that those affected by the newly imposed sanctions include members of the family of Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, including his direct cousins, in addition to “leaders and members of regime-affiliated militias and businesspeople with close ties to the Assad family, as well as persons associated with the Syrian army and the Syrian military intelligence”, along with private security firms which serve as shell companies for pro-regime militias.

On May 2, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) revealed that, in collaboration with Turkish authorities, two financial facilitators for HTS and the Qaeda-affiliated ‘Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad’ (The Tawhid and Jihad Battalion) had been included on the US sanctions list. The statement reveals that the first of these figures, Omar Alsheak, commonly known as Abu Ahmed Zakour, had held several leadership-level positions with HTS, while the second figure, a Turkish individual, had been receiving funds in Turkey since 2018 to buy arms and military equipment for the two groups.

On May 5, the Swiss government revealed that it had amended its Ordinance imposing Measures against Syria, adding 25 natural persons and eight legal persons to the annex of the Ordinance, which is a sanctions list for Syria and the Captagon trade. Among those added were three cousins of Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, namely Samer Kamal Assad, Wasim Badia Assad, and Mudar Riffat Assad, as well as a number of officials, businessmen, and pro-regime militia members involved in the drug trade.

67. On November 3, 2013, personnel from the Syrian regime’s Air Force Intelligence Directorate arrested Syrian citizen Mazen Dabbagh and his son Patrick, who both are naturalized French nationals, and detained them at al-Mazza Airport in Damascus city. On November 25, 2017, received an official note informing the family that Mazen died on November 25, 2017, while Patrick Abdul Qader died on January 21, 2014.
On May 8, the White House released a statement revealing that US President Joe Biden had extended the sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime by another year.

On May 12, France’s Court of Cassation announced that it had examined the rules of French law restricting victims of crime from facing justice for serious crimes committed outside France. The Court concluded that “the necessary conditions have been met for the French justice system to charge Syrian nationals involved in investigations for acts committed in Syria.” Commenting on this assessment, HRW released a statement noting that “while the decisions confirmed the jurisdiction of French courts over a significant number of pending cases, they do not address the full scope of restrictive conditions that remain in French law.” HRW’s statement added that the French government still needs to enact immediate reforms to remove the legal barriers, which risks France “becoming a safe haven for those involved in the world’s worst crimes.” SNHR welcomed this decision that supports the path of justice for the victims and which changed the system to enable the filing of lawsuits in French courts against individuals responsible for human rights violations in Syria.

On May 16, the US Congress’s Committee of Foreign Affairs approved a bill aimed at combating normalization with the Syrian regime. The bill, which entered into law later in the year, prohibits the US from recognizing or normalizing relations with any Syrian government presided over by Bashar Assad. The bill also includes expansions of the CAESAR Act to include individuals who support the People’s Assembly of Syria and the Baath Party in Syria.

On May 30, the US Department of the Treasury released a statement revealing that it had designated two Syrian companies, al-Fadel Exchange and al-Adham Exchange Company, as having “secretly helped” the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad, as well as its two allies the Lebanese group Hezbollah and the Iranian regime’s Quds Corps. The statement also revealed that the OFAC had similarly designated three brothers who own and run al-Fadel Exchange, namely Fadel, Mut‘i, and Muhammad Ma’ruf Balwi.

On June 12, the ICJ revealed in a statement that Canada and the Netherlands had filed a joint application to institute proceedings against the Syrian regime before the ICJ with regard to the regime’s alleged violations of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The statement further explained that “In their Application, Canada and the Netherlands contend that ‘Syria has committed countless violations of international law, beginning at least in 2011, with its violent repression of civilian demonstrations, and continuing as the situation in Syria devolved into a protracted armed conflict’... The Applicants claim that ‘these violations also include the use of chemical weapons...’” SNHR welcomed this action as a positive step in the process of holding the Syrian regime accountable. It is our hope that the ICJ will issue a ruling and convict the Syrian regime of the charges against it, which would deter other states from normalizing relations with it. On July 7, the ICJ issued a press release revealing that public hearings for the case would be held on Wednesday-Thursday, July 19-20. On July 15, however, the ICJ announced that the public hearing would be postponed for three months. In response, the Netherlands and Canada issued a joint statement on July 20, expressing their regret at the ICJ’s decision.
Meanwhile, on July 26, SANA cited an official source within the Syrian regime’s Foreign Ministry who described Canada’s and the Netherlands’ objection as “unsurprising”, claiming that these two states find any action that does not suit their wishes and policies to warrant criticism, and cannot withstand any ‘slap’ because it might undermine the endeavor they are currently engaged in. SNHR called on the ICJ to accept the appeal filed by Canada and the Netherlands in light of the existence of massive quantities of conclusive evidence proving that the Syrian regime has committed multiple violations against the Syrian people. We must reiterate that a trial procedure is the proper legal path towards fulfilling justice for the Syrian people and holding the Syrian regime to account. The group also called on the other democracies of the world to file similar lawsuits in line with their obligations to compliance with human rights conventions.

On June 19, the UK government issued a statement revealing that it had imposed new sanctions on Abdel Karim Mahmoud Ibrahim, the Chief of the General Staff of the Syrian regime’s Syrian Army and Armed Forces, and Ali Mahmoud Abbas, the Minister of Defense in the Syrian regime’s government, for their involvement in oppressing civilians in Syria and the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence and gender-based violence in a systematic way against civilians.

On July 18, the US Congress voted against a bill to lift US sanctions on the Syrian regime. A total of 3,994 representatives voted against the bill, with only 24 voting in favor.

On July 20, the EU released a statement revealing that it had adopted new restrictive measure against six Iranian individuals for supporting the Syrian regime with air defense systems.

On August 3, Reuters reported that German authorities had arrested a Syrian man accused of committing crimes against humanity and war crimes between 2012 and 2015. The agency further said that the accused was the leader of one of the pro-regime ‘shabiha’ militias. Reuters also quoted German prosecutors who said that the man had been responsible for many acts of torture, brutal beating of civilians, and two incidents in 2012 and 2015 in which he forced detainees to engage in hard labor while depriving them of food and water.

On August 16, Switzerland’s Federal Criminal Court (FCC) and Federal Office of Justice (FOJ) issued an international arrest warrant for Rifaat Assad in connection with his involvement in the horrific war crimes committed in Hama city in February 1982. At the time, Rifaat Assad was Syria’s Vice-President under his brother, the then-President of the Syrian regime, Hafez Assad, and headed the now-dissolved ‘Saraya al-Difa’ (Defense Companies).
On August 17, the US Department of Treasury noted that it has designated the two factions of ‘Ferqat al-Sultan Shah’ [the Sultan Shah Brigade] and Ferqat al-Hamza [the Hamza Division], which are affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA), on its list of sanctions, as well as three of the two factions’ leaders - Mohammad Hussein al-Jasim (Abu Amsha), his younger brother Walid Hussein al-Jasim, and Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr, in addition to sanctioning al-Safir Oto, a car trade company owned by Mohammad Hussein al-Jasim. The government agency noted that they were “responsible for or complicit in, or for having directly or indirectly engaged in, the commission of serious human rights abuses against the Syrian people.”

On September 7, Germany’s Federal Public Prosecution revealed that it had arrested two Syrian citizens identified only as Amer A. and Bassil O., who are suspected of having served as commanders of the ISIS-affiliated terror group Liwa Jund al-Rahman [the Battalion of the Soldiers of Rahman], which is accused of committing war crimes against Shiite residents of Hatla village near Deir Ez-Zour. The statement further reveals that, on September 6, “they were brought before the Investigating Judge at the Federal Court of Justice who read out the arrest warrants and decided for pre-trial detention to be put into effect.”

On October 10, the ICJ held its first public hearing session on the case of the Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, brought by Canada and the Netherlands as State Parties to the Convention (formally named the Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic). At the request of the two countries, the session focused on imposing what are known as provisional measures on the Syrian regime to compel it to immediately cease torture against potential victims, while the trial of the Syrian regime for the alleged violation of the Convention Against Torture proceeds. The Syrian regime was notably absent from the hearing, despite the fact that the session had been deferred by three months from its original date in July of this year at the request of the Syrian regime itself.

Teresa Crockett; the Canada’s Deputy Director of the Accountability, Human Rights, and United Nations Law Division of Global Affairs Canada; pointed out that during the three-month delay period granted to the Syrian regime at its request, SNHR had documented no fewer than 15 cases of death due to torture at the regime’s hands. On the morning of October 10, SNHR released a report entitled, “The Syrian Regime is Accused of Killing 15,051 Individuals, Including 190 Children and 94 Women, Under Torture in Its Detention Centers Since March 2011, While Nearly 136,000 Remain Forcibly Disappeared”, in which the group hailed the trial as a serious step on the path of long overdue accountability, after the Syrian regime has been given absolute impunity for 13 years. In that regard, the report recommends that the Canada and The Netherlands governments call on the ICJ to adopt the harshest possible provisional measures against the Syrian regime, including calling on the Syrian regime to end torture and killings under torture, to repeal all sentences issued against arbitrarily arrested detainees since they are based on confession extracted under the duress of torture, and to improve imprisonment conditions since most deaths occur due to poor health conditions.
On October 18, French examining magistrates with the country’s War Crimes Unit issued international arrest warrants for four senior officers from the Syrian regime’s military forces - Lieutenant General Fahed Jassem al-Fraij, Lieutenant General Ali Abdallah Ayoub, Brigadier General Ahmad Balloul, and Brigadier General Ali Safeti - over their complicity in a war crime in the form of “Intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities” and “Intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects, that is, objects which are not military objectives.” These charges refer to the officers’ involvement in bombardment of the Tareeq al-Sad neighborhood in Daraa city by Syrian regime air force helicopters using barrel bombs on June 7, 2017, which killed Salah Abou Nabbout, a French citizen and French language teacher. One of the barrel bombs struck Salah’s house in the neighborhood which was then being used as a school by a humanitarian organization.

On November 15, criminal investigative judges at a French court issued arrest warrants for Syrian regime head Bashar Assad, his brother Maher Assad, the commander of the regime’s Fourth Division, Ghassan Abbas, the Director of Branch 450 of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC), and General Bassam al-Hassan, Presidential Advisor for Strategic Affairs and the official currently acting as liaison officer between the Presidential Palace and the SSRC. The warrants were issued over charges of complicity in crimes against humanity in the form of carrying out chemical weapons attacks using sarin gas against Eastern Ghouta and Mu’adamiyat al-Sham in Western Ghouta in Rural Damascus governorate on August 21, 2013. SNHR stresses that this decision is binding to all states that have extradition agreements with France. In this sense, this is a landmark decision because it targets the head of the Syrian regime and is based on intensive investigations carried out by magistrates leading to the official issuance of those arrest warrants.

On November 16, the Hague-based ICJ delivered its verdict on the request made by Canada and The Netherlands to indicate provisional measures against the Syrian regime in the case brought by the two countries against the Syrian regime concerning the Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic). By the effect of this binding order, the ICJ indicated a number of provisional measures on the Syrian regime. The order was passed by a majority of 13 votes, with two votes against. SNHR released a statement welcoming this order to indicate provisional measures on the Syrian regime to put an end to torture in its detention centers and to preserve evidence. SNHR also underscores that it is vitally important that this verdict be properly implemented, as we must remind the international community that over 135,638 individuals, including 3,693 children and 8,478 women (adult female) are still enduring arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, and torture in regime detention centers. SNHR also condemned, in the strongest possible terms, the choice made by two Russian and Chinese judges on the ICJ to vote against this order. We find it deplorable and absurd that ICJ judges who are supposedly independent would vote against an order that provides for ending torture and preserving evidence. We believe in the significance of this trial as an effective and genuine step on the long overdue path of accountability, the lack of which has enabled the Syrian regime to act with impunity for 13 years to date.

68. 1. The Syrian Arab Republic shall, in accordance with its obligations under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, take all measures within its power to prevent acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and ensure that its officials, as well as any organizations or persons which may be subject to its control, direction or influence, do not commit any acts of torture or other acts of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

2. The Syrian Arab Republic shall take effective measures to prevent the destruction and ensure the preservation of any evidence related to allegations of acts within the scope of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
On November 30, SNHR released a joint statement with a number of other human rights, humanitarian, and civil society organizations, as well as associations and groups representing victims and their families, eyewitnesses, and survivors of the chemical weapons attacks in Syria. The statement called for establishing an exceptional chemical weapons tribunal to hold perpetrators accountable for the use of chemical weapons internationally in cases where existing international criminal and judicial bodies cannot be invoked domestically, as is the case in Syria.

On December 8, the UK, the US, and Canada revealed in a press release that they were about to impose sanctions on human rights abusers in a number of countries, including Syria, in tandem with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To that end, the statement noted that sanctions had been imposed on eight Syrian regime ministers and military officials for their involvement in gross human rights violations against the Syrian people, as well as on individuals connected to the regime’s Military Field Courts. The list includes the following: Major Mohammad Kanjou, Major General Yazan Al-Homsi, Boutros al Hallaq Louai Emad El-Din al-Munajjid, Firas Hassan Qaddour, Mohsen Abdul Karim Ali, Abdel Qader Jokhadar, and Ahmed Mohammad Bustaji.

On December 8, the Netherlands Public Prosecution Service revealed that it had arrested a 55-year-old Syrian man (whose name was not publicized) the same day. The man in question, who lives in the Dutch town of Druten in the province of Gelderland, was arrested based on an investigation conducted by the International Crimes Team (TIM) of the Dutch National Police, which found out that “the man is suspected of being head of the interrogation department of the [Syrian regime’s] National Defence Force (NDF) in Salamiyah in Hama governorate in central Syria in 2013 and 2014.” The statement further added that “from this position the man committed acts of torture and sexual violence against civilians.”

On December 12, Germany’s Federal Public Prosecution arrested Ammar. A., a Syrian national, over his former affiliation with the Lebanese group Hezbollah, as well as on strong suspicion of his being involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes in Bosra al-Sham town in rural Daraa governorate in Southern Syria. Ammar was captured by officers from the Baden-Württemberg State Criminal Police Office in the Rhein-Neckar district, based on an arrest warrant issued by the investigating judge of the Federal Court of Justice dated November 27, 2023. The next day, the Public Prosecution issued a statement detailing the charges brought against him, which noted that the accused was to appear before the investigating judge of the Federal Court of Justice that day, meaning December 13. During that court appearance, the judge ordered the provisional detention of the accused man.

On December 22, Germany’s Federal Public Prosecution issued a statement revealing that the Federal Prosecutor’s Office had filed charges against two Syrian nationals, identified as Mohammad Mohammad A. and Asmael K., at the ‘State Security Senate of the Düsseldorf Higher Regional Court’. The charges are related to war crimes committed in 2012, 2013, and 2014, with the two suspected to have been members of ISIS at the time. Mohammad is suspected to have led an ISIS group in the capture of two anti-ISIS individuals in Damascus city, who were subsequently executed in January 2014, along with 10 other captives held in ISIS detention centers. Meanwhile, Ismail is accused of taking part in the arrest of one of the victims, as well as guarding the 12 captives at the execution site, and shooting at least one of the captives.
B. SNHR’s role in supporting the path of accountability in 2023

In documenting human rights violations, SNHR’s purpose is to preserve the rights of all victims, hold criminals accountable in pursuit of justice, and support the path of transitional justice, as well as to honor and commemorate the victims, and to contribute to advocacy efforts on a political and social level. Indeed, SNHR further redoubled its efforts in relation to the issue of striving for accountability in 2023. Some of the most notable achievements attained by SNHR this year include:

Signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala, which provides for creating a mechanism for coordination and cooperation, paving the way to sharing information data and building capacities.

On April 13, SNHR revealed in a statement that it had assisted in building a case against the Syrian regime in a US court, through its partnership with the Center for Justice & Accountability (CJA), in relation to the case of US citizen Obada Mzaik who was subjected to torture at the hands of Syrian regime forces while he was in Syria in 2012. Obada was arrested and tortured at the Air Force branch in al-Mazza Military Airbase. SNHR supplied the CJA with a large quantity of data and evidence on the torture practices which took place at the Air Force Intelligence Directorate’s branch in al-Mazza Military Airbase in 2012, as well as other information.

On August 17, SNHR issued a statement welcoming the FCC’s decision to issue an international arrest warrant for Rifaat Assad as a positive step on the path of accountability. The statement also revealed that SNHR has cooperated with Trial International, the group that filed a criminal denunciation against Rifat Assad before the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG) and spearheaded an extensive criminal investigation, by providing data and details on the Hama Massacre of 1982.

On August 26, SNHR revealed in a statement that it had delivered a list containing data on approximately 7,000 Syrian citizens, including approximately 2,000 children killed by Russian forces in Syria since the beginning of Russia’s unlawful military intervention in the country in September 2015 to the Ukrainian Prosecutor General. The data included the victims’ names, as well as the locations and dates of the killings, along with other relevant details. This took place during a meeting between Fadel Abdulghany, SNHR Executive Director, and the Ukrainian Prosecutor General in the latter’s office in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv.

On October 11, SNHR released a statement noting that it was a principal source in the case brought by Dutch and Canadian prosecutors before the ICJ against the Syrian regime for violating the UN Convention Against Torture with 14 citations. The statement revealed that, according to the court session’s transcript, the case drew upon a number of UN sources, as well as on data provided by SNHR, which was cited as a source 14 times, while the COI was cited 24 times. The statement also provided a summary of the trial proceedings.

69. The FAFG is an unprecedented initiative that aims to make Guatemala a hub for active civil society organizations working in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, in order to empower and build the capacities of such groups in relation to searching for and documenting missing persons, with a particular focus on the use of a holistic, multidisciplinary approach, forensic sciences, memorialization, and mental health support.
On October 23, SNHR released a statement noting that it had provided French examining magistrates with large quantities of data and evidence on the Syrian regime’s use of barrel bombs, as part of a judicial investigation that was launched pursuant to a complaint filed in 2017 by Omar Abu Nabbout, son of Salah Abu Nabbout, to the Paris Court on behalf of his father, who was killed in a barrel bomb attack on June 7, 2017. The statement reveals that SNHR has been coordinating and working closely with the victim’s son in recent years, with the group supplying the examining magistrates with detailed information on the incident on June 7, 2017, as well as securing eyewitnesses and survivors, in addition to providing details on the regime’s use of barrel bombs. Moreover, at the request of the judge handling the case, Fadel Abdulghany, SNHR’s Executive Director, testified as an expert witness in January 2020 on the Syrian regime’s use of barrel bombs.

On October 18, French examining magistrates with the country’s War Crimes Unit issued international arrest warrants for four senior officers from the Syrian regime’s military forces - Lieutenant General Fahed Jassem al-Fraj, Lieutenant General Ali Abdallah Ayoub, Brigadier General Ahmad Balloul, and Brigadier General Ali Safetli - over their complicity in a war crime in the form of “Intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities” and “Intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects, that is, objects which are not military objectives.” These charges refer to the officers’ involvement in bombardment of the Tareeq al-Sad neighborhood in Daraa city by Syrian regime air force helicopters using barrel bombs on June 7, 2017, which killed Salah Abou Nabbout, a French citizen and French language teacher. One of the barrel bombs struck Salah’s house in the neighborhood which was then being used as a school by a humanitarian organization.

On November 15, the member states of the UN General Assembly voted on draft resolution A/C.3/78/L.43, which acknowledged that the number of detainees in Syria had continued to rise steadily, already exceeding 135,000. Furthermore, the resolution stressed that the documented number of child deaths had risen to 30,034, including 198 children who died due to torture. The resolution drew upon SNHR’s data in many of the figures and much of the information it cited. In this context, it should be noted that SNHR has continued its close working relationship throughout 2023 with many UN bodies on Syria, including the OHCHR, COI, the IIIM, UNICEF, and many UN special rapporteurs.

SNHR has also supplied the US Department of State and the UK’s FCDO with information on Amjad Yousef, the regime intelligence officer who was designated on the US and UK sanctions list in March 2023.

Moreover, SNHR nominated the forcibly disappeared Dr. Rania al-Abbasi and her family for the ‘Without Just Cause’ campaign launched by the US Department of State’s DRL, which focuses on political prisoners. SNHR provided the DRL with the information and details the group had documented on Dr. Rania’s arrest and subsequent enforced disappearance. The group has also nominated other prominent forcibly disappeared persons.
SNHR’s data was again used in 2023 as a principal source in many international human rights reports, including:

- **The Explosive Violence Monitor**, released by the AOAV in April 2023.
- SNHR has also been a prominent source of information for reports released by foreign affairs ministers and situation reports released by leading international powers, including:
  - **The Annual Human Rights Practice Reports for 2022**, released by the US Department of State’s DRL in March 2023.
  - **The Annual International Religious Freedom for 2022**, released by the US Department of State’s DRL in May 2023, which stressed that sectarian violence, fueled and exacerbated by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict, is still continuing in Syria.
  - **The Security Situation Report on Syria for 2022**, released by Germany’s Federal Foreign Office (AA)
  - **A report** released by Denmark’s Immigration Service, a directorate within the country’s Ministry of Immigration and Integration in July 2023
  - **The General Country Report on Syria**, released by the Netherlands’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 2023

In 2023, SNHR briefed the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the UN Special Rapporteur on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights while Countering Terrorism- Specific work on victims of terrorism, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, on 34 cases of enforced disappearance.

Also in 2023, SNHR took part in international and UN events, as well as organizing side-events on the sidelines of international events. Furthermore, Fadel Abdulghany, Executive Director of SNHR, took part in many seminars, as well as delivering many lectures and training events for Syrian and Arab human rights activists. All of these efforts are directed in the service of advocacy and mobilization and to contribute to the path of accountability. **The most notable events in which SNHR took part during 2023 were:***
1. High-level and bilateral meetings

On February 3, Fadel Abdulghany gave a briefing before the Portuguese Parliament, in which he shed light on the current state of human rights in Syria and the most notable violations committed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces during 2022, most notably the Syrian regime.

On February 6-8, Fadel Abdulghany held multiple meetings with high-ranking officials from different U.S. government departments, including the White House, Department of State, Department of Defense, and Department of Treasury. In these meetings, the SNHR underlined a number of crucial human rights issues, which we believe deserve far greater attention from the relevant U.S. government agencies. Even though these meetings had been scheduled for some weeks before the February 6 Earthquakes, the shocking catastrophe meant that humanitarian assistance became a priority focus in many of the meetings.

2. Open events

On February 23, Fadel Abdulghany participated in the event, ‘Countering Disinformation: A Shared Responsibility’ that was organized by the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the OPCW, in collaboration with CBWnet, an international network campaigning for a comprehensive reinforcement of norms against chemical and biological weapons. The event was held in the German Embassy in the Hague.

On February 22, Fadel Abdulghany was the keynote speaker at a seminar organized by the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies entitled, ‘The Human Rights Fallout of the Earthquake and the UN and International Humanitarian Assistance Crisis’.

On March 10, SNHR released a statement on Fadel Abdulghany’s participation in a panel on humanitarian intervention from the perspective of international law organized by Georgetown University in Qatar and the American Society of International Law (ASIL). In his address, Mr. Abdulghany tackled the question, ‘Shouldn’t humanitarian groups demand an intervention outside the scope of the UN Security Council in order to protect civilians in the event that murder crimes have reached the level of crimes against humanity?’, with Syria as a case study. Mr. Abdulghany noted that Syria has exposed the failing of the UN Security Council, stressing that the body’s failure to intervene to protect civilians in Syria has led to vastly compounded losses.

On March 15, SNHR hosted an online forum marking the 12th anniversary of the start of the popular uprising in Syria, entitled ‘12 Years and More: Human Rights Violations Continue in an Unsafe Syria’.
On April 20, SNHR participated in an event entitled, 'Detainees and Forcibly Disappeared Persons in Syria: Paths to Truth and Accountability', held by the Arab Center in Washington DC.

On April 24-27, SNHR participated in the event, 'New possibilities for measuring deaths in conflict settings', as part of the UN World Data Forum 2023 held in Hangzhou, China.

On May 15, SNHR participated in a side-event on the sidelines of the OPCW’s Fifth Review Conference (RC-5) that was held in the Hague from May 15-19.

On June 13, Batyna, SNHR, and the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets), held an in-person event entitled, 'We know who used chemical weapons in Syria, what is next?', which was held on the sidelines of the 'Brussels VII Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region' in Brussels, Belgium.

On June 17, SNHR participated in a panel discussion entitled, 'Impunity Kills - Lessons from Syria and Ukraine', which was held in Bornholm, Denmark and organized by the Syria-Ukraine Network (SUN).

On June 26, SNHR participated in the seminar 'Journeys of Hope. Together we create opportunities. Inclusion of refugees builds a better future for all', which was streamed on the International Coalition of the Sites of Conscience’s media channels.

On July 6, SNHR participated in a virtual panel discussion entitled, 'Pathways to Safe Return: Addressing Challenges for Syrian Refugees in the Wake of Regime Normalization', which was organized by the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, and co-hosted by the Immigration Policy Lab at Stanford University, ETH Zurich, European Institute of Peace (EIP), and SNHR.

On September 21, SNHR co-organized an event on the sidelines of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in collaboration with the US Department of State’s DRL, entitled, "Twelve Years of Suffering, Examining Human Rights Abuses and Opportunities for Accountability in Syria".

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70. A coalition of organizations and individuals from Syria, Ukraine and other nations aiming to expose and end war crimes in Syria and Ukraine.
On October 16-17, SNHR participated in the ‘Justice and Accountability: New Ways of Thinking’ international conference. The group was part of two panels: ‘Accountability at the intersection between Syria and Ukraine’, and ‘Normalizing With the Assad Regime: Who pays the Price?’. The conference was organized by the SUN in collaboration with the Center for Civil Liberties (CCL), Razom for Ukraine, and the Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF) with the support of the Union of Medical Relief and Care Organizations (UOSSM) and the Home Revival Initiative (HRI).

On October 19, SNHR held an international panel discussion to mark the release of its extensive report entitled, *The Mechanisms by Which the Syrian Regime Has Used Laws to Expropriate Tens of Thousands of Homes, Properties and Areas of Land in Homs Governorate*. The event was held in Paris, France.

On November 23, SNHR participated in the Syrian Civil Society Conference on Chemical Weapons.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Legal conclusions

• The Syrian regime has failed in upholding its responsibility to protect Syria’s population from crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from crimes of atrocity, or is itself committing such crimes, as in the case of the Syrian regime, this means that it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.71

• All parties to the conflict in Syria have violated both international humanitarian law and international human rights law, with the Syrian regime and its allies being the perpetrators of by far the largest number of violations.

• Syrian regime forces have perpetrated various violations that amount to crimes against humanity, ranging from extrajudicial killing to torture, forced displacement and others, with all these crimes being perpetrated in a simultaneously systematic and widespread manner. In addition, Syrian regime forces have committed war crimes through indiscriminate bombardment, and the destruction of buildings and facilities. Not only has the Syrian regime’s government breached international humanitarian law and customary law, but it’s also violated Security Council resolutions - particularly Resolution No. 2042 which is concerned with releasing detainees, and Resolution No. 2139 which is concerned with ceasing indiscriminate attacks and enforced disappearances. All of these issues have yet to be addressed with any form of accountability in light of the legitimacy conferred through Russian-Chinese protection and Western silence.

• The Syrian regime is responsible for practicing torture in a systematic and widespread manner. Torture practices have even resulted in violating the right to life, and, in this, constitute an explicit and blatant violation of international human rights law. It has been well-established that the Syrian regime is fully aware of such practices, and has definitive knowledge that the inhumane detention conditions in its prisons will inevitably lead to death. Accordingly, the regime’s hierarchy has made a conscious decision to implement such practices at the highest echelons of power, starting with the President of the Syrian Arab Republic, connected to him directly are the ministers of defense and interior and the National Security Bureau, and their affiliated security apparatuses.

• There are no legal grounds for convicting detainees and leveling charges against them, whether on the basis of the Counterterrorism Law or the Public Penal Code, with rulings usually being based on confessions extracted under torture and coercion. These are not courts in a legal and judicial sense.

• Northwestern Syria houses the largest IDPs population that have been displaced by the violations by the Syrian regime and its allies which have denied these IDPs access to basic services, and utterly and thoroughly abandoned their responsibilities. Even more deplorable, the Syrian regime has deliberately bombarded IDPs areas in recent years, while blocking the delivery of humanitarian relief aid and pillaging the largest proportion of this aid.

• The February 6 earthquakes further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. It is extremely unacceptable for the international community to go to those who have displaced IDPs, abandoned their responsibilities towards these vulnerable people, and bombed their camps and areas of displacement, and entrust these same assailants with delivering UN humanitarian assistance to the selfsame IDPs who are their victims.

• A noble mission such as humanitarian aid must be not distorted into an instrument to fund and support a regime that has been involved in crimes against humanity against its people.

• The legislative process in Syria has been stripped of all standards regulating legislation, especially those related to conflicts. This process has also contravened constitutional and legal articles in many of the legislative articles that have been promulgated. The legislative authority, i.e., the People’s Assembly of Syria, lacks any autonomy and is completely subservient to the executive branch in every way, from appointing its members to controlling the laws passed by it.

• The ‘Law on Managing and Investing Transferrable and Non-Transferrable Assets That Were Seized Pursuant to an Unappealable Judicial Ruling’ violates articles of local and international law, and simply gives the Syrian regime the power to strip and deprive victims of their right to property in an irreversible way.

• This law perpetuates the policy of collective punishment adopted by the regime against the people of Syria, plunging them further into impoverishment and intensifying their lack of all forms of legal protection.

• Most of the real estate laws adopted by the Syrian regime violate many fundamental human rights, through confiscating properties, raising taxes and fees, and requiring security clearance for many real estate transactions.

• The vast extent of the destruction monitored on the ground unequivocally confirms that the regime has consistently deliberately aimed to destroy any real estate property that it failed to seize in order to force their owners to leave first, and then to ensure that they never return.

• Legislative Decree No. 36 of 2023 was designed specifically to ensure the release of drug users, deserters, military servicemen, and criminals who committed misdemeanors and infractions. Meanwhile, the decree excludes all prisoners of conscience and detainees arrested in the context of the conflict, leaving it devoid of legal meaning and with no real bearing on the release of the detainees and forcibly disappeared persons held in regime detention centers.

• The frequent nature of the regime’s issuance of amnesty decrees, which are not aimed at political prisoners, only harms the state’s penal policies, since these decrees lead to the release of thousands of actual offenders. The exceptionally frequent issuing of these amnesty decrees also leads to many dysfunctions in court procedures at all levels. At this point, many judges are deferring their decisions on legal rulings in many cases since they may be included in future decrees.

• The Syrian regime has violated Principle 21 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which states that:

1. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of property and possessions

2. The property and possessions of internally displaced persons shall in all circumstances be protected, in particular, against the following acts:
   A. Pillage;
   B. Direct or indiscriminate attacks or other acts of violence;
   C. Being used to shield military operations and objectives;
   D. Being made the object of reprisal; and
   E. Being destroyed or appropriated as a form of collective punishment

3. Property and possessions left behind by internally displaced persons should be protected against destruction and arbitrary and illegal appropriation, occupation or use.

- States unanimously agreed at the World Summit 2005\textsuperscript{73} that every state is responsible for the protection of its residents against crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from crimes of atrocity, or is itself committing such crimes, as in the case of the Syrian regime, this means that it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.\textsuperscript{74}

- The bombardment of IDPs camps and civilian gatherings has created a state of terror and fear among the displaced, substantially exacerbating their already-catastrophic situation that already suffers from an extremely poor humanitarian response.

- International humanitarian law stresses that civilian objects must be provided with special protection. By the same law, targeting these objects constitutes a war crime. Article 52 of Protocol I to the Geneva Convention defines civilian objects as “all objects which are not military objects... Military objects are limited to those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.” Civilian objects include medical facilities, educational facilities, infrastructures, places of worship, and other facilities that are used for civilian purposes.

- The Syrian regime does not care about the political transition process because it would lead to a transition from dictatorship to democracy.

- According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, all states bear responsibility for providing assistance for their residences. However, the Syrian regime has refused to approve UN humanitarian aid so that said aid must go through the regime itself, enabling it to control and steal as much of the aid as possible.

- Russia cannot hide behind the principle of sovereignty and the Syrian regime’s approval, since the regime is the main cause of the displacement of millions of IDPs and does not care about them having access to UN relief aid.

\textsuperscript{73} United Nations General Assembly, 2005 World Summit Outcome \url{https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/60/1}
\textsuperscript{74} United Nations General Assembly, 2005 World Summit Outcome \url{https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/60/1}
• There is no need for the UN to obtain permission or approval from the Syrian regime in order to continue delivering cross-border humanitarian assistance to millions of Syrian citizens who urgently need such assistance.

• Russian forces have violated Security Council Resolution No. 2139, as well as Resolution No. 2254, through indiscriminate bombardment. Additionally, Russian forces have violated many rules of international humanitarian law, committing dozens of violations that amount to war crimes through indiscriminate, disproportionate bombardment, particularly given the use of excessive power in these attacks, as well as violating Article 8 of the Rome Statute by committing intentional homicide, all of which constitute war crimes.

• Russia has used its veto powers 14 times since the beginning of its direct military intervention despite its status as a party to the Syrian conflict, which violates the UN Charter. Furthermore, the use of veto powers has been exploited by the Syrian regime to protect its impunity, affording it absolute protection. In this, the use of veto powers has been arbitrary and in opposition to human rights.

• Russia has obstructed the political process and caused a suffocating humanitarian crisis that affected millions of IDPs by blocking UN cross-border aid from freely entering Syria. Russia has been involved with the Syrian regime in displacing the overwhelming majority of IDPs in Syria today.

• Commanders and other superiors are criminally responsible for war crimes committed by their subordinates pursuant to their orders, if they knew, or had reason to know, that the subordinates were about to commit or were committing such crimes and did not take all necessary and reasonable measures in their power to prevent their commission, or if such crimes had been committed, to punish the persons responsible.

• Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham has violated many basic rights, including the right to life. HTS has also practiced multiple other violations such as torture and enforced disappearance, as well as being responsible for numerous war crimes through indiscriminate shelling, looting, abduction, imposing restrictions on women, and restrictions on freedom of movement, and attempting to enforce an extremist religious ideology.

• Armed opposition factions and Syrian National Army forces have committed numerous violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, foremost among which are torture, enforced disappearance, looting and theft of property, and ethnic discrimination.

• The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have violated many basic rights, including the right to life. These forces have carried out many other violations, including torture, enforced disappearance, displacement and forced conscription, as well as looting the region’s natural resources, such as oil and gas, without issuing any financial transparency reports about their revenues and how these are spent. We fear that these funds are likely to be poured into supporting the terrorist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), of which the Democratic Union Party is the Syrian branch.

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75. “Commanders and other superiors are criminally responsible for war crimes committed pursuant to their orders.” - International Committee of the Red Cross, Rule 152 of customary international humanitarian law.

76. “Commanders and other superiors are criminally responsible for war crimes committed by their subordinates if they knew, or had reason to know, that the subordinates were about to commit or were committing such crimes and did not take all necessary and reasonable measures in their power to prevent their commission, or if such crimes had been committed, to punish the persons responsible.” - International Committee of the Red Cross, Rule 153 of the customary international humanitarian law.
• The member states of the US-led International Coalition have also failed during all the years of their presence in Syria, especially since the defeat of the ISIS terrorist group, to achieve political stability in northeast Syria, failing to enable democratic local elections through which power could be handed over to democratically elected local figures who are not affiliated with a particular ethnic or sectarian party.

• Employing remote bombing tactics to target densely populated areas reflects a criminal and wholly deliberately callous mindset, with the perpetrators clearly intending to inflict the greatest possible number of deaths, which is another clear contravention of international human rights law and a flagrant violation of the Geneva IV Convention.

• A large proportion of Syrians have been killed as a result of landmines, and none of the perpetrator forces involved in the Syrian conflict have revealed maps of the locations where landmines were planted. This indicates total indifference to the lives of civilians, and children in particular.

• The repercussions of the cumulative and continuous catastrophic violations over 13 years have caused and intensified the collapse of the Syrian state because the Syrian regime is embedded in it as a cancerous tumour fatally poisoning the entire body and will not accept any political transition even if Syria turns into the world’s most catastrophically failed state, leading to the fragmentation of Syrian society and the displacement of millions.

• The UN Security Council is the main body responsible for the state of absence of security in Syria in light of its utter failure to protect civilians over the past 13 years, and its failure to bring about a political transition. As the conflict goes on, so does the devolution of anarchy, violations, and illegal acts.

Recommendations

**UN Security Council and the United Nations**

- 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."

- Find ways and mechanisms to implement Security Council Resolutions 2041, 2042, 2139 and Article 12 of Resolution 2254 regarding detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria.

- Take action under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations to protect detainees from certain death inside detention centers, and to put an end to the pandemic of enforced disappearance that continues to plague Syria, posing a threat to the security and stability of society, act to end torture and deaths due to torture inside Syrian regime detention centers, and save whoever is still left among the detainees as quickly as possible.

- Disclose the fate of the nearly 112,000 forcibly disappeared persons in Syria, 86 percent of whom have been ‘disappeared’ by the Syrian regime. Also, call on the Syrian regime to reveal the names of its male and female detainees, publicize lists of the sentences issued, and clarify how such rulings were made, given the complete domination of the executive and security branch over the judiciary, especially the Counterterrorism Court.

- Work to reveal the fate of forcibly disappeared persons in tandem with, or ahead of the rounds of the political process, and establish a strict timetable for revealing their fates.

- Be wary of accepting claims made by the regime about its amnesty decrees, which lack any credibility both in theory and practice, and call for the release of detainees whose arrest and detention are based on false grounds with no evidence. Rather, these prisoners have been arrested for rightfully demanding their right to political change and expression.

- It is impossible to address the roots of the real estate issue in Syria so long as the Syrian regime remains in power since it is the main reason behind those complications. Indeed, a political transition will be the first step towards resolving the real estate issue in Syria.

- Condemn the Syrian regime's hegemony over the three main branches of government (legislative, judicial, and alternative), and expose its practices in promulgating laws through which the regime is pillaging the properties of IDPs, refugees, forcibly disappeared persons, and victims killed by the regime whose deaths it has failed to register.

- Donor states, investors, and humanitarian agencies operating in Syria must cease their direction of funds to the Syrian regime through reconstruction programs, and introduce new mechanisms, so as to avoid those funds potentially being misused to violate the HLP rights of residents or the displaced, or so that these funds do not go to bodies that violate human rights and international humanitarian law.
• Following the failure of the parties, in particular the Syrian regime, to comply with any of the UN Security Council resolutions concerning the use of chemical weapons, barrel bombs or enforced disappearance, the Security Council has no choice, after almost 13 years, but to intervene militarily in order to protect Syrian civilians.

• Members of the UN Security Council must stop using their veto to protect the Syrian regime, which has committed hundreds of thousands of violations for over a decade, many of which constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes.

• The veto is supposed to be a non-option for a state that is involved in a conflict. Russia is directly involved in the Syrian conflict and has been using its veto powers in its own and the Syrian regime’s favor, although both are primary parties to this armed conflict.

• Refer the Syrian issue to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and hold all those involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes accountable.

• 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 the dignified and safe return of refugees and IDPs.

• Establish security and peace in Syria and implement the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine in order to preserve Syrians’ lives, heritage, and cultural artifacts from being further destroyed, looted, and ruined.

• Monitor the claims about the Iranian regime’s continuing to supply weapons, equipment and militias to the Syrian regime.

• Ensure the safety and security of millions of Syrian refugees, especially women and children, who have been displaced worldwide, and ensure their safety from arrest, torture or enforced disappearance if they choose to return to areas controlled by the Syrian regime. All world states must refrain from practices of refoulement.

• Request all relevant UN agencies to 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.

• Coordinate with human rights groups to support the process of documenting the decrees and laws promulgated by the regime, expose the extent to which these laws contravene international human rights law, and condemn all their ramifications.

• Abstain from using the concept of sovereignty as an excuse for inaction and take action to redress the invocation of the Security Council’s arbitrary powers at the expense of international law, especially in regard to humanitarian aid.

• Refuse to enter into exclusive partnerships with the bodies dictated by the regime to distribute aid, namely the SARC and the STD, and reject the regime security forces’ control over the implementation of projects and over who benefits from said projects, and other forms of extortions practiced by the Syrian regime on UN agencies in order to direct aid in its favor.

• Allocate a significant amount of funds for clearing live 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 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 (ICR2P) 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 proving 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 lasted for almost 12 years in Syria.

- Expand political and economic sanctions against the Russian regime for committing war crimes in Syria, for continuing to violate sanctions imposed against the Syrian regime, and for assisting it in breaching UN Security Council resolutions, including those regarding non-recurrence of using chemical weapons and barrel bombs.

- Put real pressure on Russia and Iran, and categorize them as key partners in the violations committed in Syria since they continue to supply the Syrian regime with weapons, as well as due to their direct involvement in thousands of violations against Syrian citizens.

- Provide protection and assistance to forcibly displaced women and children, including IDPs and refugees, and take into account their specific needs, primarily for protection.

- All countries worldwide that ratified the CEDAW Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, must fulfill their obligations under these conventions to hold the Syrian regime accountable, expose the regime’s criminal practices against Syria’s women and children, and make every possible effort to mitigate and stop these.

- Fulfill the commitment of pledged financial contributions:
  - Assist neighboring countries and provide all possible support to increase the level of education and healthcare in these countries which host the largest number of female and child refugees.
  - Establish mechanisms to end the bombing of schools and kindergartens, protect these facilities, and work to create a safe learning environment, which is the least possible level of protection that could be offered for civilians.
  - At a minimum, pressure must be applied on the Syrian regime to ensure that international observers, including the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, are given unconditional and unrestricted access to women and girls in detention centers.
• Support the political transition process and impose pressure to compel the parties to implement the political transition within a time period of no more than six months so that most of the violations end and millions of displaced people can safely and, without fear, return to their homes.

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

• Act more urgently in regard to bringing about a political resolution that would enable the Syrian people to hold free and fair political, parliamentary, and local elections that respect the rules of the electoral process.

• Condemn the laws promulgated by the Syrian regime that violate the rights of millions of the Syrian people, and are enforced through coercion and arms.

• Take serious punitive actions against the Syrian regime to deter it from killing Syrian citizens under torture. Also, apply pressure on the other parties to the conflict through all available means to completely end all torture practices.

• The states ratifying the Geneva Conventions have the obligation of fighting crimes against humanity and war crimes. States that have universal jurisdiction must play a larger role in filing cases against perpetrators of violations in Syria.

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (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.

• Issue a statement condemning the Syrian regime’s careless toying with the issue of political prisoners and their properties, and its continued detention of tens of thousands of Syrian citizens with no fair trial or real evidence.

• Give an honest and clear picture of the barbarism of the laws promulgated by the Syrian regime for the Security Council and the world states to see.

• Condemn the Syrian regime’s widespread and systematic pillaging of properties and residential and agricultural lands that are owned by refugees and IDPs. and submit a report on this issue to the Security Council and the UN Special Envoy to Syria, since it is one of the major obstacles precluding the return of refugees and IDPs.

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

- 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 opinion 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 newly formed UN body on clarifying the fate of the missing in Syria

- Identify who is responsible for enforced disappearance in Syria, and provide all possible forms of support and protection for the victims and their families.

- Look into all the cases included in this report, as well as other reports by the SNHR. We are willing to provide more data and details.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- Create a stable and safe environment for Syrian refugee children and intensify work for their reintegration into society through long-term psychological treatment.

- Increase investment in education and health.

- Reiterate that there can be no discussion of any potential normalization of relations with the Syrian regime, without first resolving the issue of refugees, which cannot be addressed without fully returning real estate properties to their original and rightful owners in Syria.
The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and local and international humanitarian and relief organizations

- Coordinate humanitarian aid operations according to the areas worst affected and reject attempts at pressure and exploitation by the Syrian regime which is working to harness aid to its advantage.

- Allocate adequate resources for the rehabilitation of child and female adult survivors, especially those who have been directly affected by violations, or subjected to violence, sexual exploitation and forced marriage, giving priority to the areas worst affected.

The UN Special Envoy to Syria

- Condemn the perpetrators of these crimes, including of massacres, and those who were primarily responsible for dooming the de-escalation agreements.

- Call for rapid implementation of democratic political change that restores victims’ rights and embodies the principles of transitional justice.

- 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.

Supporting States and European Union

- Support the processes of documenting human rights violations in Syria that expose the Syrian regime’s atrocious practices and their continuing nature, as well as the regime’s violation of the principles of international law.

- Take further steps towards accelerating the completion of the political transition towards democracy and human rights.

- The situation in Syria is still in a critical state in terms of respecting basic rights, and any citizen may be subjected to arrest under these vague and overly broad laws. Therefore, we recommend that refugees not be returned until such a political transition is achieved, as there will be no stability and security in light of the survival of the current Syrian regime and the Counter-Terrorism Court.

- Economic sanctions imposed on the two main backers of the Syrian regime, namely Iran and Russia, must be intensified, which is something that can be effectively achieved by the European Union. While civilian protection and safe zones are still the primary demands, economic sanctions also remain an effective course of action.

- Provide every possible assistance to the active civil society groups working to rehabilitate and reintegrate female victims into their communities, and support the operations for the support and rehabilitation of female survivors in areas of displacement and asylum.
• Reject viewing the Russian government as part of the dialogue and political transition in Syria should the Russian regime persist in perpetrating widespread and systematic violations against the Syrian people. The use of cluster munitions is clear evidence of the Russian regime’s violations.

**Neighboring countries**

• Ensure that refugees fleeing Syria are able to seek asylum, respect their rights, including the prohibition of refoulement, and expedite reunification. EU states and other countries should alleviate the burden on neighboring countries and receive more Syrian refugees, while donor countries should increase their assistance to the UNHCR and civil societies organizations in countries of asylum.

**League of Arab States**

• End all attempts to normalize relations with the Syrian regime. Should some of the Arab states believe they are compelled to do so, they must require as a precondition: 1. The release of approximately 136,000 political detainees, including 96,000 forcibly disappeared persons; 2. the disclosure of the fate of victims of torture and execution practices in regime detention centers, as well as details of their burial; and 3. allow the launch of an independent accountability process for all Syrian regime personnel involved in crimes of murder and torture, no matter their security and military ranks and positions.

**The Syrian regime**

• Ensure compliance with UN Security Council resolutions and customary humanitarian law.
• 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.
• Repeal all barbaric laws and inflexible expressions included in these that can be interpreted and exploited without limits to justify the arrest and torture of any political opponent, and publish any secret legislation in the official gazette. If these laws are integral to the state security, then at least publish the articles that are relevant to citizens and pose a threat to their lives in accordance with the law on publishing in the official gazette (5/2004).
• Reveal the fate of nearly 96,000 forcibly disappeared persons, and immediately release tens of thousands of arbitrary detainees and detained persons whose sentences have ended.
• Release prisoners of conscience unconditionally, reveal the fate of the disappeared among them, compensate those affected, and stop tampering with their fate and extorting their families.
• Cooperate with the newly formed UN body to clarify the fate of the missing in Syria.
- Disband the exceptional criminal court, namely the Counterterrorism Court, and repeal all rulings issued by this court, as well as the Military Field Court for lacking the most basic foundations of justice, and compensate those harmed by the court and return their legal and personal rights to them.

- Repeal the open-ended authorization given to the state security services to act as custodians of the responsibilities of the police, as well as to arrest and interrogate people.

- Disband the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, and reincorporate it into the General Intelligence Directorate. Also, shrink the scope of the work of the Intelligence Directorate and limit it to the army.

- Repeal all exceptional legislation, and stop treating the Syrian state as if it were private family property.

- Stop terrorizing the Syrian people through enforced disappearances, torture, and death due to torture.

- Stop tampering with the constitution and laws, and using them to serve the goals of the ruling family, and enacting deceptive legislation.

- Take responsibility for all legal and material costs and compensate the victims and their families from the resources of the Syrian state.

- Repeal all abusive laws which violate property rights, that have been promulgated under the rule of Hafez and Bashar Assad, and return the lands that have been stolen to their original and rightful owners.

**The Syrian regime’s allies, primarily the Russian regime**

- Condemn the barbaric courts established by the Syrian regime, and demand that these be abolished along with all the associated sentences and rulings issued by them, including those legitimizing the looting of property and money.

- Put pressure on the Syrian regime to repeal all laws that contradict international human rights law, which use excessively broad and vague language that can be easily applied to political opponents.

- Demand that the Syrian regime separate the different state powers and stop encroaching on judicial and legislative powers.

- Stop supporting a regime that conducts political trials which are considered the most reprehensible in modern history, since this support is direct complicity and participation in the multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes which the Syrian regime has perpetrated and continues perpetrating against detainees and their property.

- Contribute to dissolving the regime’s security services whose members outnumber the army and pose a direct threat to Syrian society, as well as to the country’s judiciary and its citizens’ human rights.
SNHR’s 13th Annual Report: Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2023

- Stop supporting the current Syrian regime and apologize to the Syrian people for all violations committed by Russian forces.

- Support a genuine political transition away from the dynastic dictatorship of one family and its brutal security services, since this is the only way to achieve security, stability, and reconstruction.

- Launch investigations into the incidents included in this report, make the findings of these investigations public for the Syrian people, and hold all those involved accountable.

- Reconstruct and restore the residential buildings and shops destroyed by Russian military forces, and compensate victims throughout the duration of their displacement.

- Stop investing in the Syrian regime, which is hostile to the vast majority of the Syrian people, and which is involved in committing crimes against humanity, and support a process of real political change in order to achieve stability.

- Completely cease the bombing of hospitals, protected objects, and civilian areas, and respect customary humanitarian law.

**US-led International Coalition**

- The states of the coalition must expedite the process of compensating and apologizing to the victims and all those affected.

- Support a local election process in northeast Syria that leads to the establishment of local councils representing the people of the region and the affiliated military forces, then start to support reconstruction operations.

- 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, including forced conscription, and to respect the rules of international humanitarian law and the principles of international human rights law in the areas under their control.

- Support the process of establishing a genuine local administration in the northeastern regions of Syria, in which all the inhabitants of the region may participate without discrimination on the grounds of race or ethnicity and without the intervention of the de facto authorities in order to achieve stability and justice.

- 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.

- Support the building and establishment of an independent judiciary that prohibits military parties from forcibly conscripting children.
Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

- 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 any others affected.
- Stop all forms of child conscriptions, disclose the fate of all forcibly disappeared children, allow their families to visit and communicate with them, in preparation for releasing them.
- Provide detailed maps of the locations where the SDF planted landmines, especially civilian sites or near residential communities.

All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA)

- Ensure the protection of civilians in all the areas under their control. Also, all Armed opposition factions/ Syrian National Army should distinguish between civilian and military targets and cease any indiscriminate attacks.
- Pledge to cease any conscription of children, and investigate incidents that have resulted in violations of international humanitarian law.
- End arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, confiscation and looting of property, and all other measures that violate the most basic principles of international human rights law.
- Launch investigations into the human rights violations that took place, hold those responsible accountable, and make the findings of these investigations public for the Syrian people.

Humanitarian Organizations

- Develop urgent operational plans to secure decent shelter for internally displaced persons, primarily widows and orphans.
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Russia's Veto Blocking UN Cross-Border Relief Aid is Unlawful and its Only Aim is to Seize UN Relief Aid


We Welcome the OPCW Report's Conclusion that the Syrian Regime Was Responsible for the April 2018 Chemical Attack on Douma City

Cluster Munitions Remnants are an Open-Ended Threat to the Lives of Syria's Future Generations

A total of 6,319 Syrians Died Due to the Recent Earthquake, Including 2,157 in Non-Regime Territories, and 321 in Regime Territories, While 3,841 Died in Türkiye

A total of 7,259 Syrians, including 2,153 Children and 1,524 Women, Died Due to the Turkey-Syria Earthquake: 2,534 Died in Non-Regime Territories, 394 in Regime Territories, and 4,331 in Türkiye

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Syrian-Russian Alliance Forces Have Committed Violations that Constitute Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Through Unlawful Attacks Against Northwestern Syria
Investigation Confirms the Syrian Regime’s Responsibility for the Massacre in Qarqour Village, Rural Hama, in Which Six Children Were Killed
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January
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March
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November

5. UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR)

Syria: UN experts urge Security Council to extend life-saving aid delivery into northwest Syria

Genuine solidarity with earthquake survivors calls for lifting of sanction-induced restrictions. UN experts

SYRIA: UN expert calls for immediate and unhindered access to lifesaving-aid after deadly earthquake

Syria: UN experts alarmed by reports of boys taken from Camp Roj by de facto authorities

Human Rights Council Opens Fifty-Second Regular Session and Holds a Minute of Silence for the Victims of the Earthquake in Türkiye and Syria

Global update: High Commissioner outlines concerns in over 40 countries

UN Syria Commission of Inquiry: Those responsible for atrocities during 12 years of violence must be brought to justice

Human Rights Council Adopts Eight Resolutions, Extends Mandates on Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children, Iran, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Belarus, and Syria

Behind the data: Recording civilian casualties in Syria

Human Rights 75: activities update – 24 May 2023

Syria: UN experts urge General Assembly to address plight of the missing and forcibly disappeared


UN expert cancels visit to Syria due to lack of full cooperation
Human Rights Council Adopts 10 Resolutions, Extends Mandates on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Persons with Disabilities and Belarus

Syria: UN expert calls for an end to mass arbitrary and indefinite detentions and urges protection for children in Northeast Syria

Marked increase in fighting and a rapidly plummeting economy require urgent Syrian and international responses, UN Syria Commission of Inquiry warns

Türk warns civilians will again pay price as Syrian conflict fragments

Türk calls on UN General Assembly to establish new, independent institution on missing persons in Syria

Children in Northeast Syria must be urgently repatriated: UN experts


Reports:

- Gendered Impact of the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on Women and Girls – June 2023
- No End in Sight: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023

Statements:

- UN Syria Commission: Urgent action required to assist those impacted by earthquakes, including a countrywide ceasefire to enable humanitarian access
- Statement by Paulo Pinheiro Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - 52nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council (21 March 2023)
- Epicentre of Neglect: Protection of Civilians in Syria Remains an Illusion says UN Syria Commission of Inquiry
- Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls
- Statement by Paulo Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (05 July 2023)
- Statement by Paulo Pinheiro Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (22 September 2023)
- Statement by Paulo Pinheiro Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (24 October 2023)
- UN Syria Commission welcomes landmark ICJ order to Syria to prevent torture and destruction of evidence
C. Reports by Humanitarian Groups

1. Human Rights Watch (HRW)

One Year On: Documenting Koblenz
Northwest Syria: Aid Delays Deadly for Quake Survivors
Don’t Rush to Normalize Relations with Assad’s Syria
Syrian Refugees in Denmark at Risk of Forced Return
Syria: Turkey-Backed Fighters Kill 4 Kurdish Civilians
Turkish Border Guards Torture, Kill Syrians
UAE Invites Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to COP28
Put People’s Rights First in Syria Sanctions
Questions and Answers: How Sanctions Affect the Humanitarian Response in Syria
Civil Society Organizations Urge UN Member States to Vote in Favor of Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria
UN: Create Body on Missing Syrians
Syrians in Passport Limbo During Assad’s Victory Lap
Relying on Syrian Government for Cross Border Aid Delivery is Untenable
Northeast Syria: Thousands Displaced in Dire Conditions
No, Syria Is Still Not Safe for Refugee Returns
Syria: World Court Begins Watershed Torture Case
Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Disrupt Water, Electricity
The Full Costs of Turkey’s Bombing Campaign in Northeast Syria
Northwest Syria: Government Uses Cluster Munitions
World Court Rules Against Syria in Torture Case

2. Save the Children

Reports:
Türkiye and Syria Earthquake Crisis 100 Days

Statements:
Syria: Longer-Term Commitment Needed to Keep Lifesaving Aid Border Crossing Open – Save the Children
Spain Repatriates 13 Children and Two Women from North East Syria Camps
Save the Children Calls for More Countries to Follow France and Repatriate Women and Children from Unsafe Camps in North East Syria
Children Feared Trapped and Thousands Killed After Two Earthquakes Hit Türkiye and Syria
Children Sleeping in Cars as Too Scared to Go Inside While Freezing Conditions Hinder Aid to Türkiye, Syria Earthquake Zones
Race Against Time to Save Children Buried Under Rubble in Türkiye and Syria Following Devastating Earthquakes

Trapped Without Food: How Syria Is Grappling With One of World’s Worst Earthquakes This Century

Second Humanitarian Disaster Looms as Children Without Shelter and Water Following Earthquakes

35 INGOs and Syrian NGOs Demanding Unfettered Access and Massive Scale-Up of Humanitarian Response

Children Who Have Survived the Earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria Need Help Finding Their Families, Not Adoption

Children Demand World Leaders Step Up as Donor Conference Raises About Half of $1.5 Bln Target to Boost Education in Emergencies

Fear, Distress and Grief: Türkiye and Syria Earthquakes May Fuel Severe Mental Health Needs in the Region

Save the Children Statement: Another Earthquake Hits Southern Türkiye and Northern Syria

New Earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria Retriggering Trauma in Children, Says Save the Children

‘Hidden Scars’: Children at Risk of Toxic Stress as More Earthquakes Hit Türkiye and Syria

‘Resilience Has Its Limits’: After Devastating Earthquakes, Syrian Children Need Our Help to Piece Their Lives Back Together

‘She Thinks We’re Still Under the Rubble’: One Month After Earthquakes, Children in Türkiye and Syria Are in Survival Mode

Earthquake One Month On: Funding Falls Short of Huge Needs in Syria

Syria on the Brink: After 12-Years of Conflict, Earthquakes Impact Signals A Country Pushed Beyond Limits

Syria: Children Terrified of Sleeping in Tents as Storms and Flooding Damage Shelters of Families Already Affected by the Earthquakes

Long Road Ahead for Children’s Recovery as International Community Pledges €7 Billion in Earthquake Funding to Türkiye and Syria

Canada Repatriates 10 Children from Syrian Camps as Thousands of Other Foreign Nationals Remain in Limbo

Statement on Legal Action to Repatriate Australian Children and Their Mothers from North East Syria Save the Children Australia CEO Mat Tinkler Comments on Ngo’s Role as Litigation Guardian in the Case

Child Stunting in Syria Could Reach Levels Never Seen Before as Earthquakes Threaten to Push 665,000 People into Hunger

Syrian Teens Present Snapshots of Their Shattered Lives at International Conference

Statement on the Outcome of Brussels Conference on Syria

Top Refugee Hosting Countries Spend as Much on Debt Interest as Cost to Educate Refugee Children for Five Years - Report

Cross-Border Aid to North West Syria Must Continue to Ensure Children Survive, Says Save the Children

Syria: Urgent Calls for A Ceasefire Following New Wave of Violence and Deaths of at Least Six Children

At Least 17 Children Killed in Wave of Violence Across Syria
3. Amnesty International

Research

Türkiye/Syria: A human rights response to the 6 February earthquakes
Syria: UN must continue cross-border aid regardless of UN Security Council or Syrian government approval
Turkey: Principles for responsibility-sharing for refugees in Türkiye and for the international relocation of survivors of the 2023 Türkiye-Syria earthquakes
Civil society organizations urge UN member states to vote in favor of independent institution on missing persons in Syria

Articles

Syria/UN: UN Security Council must extend cross-border aid mechanism to avert a humanitarian catastrophe
Lebanon: Syrians who survived boat sinking allegedly deported
Syria: Government forces must lift siege on civilians in predominantly Kurdish areas in Aleppo
Syria: International action needed after devastating earthquake afflicts war-torn regions
Syria/Türkiye: Human rights must be ‘at the heart of response’ to earthquakes
Syria: Vital earthquake aid blocked or diverted in Aleppo’s desperate hour of need
Lebanon: Halt summary deportations of Syrian refugees
Syria: UN must continue delivering aid to north-west through all border crossings
Syria: UN member states must support institution for conflict’s disappeared
Syria: UN Security Council must renew cross-border aid for at least one year to avert humanitarian catastrophe
Syria: UN General Assembly must back cross-border humanitarian aid mechanism into north-west
“More than a million years of waiting and campaigning”: Families of the disappeared mark the International Day for the Disappeared in Beirut
Syria: Aleppo authorities must ensure that building safety measures do not result in forced evictions and homelessness

4. European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), formerly the European Asylum Support Office

Syria - Country Focus
Syria - Security Situation
5. Doctors Without Borders (MSF)

MSF scales up response after earthquakes hit south Türkiye and northwest Syria
Four things to know about the earthquake response in Türkiye and Syria
People in northwest Syria need urgent support after earthquakes
Vital needs grow in northwest Syria after the earthquakes
Hospitals overwhelmed after earthquakes: “The rooms were covered in blood”
MSF calls for urgent assistance to people in northwest Syria
MSF remains committed to providing care in all areas of Syria
Surviving among the rubble: Syria and Türkiye one month on
Northwest Syria: Providing healthcare amongst the rubble in Jindires
MSF delegation in Damascus to deliver additional relief aid
Inadequate water and sanitation pose health threats in Syria
The humanitarian isolation of northwest Syria must be prevented
UN Security Council fails Syrian people with cross-border resolution collapse
Six months of humanitarian action after earthquakes in northwest Syria
As winter approaches in Syria, people in camps burn shoes for warmth