

Statement

On World Press Freedom Day

717 Journalists and Media Workers Have Been Documented as Killed by the Parties to the Conflict and Controlling Forces in Syria Since March 2011, Including 53 Who Died due Torture

Law No. 19 Promulgated by the Syrian Regime Contravenes the Most Basic Principles of Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and Further Perpetuates the Executive Branch's Grip on the Media



Friday 3 May 2024

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.

This year marks the 31st anniversary of the initial proclamation of May 3 as World Press Freedom Day,¹ in accordance with the [resolutions](#) of the 26th session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference held in 1991. In proclaiming May 3 as the annual celebration of press freedom, UNESCO emphasized that “a free, pluralist and independent press is an essential component of any democratic society”. On December 18, 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. On May 27, 2015, the Security Council adopted [resolution 2222](#) condemning attacks and violence against journalists, media workers, and personnel associated with media outlets in situations of armed conflict. These are just a few of the numerous texts championing freedom of opinion and expression in international human rights law.

Since the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria, the various parties to the conflict have unapologetically carried out practices that violate the freedom of press, opinion, and expression. We have documented numerous types of serious violations, including extrajudicial killings, arrest/enforced disappearance, torture, assaults on facilities, and imposing laws that restrict the freedom of press, opinion, and expression. The Syrian regime, which controls the Syrian state, bears the primary responsibility for Syria’s disastrous rankings worldwide in terms of freedom of press and media work and, through this, for defaming the image of Syria and Syrians. Indeed, the Syrian regime is the primary perpetrator of violations against journalists and media workers, vastly surpassing the other parties to the conflict individually or collectively. Meanwhile, Russia is practically a supporter and backer of the Syrian regime’s violations, which necessarily entails that it bears joint responsibility with the Syrian regime for 85 percent of all violations against journalist and media workers in Syria. The regime still maintains its ban on all independent media outlets, imposing full and absolute control over state media, and quashing any freedom of opinion and expression for media workers and citizens through restrictive laws² and decrees³ (or the People’s Assembly of Syria, which is also completely subservient to the regime) that explicitly violate international human rights law, and alarmingly limit the freedom of the press, opinion, and expression.⁴ Law No. 20 of 2022⁵ on cybercrime, which was passed by the head of the Syrian regime Bashar

1. Was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1993.

2. 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-related 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.”

3. On May 7, 2012, [Legislative Decree No. 17](#) on Implementing the Rules of Social Media and Counter-Cybercrime Law was issued. According to Article 28, the minimum sentence specified in the applicable criminal laws is doubled in the event the internet, a PC, or an information system was used. 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 describes all of its dissidents, and anyone who publishes any information exposing its practices and violations as a “terrorist”.

4. “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-related 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.

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

Assad on April 18, 2022, is a perfect example of such policies. This law provided for an overhaul of the punitive legal rules regarding cybercrime, as specified by Legislative Decree 17/2012.⁶ On August 18, 2023, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (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 affects the lives of the Syrian people, as well as how it further restricts freedom of opinion and expression and violates fundamental human rights. According to the details on SNHR's database, the Syrian regime has arrested 176 individuals, 21 of them women, in connection with the Cybercrime Law since its promulgation up until May 2024. Of these detainees, 23 are journalists/citizen journalists and media workers, accounting for about 13 percent of the total. SNHR reiterates that the effects of the texts of this law only perpetuate the regime's policy of restricting freedom of opinion and expression and expand the scope of the already-vague, broad charges created and used as a pretext by the regime since March 2011 to legitimize the widespread arrests made by its forces and to grant free rein to its several security authorities.

On April 23, 2024, [the Syrian regime promulgated Law No. 19 of 2024](#), which introduces a new Ministry of Media, which is set to supplant the older one established in accordance with Legislative Decree No. 186 of 1961. In line with the previous legal texts, SNHR believes that this law aims to place further and unprecedented restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression, as well as being riddled with contradictions, with a number of its articles contravening international instruments on human rights.⁷ Even more absurd is the fact that this law conflicts with the Syrian Constitution adopted by the Syrian regime itself in 2012.⁸ The most glaring of those contradictory features are found in Articles 4, 8, and 9 of Law No. 19, which provide for the new Ministry of Media to have absolute supervisory authority over all journalistic and media work in the country; as the new law establishes, this new authority is expressed in a number of ways, including formulating plans and regulations, conducting studies, research, and polls, supervising advertisements and disseminating brochures, establishing a monopoly over TV production and Syrian media abroad, handling the licensing of publishing houses and media service companies, and controlling TV production through a body called the National Committee on Drama, which would be responsible for framing the policies for production, scripting, and distribution. SNHR believes that the Syrian regime is trying to impose an even tighter grip on TV production in particular, and all media outlets in a more general sense, in order to promote its propaganda that has been spouting for years, which is based on omitting facts, discrediting the narrative of the Syrian people's uprising for democracy, polishing the image of the Syrian regime, denying its crimes, and asserting its narratives.

6. People's Assembly of Syria, Legislative Decree [No. 17](#) on Implementing the Rules of Social Media and Counter-Cybercrime Law

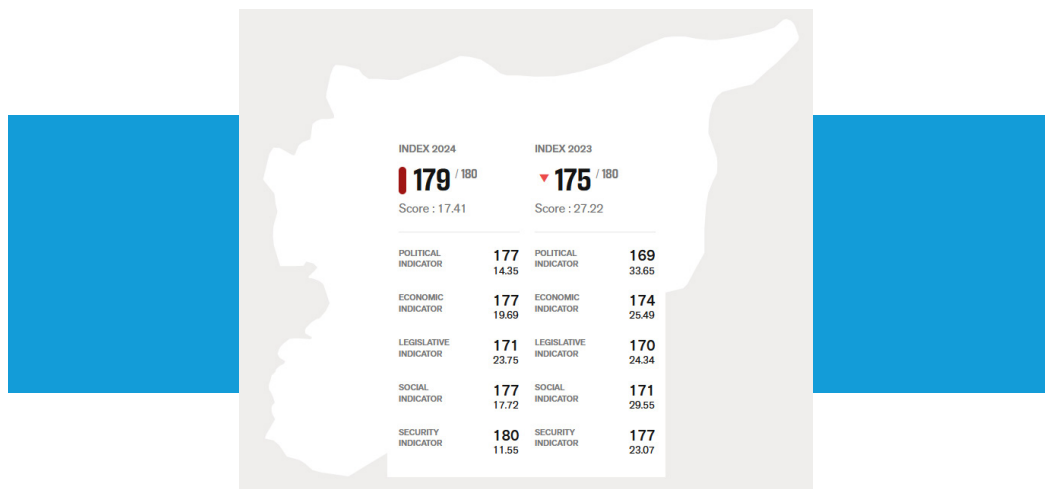
7. For instance, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. See:

UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR). Universal Declaration of Human Rights - English. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english>

UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

8. Articles 42 and 43 of the 2012's Syrian Constitution. For the full text of the 2012's Syrian Constitution see: Constitute. Syrian Arab Republic 2012. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Syria_2012

While the Syrian regime is by far the party most responsible for violations against journalists and media workers, it is not the only main party that committed such violations. Indeed, all parties to the conflict and controlling forces have violated the rights of journalists and media workers, especially when those individuals expose the violations of those de facto powers. Regrettably, the areas that broke free of the regime control have failed to portray a democratic model that respects press, opinion and expression.⁹ Broadly, all of these parties have resorted to a policy of silencing mouths. As a result of those compounded, continued violations, Syria has become over the past 13 years one of the world’s worst countries in terms of freedom of press, as well as freedom of opinion and expression, in light of the numerous violations taking place in those areas, of which we have documented a significant and important proportion, in addition to the assessments of a number of reports by international organizations that compare the state of journalism with other countries in the world. According to the Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) [2023 World Press Freedom Index](#), which was released on May 3, 2023, and which measures freedom of press around the world, [Syria was ranked 175 out of 180 countries](#), a further decline from its previous 171st place ranking. “Syria (175th) continues to be one of the world’s most dangerous countries for journalists, who are caught in the crossfire between Bashar al-Assad’s murderous army, militias, and Turkish interventions.” [The RSF remarked](#). Furthermore, Syria continues to hold the unenviable title of the country with the most journalists being hostages worldwide.



We have documented further horrific violations since our last annual report, released in May 2023. We noticed no tangible difference in the practices of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces against journalists and media workers in the last year compared to previous years. Overall, press freedom in Syria continues to be notable only by its absence.

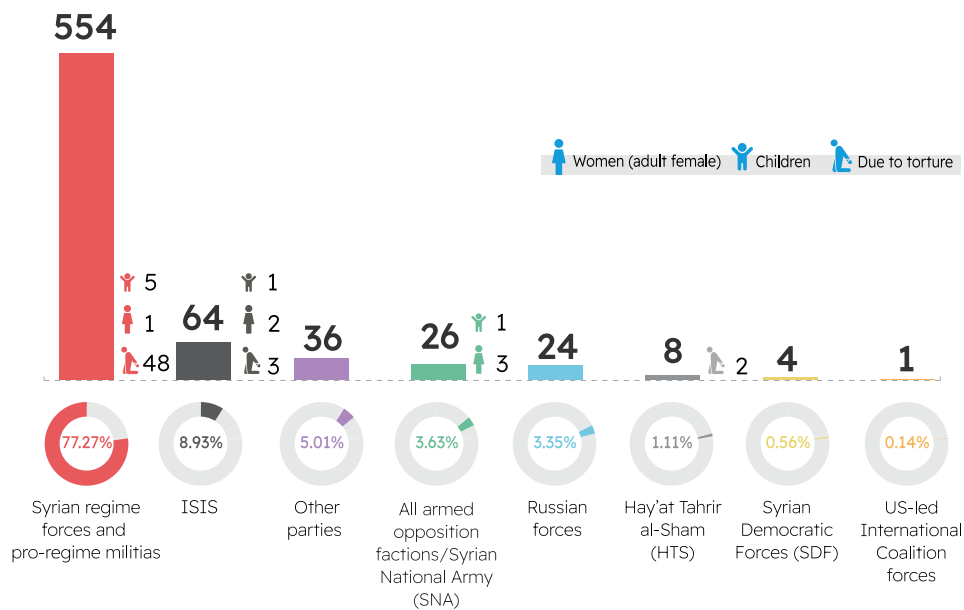
Below is a summary of the most notable violations against journalists and media workers according to SNHR’s database (in the context of the armed conflict or in violation of international human rights law) between March 2011 and May 2024 and between May 2023, when our last report was released, and May 2024.

9. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (2023, May 3). On World Press Freedom Day: SNHR Issues Its Annual Report on the Most Notable Violations Against Media Workers in Syria. <https://snhr.org/?p=59561>

First: Since March 2011

A. Extrajudicial killing

Between March 2011 and May 2024, SNHR documented the killing of **717** journalists and media workers, including seven children and six women (adult females), as well as nine foreign journalists and 53 journalists who died due to torture, and the injury of no fewer than **1,612** others at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria. Those deaths are distributed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces as follows:



1. Main parties

- Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, Shiite foreign militias):¹⁰ 554 journalists, including five children, one woman, five foreign journalists, and 48 journalists who died due to torture in detention centers.
- Russian forces: 24 journalists.
- ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'):¹¹ 64 journalists, including one child, two women, three foreign journalists, and three journalists who died due to torture.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):¹¹ Eight journalists, including two who died due to torture.
- All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA):¹² 26 journalists, including one child and three women.
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): Four journalists.
- US-led International coalition forces: One journalist.

10. 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 security apparatus. Conversely, the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, with no real decision-making power or active role of their own. Syria is under autocratic/family rule, with no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade merely for show. The Minister of 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.

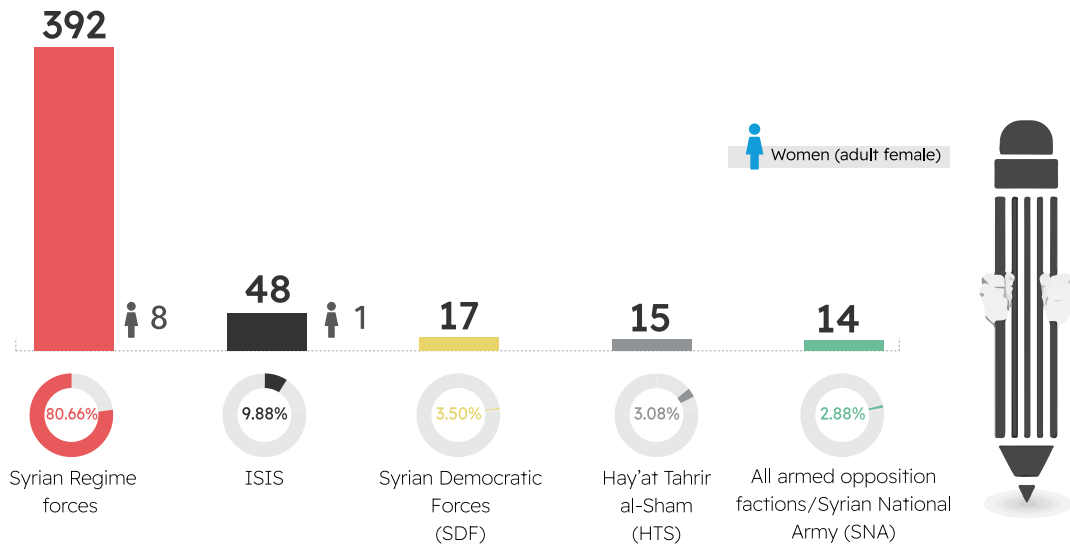
11. Was designated a terrorist group by the UN.

12. All the armed opposition factions/SNA since 2011 in all the areas they had taken control of.

2- Other parties: 36 journalists, including one journalist who was killed at the hands of the forces of Operation Peace Spring (Joint operation by Turkish forces and the SNA).

B. Arbitrary arrest/detention/abduction or enforced disappearance

SNHR documented no fewer than **1,358 cases** of arrest and abduction involving journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and May 2024. Of this total, **486 journalists**, including nine women and 17 foreign journalists, are still under arrest and/or forcibly disappeared in the detention centers operated by the various parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria. The 486 cases are distributed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria as follows:



- Syrian regime forces: 392 journalists, including eight women and four foreign journalists.
- ISIS: 48 journalists, including one woman and eight foreign journalists.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): 11 journalists.
- All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA): 14 journalists, including five foreign journalists.
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): 17 journalists.

No fewer than 13 journalists and media workers have been registered as dead in the civil registry or identified in the Caesar photographs that were leaked from the Syrian regime detention centers.

Between the beginning of 2018 and May 2024, SNHR recorded no fewer than 10 journalists and media workers who are forcibly disappeared in regime detention centers and recorded as dead in civil registry offices across Syria. The causes of death in these cases were not disclosed, and the Syrian regime has failed to return the victims' bodies to their families or even to inform them of where their loved ones were buried. The Syrian regime has also failed to disclose the deaths at the time of their occurrence.

Between the beginning of 2015 and May 2024, we recorded no fewer than three media personnel who we have been able to identify from the photographs leaked by the defected regime officer known as Caesar showing the bodies of regime victims from detention centers and military hospitals operated by the Syrian regime.

Second: From May 2023 until May 2024

A. Extrajudicial killing

We documented the killing of two journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between May 2023 and May 2024. They are distributed by the perpetrator party as follows:

1. Main parties:

- Syrian regime forces: One journalist.

2. Other parties: One journalist.

- Bombings by unidentified parties: One journalist.

B. Arbitrary arrest or enforced disappearance

We documented no fewer than 49 cases of arrest and abduction involving journalists and media workers, including two women, at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between May 2023 and May 2024. Of these, 34 were released, while the remaining 15 are now categorized as forcibly disappeared.

The 49 cases are distributed by the perpetrator party as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces:** 13 journalists, including two women. Of these, eight have been released, while five have subsequently been categorized as forcibly disappeared.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):** 16 journalists. Of these, 12 have been released, while four have subsequently been categorized as forcibly disappeared.
- **All Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA):** 11 journalists. Of these, nine have been released, while two have subsequently been categorized as forcibly disappeared.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF):** Nine journalists. Of these, five have been released, while four have subsequently been categorized as forcibly disappeared.

SNHR stresses that, as long as dictatorship and despotism continue to exist in Syria, the country will never enjoy freedom of press, opinion, and expression. The only way to change this terrible reality in which fundamental freedoms are denied and absolutely crushed is to bring about a political transition to democracy in Syria, which has been the people's fundamental demand since the popular uprising first began in March 2011.

As the data in this report shows, all the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria have violated many of the rules and laws of international human rights law in the areas under their control, especially those related to freedom of opinion and expression, such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These parties have also violated many rules and articles of international humanitarian law, foremost among which is Rule 34 of customary law, which requires that civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities.

SNHR stresses that all parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria must immediately release journalists and media workers who have been arbitrarily detained, and reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared, allow access to all media outlets and cease to proscribe the work of journalists according to the extent of their loyalty to the controlling party, repeal all 'security laws' which absolutely suppress and deny freedom of opinion and expression, especially those issued by the Syrian regime, abstain from using media as organs to serve the controlling forces and to justify their violations or falsify the truth, and stop direct or indirect harassment and threats to press institutions and their employees.

Moreover, SNHR calls on the UN Security Council and the international community to make clear efforts to end the conflict in Syria through a political process that advances Syria from being a totalitarian state to a stable, democratic and civilized state that respects freedom of press.

13. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s IHL Databases. Rule 34. Journalists. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule34>



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No justice without accountability

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