

On World Refugee Day

**At least 4,714 Returning Refugees & IDPs
Have been Arbitrarily Arrested
by Syrian Regime Forces**

**At least 367 Civilians Have Been Killed
in Syria in 2024 to Date, including 56 Children,
34 Women, and 43 Who Died due to Torture**

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Returning Refugees & IDPs Have been Arbitrarily Arrested

Thursday 20 June 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 analyses in Syria.

Contents

I. At least 367 Civilians; including 56 Children, 34 Women, and 43 Who Died due to Torture in Syria in 2024	1
II. At least 4,714 Returning Refugees & IDPs Have been Arrested by Syrian Regime Forces as of June 2024.....	3
III. One Hundred and Sixty-Eight Refugees Forcibly Deported from Lebanon Since the Start of April 2013 Have been Arrested.....	4
IV. Conclusions and Recommendations.....	5



I. At least 367 Civilians; including 56 Children, 34 Women, and 43 Who Died due to Torture in Syria in 2024

On June 20, the international community observes [World Refugee Day](#), a most appropriate occasion for the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) to remind the world of the violations against refugees returning, either voluntarily or by force, to Syria. In this report we'll also provide a summary of the violations still taking place in Syria, which were the cause behind the displacement of millions of Syrians from their country in the first place. The Syrian refugee population, [currently estimated at 6.7 million](#), is today the largest refugee population worldwide.¹

SNHR has documented the killing of no fewer than **367 civilians**, including 56 children and 34 women at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since the start of January 2024 up until June 2024. These are distributed as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces** (army, security, local militias, Shiite foreign militias): 53 civilians, including eight children and four women.
- **Russian forces**: Five civilians, including three children and one woman.
- **ISIS**: Four civilians, including one child.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**: 16 civilians, including one child and one woman.
- **All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA)**: 10 civilians, including one child.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**: 33 civilians, including eight children.
- **Other parties**: 246 civilians, including 34 children and 28 women.

SNHR has also documented the deaths of at least **43 individuals**, including one child, due to torture in the detention centers operated by the various parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since the start of January 2024 up until June 2024. These are distributed as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces**: 22 individuals.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**: 13 individuals.
- **All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA)**: Four individuals.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**: Four individuals, including one child.

1. The Un Refugee Agency (UNHCR). June 2023. Mid-Year Trends. <https://www.unhcr.org/mid-year-trends>

Additionally, SNHR has documented that no fewer than **828** of those arrested between January and June 2024, including 44 children and 17 women, are still under arrest/forcibly disappeared. These are distributed as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces:** 398 individuals, including five children and six women.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):** 59 individuals.
- **All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA):** 140 individuals, including one child and six women.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF):** 231 individuals, including 38 children and five women.

These continuing gross violations are the main reason why Syrian refugees are still not returning home to their nation; on the contrary, even more Syrians are now seeking asylum abroad. As a result of these violations that threaten fundamental human rights and human dignity, and to which there is no apparent prospect of any end in the foreseeable future or of the perpetrators being held to account, hundreds more Syrians are now trying to sell their properties and flee their home country. In April 2024, [the European Union Agency for Asylum \(EUAA\)](#) confirmed that the whole of Syria is unsafe for the return of refugees, noting that high and random levels of violence are still seen nationwide.



Residents fleeing the villages of Jabal al-Zawiya in southern rural Idlib for safer areas in northern rural Idlib following intensified bombardment by Syrian regime forces – September 4, 2023

Meanwhile, as refugees in neighboring countries continue to grapple with worsening conditions, especially in Lebanon and Türkiye, we've documented a continuation of the life-threatening irregular asylum-seeking attempts by refugees trying desperately to reach EU states either by land from Türkiye or via the Mediterranean Sea from Türkiye, Lebanon, or the Maghrib countries.²

2. A report released in early 2023 by Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) noted that most asylum seekers in 2022 came from Syria and Afghanistan. The report revealed that a total of 70,976 Syrians filed initial asylum applications in 2022, a year-on-year increase of approximately 29.3 percent from the previous year. On January 31, 2023, [Statistics Netherlands \(CBS\) released a report](#) saying that the number of asylum seekers in the Netherlands increased by 44 percent in 2022 in comparison to the previous year. The report added that Syrian asylum seekers continued to be the largest group of all asylum seekers, making up one-third of the total number of asylum seekers in the country, with Syrians accounting for 12,640 of the total number of 35,535 asylum requests received by the Netherlands in 2022, a 50 percent increase from 2021. On February 22, 2023, [the EUAA stated](#) that EU countries had received 966,000 asylum requests in the year 2022, a 50 percent increase from 2021. This increase means that 2022 saw the highest number of asylum requests since 2016. The agency also stated that Syrians accounted for the largest group of asylum seekers. According to the data, 132,000 Syrians requested asylum in EU countries in 2022.

II. At least 4,714 Returning Refugees & IDPs Have been Arrested by Syrian Regime Forces as of June 2024

Assessing the situation in Syria is a responsibility that falls on the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, and active and specialized domestic groups such as SNHR. All these bodies have confirmed that Syria is unsafe.

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

Since the start of 2014 up until June 2024, SNHR has documented no fewer than **4,714 cases** of arbitrary arrest/detention by Syrian regime forces of returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Of these, 2,402 have been released, while 2,312 remain under arrest, including 1,521 who have been subsequently categorized as forcibly disappeared persons. These are distributed as follows:

- **3,532 refugees**, including 251 children and 214 women (adult female) returning from their countries of asylum or residence to their original places of residence in Syria. Of these, the Syrian regime has released 2,149, while 1,383 remain under arrest, including 969 who have been subsequently categorized as forcibly disappeared persons.
- **168 individuals**, including six children and nine women, who were forcibly repatriated from Lebanon since the start of April 2023. Most of these were arrested by the Syrian regime's Military Security Intelligence branch in al-Masna border area.
- **1,014 IDPs**, including 22 children and 19 women, returning from their areas of forced displacement to regime-held areas. Of these, the Syrian regime has released 253, while 761 remain under arrest, including 549 who have been subsequently categorized as forcibly disappeared persons.

We have also documented the **deaths of 39** of the returning refugees and IDPs due to torture in regime detention centers during the same period: 31 of these victims were refugees returning from their countries of asylum and eight were returning IDPs, six of whom had previously been forcibly deported from regime-controlled areas to northern Syria under the forced displacement agreements struck with the Syrian regime.

We have also recorded no fewer than **93 cases** of sexual violence against returning refugees in the same period.

The refoulment of refugees and the forced repatriation of Syrian refugees constitute blatant violations of customary international 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 those forced to return, in addition, of course, to the Syrian regime's direct responsibility for such violations.

III. One Hundred and Sixty-Eight Refugees Forcibly Deported from Lebanon Since the Start of April 2013 Have been Arrested

The fact that some states have resumed relations with the Syrian regime, in addition to readmitting Syria to the Arab League,³ [does not mean that Syria is now safe for the return of refugees, given the fact that the Syrian regime is still committing crimes against humanity](#). SNHR is seriously concerned that any restoration of relations with the Syrian regime may lead to Syrian refugees being forced to return to Syria; indeed, SNHR has already recorded the refoulment of hundreds of Syrian refugees from Lebanon since the beginning of April 2023. Of these, we have recorded the arrest of **168 individuals**, including six children and nine women, with most of those detained being arrested by personnel from the Syrian regime's Military Security Intelligence branch in the al-Masna border area.

Since May 2024, there have been dozens of raids and arrests targeting Syrians throughout Lebanon. Meanwhile, the Lebanese government has announced the resumption of convoys returning refugees to Syria. Shops run by Syrians have been closed down and there are widespread reports of residency permits being revoked. In a context where at least 83 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have access to legal residency, and Syrians who entered the country irregularly after April 2019 are deemed "illegal", these measures put hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees at immediate risk of forced deportation to Syria.

3. On May 18, 2023, 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 in the summit came about as the result of [an official invitation issued by the King of Saudi Arabia on May 10, 2023](#). 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 has 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.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- Seeking asylum is the right of every Syrian. Every state in which Syrians have requested asylum must grant them that right. The Syrian regime has committed and is committing numerous violations against the Syrian people that amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. Meanwhile, the other parties to the conflict have committed a multitude of violations against the Syrian people, some of which amount to war crimes.
- Syrian refugees will not voluntarily return while the Syrian authorities' multiple violations continue. We are absolutely certain that these 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. 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.

Recommendations

- Governments of states hosting Syrian refugees, especially neighboring countries which house the largest proportion of refugees, should stop their constant threats to deport these refugees back to Syria, which only causes further distress and anxiety amongst already traumatized refugees, threatens their material stability, and hinders the processes of social integration.
- World states should uphold their responsibilities regarding the refugee crisis by taking in more refugees, instead of leaving neighboring countries to be overwhelmed by their refugee population while financial pledges of assistance keep declining. Democratic states must continue to take in refugees from neighboring countries, while raising their financial support for these states.
- The international community and the UN Security Council should work 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 homes and nation.



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