



الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Urgent Need to Preserve Crime Scenes in Former Detention Centers under the Control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

SDF Still Holds At Least **3,705** Forcibly Disappeared Persons and Has Killed **122** People under Torture Since Its Establishment

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

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FIRST: THE REALITY OF DETENTION CENTERS IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA AND THE RELATED VIOLATIONS BY THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

The recent takeover by the current Syrian government of several detention facilities previously run by the Syrian Democratic Forces in the Syrian Jazeera region presents an urgent challenge to preserve and protect evidence from loss or tampering. This transformation has been accompanied by fundamental changes in prison conditions in terms of emptying, transfer of control, or the continued administration of some of them by the Syrian Democratic Forces, which increases the risk of losing crucial evidence related to serious human rights violations.

According to information documented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, a number of detention facilities were emptied during the recent period, including: Ayed Prison in the city of Tabqa, the Juvenile Prison, the Intelligence Prison, the Reconstruction Prison, the 17th Division Prison in Raqqa, in addition to Al-Shaddadi Prison in Hasaka Governorate, and the prisons of Al-Maamel, Al-Sour and Omar Field in the countryside of Deir Ez-Zour Governorate. Regarding the Al-Aqtan prison in Raqqa Governorate, the transfer of the detained children, estimated at around **100 children**, to the Raqqa city courthouse was limited to reviewing their files and releasing them, while other groups continued to be detained inside it.

Control of a number of these facilities has also been transferred to the Syrian government, notably the cotton prison in Raqqa, the Ayed prison in Tabqa, the factories prison in Deir Ez-Zour, and the Shaddadi prison in Hasaka.

In contrast, the Syrian Democratic Forces still retain control of other detention facilities, most notably the Jarkin prison, the prison known as the “**Black Prison**,” the Alaya prison, and the Industrial Prison (Ghuwairan) in Hasaka Governorate, in addition to the Terrorism Court prison in the city of Kobani.

Available data indicates that these facilities housed various categories of detainees, including those held on political, security, and criminal charges. Among them were former members of armed opposition groups, individuals detained for drug offenses and other crimes such as murder and theft, as well as ISIS members and activists opposed to the policies of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Some facilities were designated for specific groups, such as the Al-Taamir prison, which held women and individuals detained for drug use and other criminal offenses, and the juvenile detention center, which housed minors held for various reasons.

Among the most prominent facilities that are now under the control of the Syrian government are Al-Aqtan prison in Raqqa province, in addition to Al-Hol camp, which is one of the largest detention complexes in the region, housing at least **23,000 people** subject to severe restrictions on their freedom that in many cases amount to arbitrary detention, including thousands of women and children.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights database, the Syrian Democratic Forces, from the establishment of the People's Protection Units and their subsequent formal formation until the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, are responsible for thousands of cases of enforced disappearance and hundreds of deaths under torture within their detention centers, in a context characterized by systematic patterns of arbitrary detention and widespread denial of basic legal guarantees.

As Syria entered the transitional phase following the fall of the Assad regime, and as the Syrian Democratic Forces continued to control detention facilities in the Syrian Jazeera region until control changed later, the Syrian Network for Human Rights continued to document violations related to these facilities.

Toll of the Most Notable Violations:

a. From December 8, 2024 (The Fall of Bashar al-Assad Regime):

Between December 8, 2024, and January 23, 2026, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) database indicates that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are responsible for:

- **Enforced disappearances:** At least **819 cases** of enforced disappearance were documented, involving the detention of individuals without disclosing their fate or whereabouts, and the denial of any official information to their families.
- **Torture and ill-treatment:** The deaths of **15 individuals**, including a child and 2 women, due to torture and ill-treatment in detention centers were documented, including various forms of physical and psychological abuse.
- **Killings:** The SNHR documented the killing of **204 civilians**, including 24 children and 19 women.

b. Since the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces:

From the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (the People's Protection Units were established in July 2012) until January 23, 2026, the network's database indicates that the Syrian Democratic Forces are responsible for:

- **Enforced disappearance:** At least **3,705 cases** of enforced disappearance were documented, which consisted of detaining people without disclosing their fate or places of detention, and depriving their families of any official information.
- **Torture and ill-treatment:** SNHR documented the deaths of **122 people**, including 5 children and 4 women, due to torture and ill-treatment in detention centers, encompassing various forms of physical and psychological abuse.
- **Killings:** SNHR documented the killing of **1,806 civilians**, including 317 children and 211 women.

The updating and verification process is still ongoing in light of recent field developments, the transfer of control over detention facilities, and the initial opportunities this has provided to access sources and evidence that were not previously available.

The systematic nature and scale of these violations necessitate immediate and professional measures to secure, document, and preserve all evidence found in these facilities, ensuring accountability, upholding the rights of victims and their families to know the truth and achieve justice, and providing a reliable, factual record to be used in transitional justice processes.

SECOND: THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND OBLIGATIONS FOR PRESERVING EVIDENCE:

The transfer of control over detention facilities does not relieve the state of the duty to investigate past abuses, but rather transfers to it a direct legal responsibility to preserve evidence and ensure that there is no impunity.

Under international law, the current Syrian authorities have positive obligations to investigate potentially unlawful deaths and gross human rights violations occurring within their territory or jurisdiction. The Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Deaths stipulates that investigations must be prompt, effective, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent. The Istanbul Protocol further stipulates that detention centers where torture and ill-treatment have occurred must be treated as crime scenes, with forensic experts obligated to maintain appropriate preservation chains of custody for all categories of evidence, including testimonies, physical evidence, medical and legal evidence, and digital evidence.

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance obliges States to maintain accurate records, and to search for, locate and identify missing persons, obligations directly related to the patterns of enforced disappearances documented in facilities formerly controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Furthermore, the Nelson Mandela Rules stipulate that deaths, disappearances, serious injuries, and allegations of torture in detention centers must be reported to independent judicial authorities for investigation, with all potential evidence, including medical records and surveillance footage, being preserved. Article 93 of the Rome Statute also states that where there is a unique opportunity to obtain important evidence or a substantial risk that such evidence will subsequently become unavailable, measures must be taken to preserve it.

The evidentiary materials found in al-Aqtan prison, al-Hol camp and detention facilities that were under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, including administrative records, prisoner files, cell configurations, restraint or torture devices, biological samples, digital systems and any burial sites, are crucial evidence for any potential prosecutions before Syrian or international courts or within universal jurisdiction proceedings in third countries.

THIRD: OPERATIONAL NECESSITIES AND THE RISK OF EVIDENCE LOSS

These operational necessities are of critical importance, as any procedural flaw in collecting, preserving, or documenting evidence may lead to its subsequent exclusion before the courts, no matter how serious the violations committed, which threatens the victims' rights to truth and justice.

The experience of reopening former regime detention facilities after December 2024 demonstrates the multiple pathways through which vital evidence can be irretrievably lost in the absence of immediate safeguards. Deliberate destruction by perpetrators, uncontrolled access by families seeking information about their missing relatives, removal of documents by journalists and researchers, and environmental degradation all pose serious threats to the integrity and admissibility of evidence in court.

In al-Hol camp, where conditions were characterized by systematic deprivation, the arbitrary detention of entire families including thousands of children, and restricted access to humanitarian aid, administrative records documenting arrivals, transfers, deaths, and releases are crucial for identifying victims and outlining the scope, structure, and responsibilities for violations. The physical infrastructure of detention cells, interrogation areas, and isolation units in al-Aqtan prison can corroborate survivors' testimonies regarding torture methods and detention conditions by corroborating them with field observations and technical documentation standards. Digital evidence, including surveillance systems, computer files, and electronic communications, requires immediate forensic imaging using write-protection techniques to prevent accidental alteration, along with the calculation of encrypted hash values to verify data integrity and prevent tampering. A chain of custody must be established from the moment of collection, with thorough documentation of each receipt, transfer, or deposit, to ensure the evidence meets the admissibility standards in national and international legal proceedings.

FOURTH: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SNHR calls on the Syrian authorities to:

1. Secure all detention centers formerly controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces and now under government control, immediately, by deploying trained security personnel to establish physical protection perimeters, implementing strict entry protocols requiring written authorization and full documentation, and preventing any removal, destruction, or transfer of evidence from the sites.
2. The authorities should issue a public statement affirming their commitment to preserving evidence as a fundamental principle of accountability and justice.
3. Emergency regulations should be enacted stipulating criminal penalties for anyone who tampers with, destroys, or removes evidence from protected sites.
4. The Syrian government must expedite the conclusion of formal cooperation agreements with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria, the International Commission on Missing Persons, and the United Nations Commission of Inquiry, and grant these bodies access to collect evidence in accordance with international criminal standards.
5. Systematic documentation protocols must be implemented, including comprehensive photographic and video recordings, the preparation of crime scene records, and the cataloging of all evidence to ensure its reliable traceability and management.

With regard to Al-Hol camp specifically, given the presence of thousands of children there, and the documented patterns of arbitrary detention of entire families:

1. Immediate measures should be taken to document the identities of all detainees and the circumstances of their detention, initiate legal procedures for the release of those detained without legal basis, and preserve all records that may substantiate individual cases of arbitrary detention, family separation, and deaths in custody.
2. Establishing information centers that enable families to report missing persons and provide pre-death data is crucial to supporting future identification efforts.

The evidence held in these centers, if protected and professionally handled, can meet the requirements for criminal accountability, truth-seeking, and identifying victims, particularly those forcibly disappeared years ago. Conversely, the loss of evidence due to damage, contamination, or tampering represents an irreparable loss, not only for individual prosecutions but also for the overall historical record of violations committed against the Syrian people.

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