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The Syrian Regime Arrests 17 Refugees Forcibly Deported from Lebanon



Press release: (Download the full report below)

The Hague – The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) revealed in its latest monthly report released today that no fewer than 209 cases of arbitrary arrests were documented in July 2024, with those detained including 14 children and three women. The group also noted that the Syrian regime has arrested 17 refugees who were forcibly deported from Lebanon.

The 21-page report notes that, given the staggering rates of continuing arbitrary arrests, the number of Syrian citizens classified as missing has skyrocketed, so much so that this can be called a phenomenon in itself. Indeed, Syria is now one of the worst countries worldwide in terms of the numbers of ‘disappeared’ citizens. The report adds that the Syrian regime surpasses many of the world’s other authoritarian regimes by virtue of having absolute hegemony over the legislative and judicial branches of government. The regime has wielded this hegemony to promulgate a multitude of laws and decrees that violate international human rights law, as well as the principles of law and the parameters of arrests and interrogation established in domestic legislation and the current Constitution of 2012. A part of this process, the report stresses, is legitimizing the crime of torture. Syrian law contains several texts that outlaw torture, including Article 53 of the current Syrian constitution which bans arbitrary arrest and torture and Article 391 of the Public Penal Code, which provides that anyone who uses coercion during interrogation shall receive a timed prison sentence ranging from three months to three years, while torture is wholly prohibited. Despite these texts, however, other legal texts, including Law No. 16 of 2022 on Criminalizing Torture, explicitly contradict the aforementioned legal articles, and legitimize impunity for torturers.

The report summarizes the arbitrary arrests/detentions and the releases of detainees from various detention centers documented as having been carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in July 2024. The report does not, however, include abductions carried out by unidentified parties. Another exception made by SNHR is of individuals detained for committing criminal offenses, such as murder, theft, narcotics-related

crimes, and other crimes that have no political nature or are unrelated to the armed conflict, dissident activism, or freedom of opinion and expression. The report also touches upon the laws and decrees promulgated by the parties to the conflict in relation to issues of arrest and enforced disappearance in the period covered. In much of its reportage, the report incorporates a descriptive and analytic methodology.

The report documents no fewer than 209 cases of arbitrary arrest/detention in July 2024, with those detained including 14 children and three women (adult females). Of these, 157 have subsequently been classified as enforced disappearances. Syrian regime forces were responsible for 106 of the 209 cases, including of one child and two women, while Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were responsible for 43 cases, including of 13 children. Additionally, the report records 32 arbitrary arrests/detentions at the hands of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), while all armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA) were responsible for 28 arbitrary arrests/detentions.

The report also shows the distribution of July's cases across Syria's governorates. Analysis of the data shows that Aleppo governorate saw the highest number of arbitrary arrests/detentions, followed by Rural Damascus governorate, then in descending order, Idlib, Homs, Deir Ez-Zour and Damascus, and then Hasaka. The report also compares the number of arbitrary arrests/detentions carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria with the numbers of releases of detainees from the various forces' detention centers documented in July 2024. In this regard, the report stresses that the number of arbitrary arrests far surpasses the number of releases from detention centers, with the number of releases equaling approximately 30 percent of all the detentions documented; this confirms again that at least two or three times as many people are detained as are released, primarily by the Syrian regime, which indicates that these arrest and detention practices are standard policy in comparison to the extremely limited numbers of people released by all parties to the conflict, but mainly from regime detention centers.

The report further notes that Syrian regime forces carried out more arrests/detentions of refugees who had been forcibly repatriated from Lebanon. These arrests, which took place at the al-Masna Border Crossing on the Syrian-Lebanese border, were carried out after the Lebanese army had carried out raid and arrest campaigns targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon who were then transferred to the border for deportation. Most of those arrested at the border by Syrian regime forces were taken to security and military detention centers in the governorates of Homs and Damascus.

Additionally, regime forces carried out widespread arrests/detentions of civilians by regime personnel in the governorates of Rural Damascus and Hama on the pretext of the detainees failing to join the regime's military or reserve forces as part of its mandatory military service policy. These arrests were carried out during raids or mass arrests at checkpoints, and even targeted individuals who had previously agreed to settle their security situation with the regime in the areas that saw settlement agreements. Furthermore, the report documents arrests/detentions by regime forces of a number of individuals in Syria who were heading towards the Syrian-Lebanese borders to cross irregularly into Lebanon. These arrests were concentrated in Homs governorate. In addition, the report recorded arrests/detentions carried out by the Syrian regime's Fourth Division targeting citizens at checkpoints who were trying to enter al-Hajar al-Aswad subdistrict to check on their homes, from which they had been displaced at an earlier date. There were also arrests/detentions carried out by security forces at the regime's various Immigration and Passport Departments, as well as centers that issue non-conviction documents (background screening certification documents confirming individuals have no criminal convictions), in regime-held governorates. These arrests targeted civilians who were trying to obtain travel documents to leave the country.

On a related note, the report stresses that, through these arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances carried out in July, the Syrian regime continues to violate the orders of the Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued on November 16, 2023, on requesting provisional measures in the case brought by Canada and the Netherlands against the Syrian regime on the application of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Meanwhile, the report notes, the SDF also continued enforcing the group's policies of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in July 2024. In pursuit of these policies, SDF personnel continued carrying out campaigns of mass raids and detentions, targeting civilians on the pretext of fighting ISIS, with some of these arrest campaigns backed by US-led Coalition helicopters. We also documented arrests/detentions of civilians over accusations of working with the SNA. Moreover, we documented more arrests/detention of civilians for forced conscription, with these detainees taken to SDF military training and recruitment camps, which are concentrated in SDF-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate. Additionally, we documented a number of arrests targeting individuals accused of being affiliated with the Arab tribes' forces. Those arrests were concentrated in Deir Ez-Zour governorate.

The SDF also continued abducting children with the objective of conscripting them for military training, with these children being sent to military training camps; the parents and families of these conscripted children are not allowed to contact them, while the SDF refuses to disclose their fate.

As the report further reveals, HTS detained more civilians in July 2024. These arrests, which were concentrated in Idlib governorate and some areas of rural Aleppo governorate under the group's control, targeted media activists, political activists, and local dignitaries. Most of these arrests were carried out in connection with the detainees expressing opinions critical of HTS's management of areas under its control. These detentions are routinely and arbitrarily carried out in the form of raids in which HTS members storm their victims' homes, often breaking down the doors, or abducting their victims in the street or while they're passing through temporary checkpoints. The report also documents arrests/detentions mostly carried out as part of raids and mass arrests, or at checkpoints in Idlib governorate that targeted individuals over their participation in the recent anti-HTS protests in the governorate. Most of these arrests were concentrated in Binnesh city in Idlib governorate.

Furthermore, the report continues, all armed opposition factions/SNA continued carrying out arbitrary arrests/detentions and kidnappings in July 2024, including of women. Most of these detentions were conducted on a mass scale, targeting individuals coming from areas controlled by the Syrian regime or the SDF. In addition, the report documented detentions that exhibited an ethnic character, with these incidents concentrated in 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 responsible for arrests and detentions through the judiciary, as well as being carried out without any clear charges being presented against those being detained. Furthermore, the report documented raids and arrests by SNA personnel targeting civilians who were accused of working with the SDF, with these arrests being concentrated in some of the villages which are administratively part of Afrin city in Aleppo governorate. The report also recorded arrests/detentions of civilians by the SNA's 'al-Sultan Squad' in retaliation for those people demanding the return of their homes which had been seized by al-Sultan Squad at an earlier date. Those arrests were concentrated in Afrin city. Additionally, the report documented arrests of IDPs returning to their houses in SNA-controlled areas. Those arrests were also concentrated in Afrin city. There were also arrests involving a number of individuals who were travelling from regime-held areas to the Syrian-Turkish borders to cross irregularly into Türkiye. These arrests were concentrated in Afrin city.

On the subject of releases, the report documents the release of 23 detainees by Syrian regime forces, including the release of two detainees in connection with the amnesty decree promulgated by the Syrian regime on April 30, 2022 (Decree No. 7 of 2022). Also, in Damascus governorate, the report documents the regime's release of two individuals originally from Daraa governorate. These detainees were released after serving the full term of their arbitrary sentences of about five years. Additionally, the report documents the release of 19 individuals who had been held without trial for a few days. Most of these detainees came from the governorates of Rural Damascus, Aleppo, and Daraa, and most had spent the duration of their detention in regime security branches.

As the report further reveals, 257 people, including two children, were released in July from SDF detention centers. The SDF released 14 individuals, including two children, from its detention centers after holding them for periods ranging from a few days to three months. Most of those released came originally from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, and Aleppo. The majority of these releases, however, came in in connection with Amnesty Act No. 10 of 2024, promulgated by the group on July 17, 2024, which pardons crimes committed by Syrian nationals prior to July 17, 2024. The SDF released 243 individuals who had been detained for periods ranging from three months to seven years, with most of them hailing originally from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, Raqqa, and Aleppo.

The report also documents HTS' release of 26 individuals from its detention centers in Idlib governorate, with the released detainees having been detained for periods ranging from a few days to three years, without any clear charges being brought against them. Elsewhere, all armed opposition factions/SNA released 12 individuals, including one woman, after detaining them for periods ranging from a few days to a few months without bringing any clear charges against them or putting them on trial. Most were released only after their families had been extorted into paying sums of money to secure their release.

As the report further notes, SNHR's data is classified as a reputable principal source of information by many UN bodies, being used in numerous statements and resolutions. The most recent of these was a draft resolution on the human rights situation in Syria (A/C.3/78/L.43), passed by a vote on Wednesday, November 15, 2023, which condemned the Syrian regime's continuation of gross, systematic, and widespread violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. This latest resolution also acknowledged that the number of detainees in Syria continues to rise steadily, already exceeding 135,000. Relatedly, the resolution holds the regime responsible for the systematic use of enforced disappearance, which, it notes, constitutes a crime against humanity.

The report notes that the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons is one of the most crucial human rights issues in Syria which there has been no progress in resolving despite its inclusion in several UN Security Council resolutions, as well as in UN General Assembly resolutions, in Kofi Annan's plan, in Security Council resolution 2254 of December 2015, and finally in the statement on cessation of hostilities issued in February 2016.

The report stresses that the Syrian regime has not fulfilled any of its obligations in any of the international treaties and conventions it has ratified, most particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It has also violated several articles of the Syrian Constitution itself, with thousands of detainees imprisoned without any arrest warrant for many years, without charges, and prevented from appointing a lawyer and from receiving family visits. Approximately 68 percent of all detentions documented have subsequently been categorized as enforced disappearance cases.

The report further notes that, in light of the continuing high rates of arbitrary arrests, torture, and enforced disappearance at the hands of Syrian regime forces, we see no indicator of any willingness on the Syrian regime's part to end torture or comply with the ICJ's order for provisional measures since its issuance on November 16, 2023. Even worse, the regime continues to imprison 136,528 arbitrarily arrested detainees/forcibly disappeared persons in its detention centers, all of whom are still being subjected to torture, which further confirms that the Syrian regime explicitly continues to contravene the Convention against Torture, which the regime ratified in 2004, and continues to fail to comply with the Convention.

The report additionally notes that the other parties (Syrian Democratic Forces, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, and all Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army are also all obliged to implement the provisions of international human rights law, and that they have committed widespread violations through arrests and enforced disappearances.

In the report, SNHR again calls on the UN Security Council to follow through with the implementation of UN Security Resolution 2042, Resolution 2043, and Resolution 2139.

The report stresses that the UN must form an impartial special committee to monitor cases of arbitrary arrest and reveal the fate of the 112,000 missing persons in Syria, 85 percent of whom are detained by the Syrian regime. The report adds that pressure should be applied on all parties to immediately reveal their detention records in accordance with a timetable, and to immediately make detainees' whereabouts public, and allow humanitarian organizations and the International Committee of Red Cross to have direct access to them.

Lastly, the report emphasizes that children and women should immediately be released from captivity, and that families and friends of detainees or wanted individuals should not be detained as prisoners of war, as well as providing a number of additional recommendations.