

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1295
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Syrian Network for Human Rights
Titel:	125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture and One Massacre. Civilian Death Toll Increased Compared to the Previous Month as a Result of Remote Bombings
Udgivet:	1. juni 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	25. august 2020

125 Civilians Documented Killed in Syria in May 2020, including Eight Who Died Due to Torture, and One Massacre

Civilian Death Toll Increased Compared to the Previous Month as a Result of Remote Bombings



SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Monday, June 1, 2020

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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I. Introduction and Methodology

The documentation process to register victims killed in Syria is one of the most important roles performed by the Syrian Network for Human Rights since March 2011. This is all the more crucial since murder is the most prevalent of all the violations perpetrated, and the one which most profoundly affects the Syrian people, with countless families suffering incalculable and irreparable trauma through the loss of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends, etc.

These violations have become so widespread primarily through Syrian regime forces' and affiliated militias' systematic killing of civilians using every kind of weapon. The regime began by using tanks and artillery, then progressed to also deploying warplanes and helicopter gunships which have deployed barrel bombs, in addition to Scud missiles and chemical weapons.

The entry of several other parties into the Syrian conflict has further increased the importance and complexity of documenting the victims killed in Syria.

Since 2011, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has created complex electronic programs to archive and categorize the data on victims, which the team collects and verifies, enabling us to catalogue the victims according to their gender and the location where each was killed, the governorate from which each victim originally came, and the party responsible for the killing, and to make comparisons between these parties, and identify the governorates which lost the largest proportion of residents.



Since 2011, we have also deemed it appropriate to highlight the death toll among women and children due to the vulnerability of these groups, their central role in the community, and because they give a strong indication of the targeting of civilians. We later added other groups which have played a key role in the popular uprising and later in the armed conflict, such as media, medical, relief and civil defense personnel.

Given the importance and sensitivity surrounding the murder of Syrian citizens, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has never stopped issuing daily death toll of victims for nearly nine years, or publishing monthly reports documenting the death toll of victims Syria lost each month, in addition to issuing an annual report, as well as dozens of other reports documenting massacres committed on Syrian soil. Also, SNHR periodically sends a special form to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings.

It should be noted that the United Nations has relied on the Syrian Network for Human Rights for all the statistics it has used in its analysis of victims in the conflict, given SNHR's prominent role as one of the most credible sources. SNHR is also used as a trustworthy source by a large number of Arab and international news agencies and many international human rights organizations.

Methodology

This report records the death toll of victims killed by the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria in May 2020, particularly focusing on those victims killed under torture, and victims amongst media and medical personnel, paying particular attention to those massacres which the SNHR was able to document that were committed by the parties to the conflict over the past month.

We should note that in this context we use the term “massacre” to refer to any attack that resulted in the deaths of five or more peaceful individuals in the same incident.

The report also includes an outline of the most notable incidents during this period. Finally, we maintain the full details of every incident on the SNHR database.

The statistics provided for the death toll of victims include extrajudicial killings by the dominant powers in each area which occurred as a violation of both International Human Rights Law or International Humanitarian Law, and do not include natural deaths or those caused by disputes between individual members of society.

The report catalogues the death toll of victims according to the main perpetrator parties in the Syrian conflict. Accurately ascribing responsibility sometimes requires more time and investigation than usual, especially in the case of joint attacks. On some occasions, when we are unable to definitively assign responsibility for particular attacks to one specific par-



ty, as in the case of air strikes by Syrian or Russian warplanes, Syrian-Iranian attacks, or attacks by Syrian Democratic Forces and US-led coalition, we indicate that responsibility for these attacks is held jointly by the parties in question until we are able to likely establish which one of the parties was responsible, or it's proved that the attack was a joint initiative carried out in coordination between the two parties.

In addition, in cases where we are unable to definitively assign responsibility for a particular killing to one of two possible parties because of the area's proximity to the lines of engagement, the use of similar weapons, or other reasons, the incident is categorized among 'other parties' until we have sufficient evidence to conclusively assign responsibility for the violation to one of the two parties.

The perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria are:

A. The main parties:

- Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias)
- Russian forces
- ISIS
- Extremist Islamist groups
- Factions of the Armed Opposition
- Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic forces (the Democratic Union Party)
- US-led coalition

B. Other parties

Through use of SNHR's extensive database, we can catalogue the victims according to the governorate where they were killed, and also by the governorate from which they originally came. This report catalogues the death toll of victims according to the governorate in which they were killed, rather than by the governorate they originally came from.

In relation to victims amongst armed forces, these are divided into two categories:

- Victims from the armed opposition: We face additional difficulties in assessing these casualties as many of these victims are killed on battlefronts rather than in cities or other urban settlements. We are also often unable to obtain information on the victims such as names, photographs and other important personal details due to the reluctance of armed opposition forces to reveal such sensitive information for security concerns among other reasons. Therefore, the actual number of victims is far higher than the number documented.



- Victims from Syrian Regime force, extremist Islamist groups, and Kurdish Democratic Union Party forces: It is almost impossible to access information about this category of victims and the margin of error is considerably higher than usual due to the lack of any applicable methodology in this type of documentation, since these parties don't publish, reveal, or document information about their casualties. From our perspective and given these facts, it is rational to conclude that the statistics published by some groups concerning casualties amongst this category of victims are fabricated rather than being based on any actual data.

In this report, we record only the toll of civilian casualties, whose deaths we were able to document during the last month. Some of the victims documented may have been killed months or even years ago, as in some cases of death due to torture; in these cases, where the deaths have only recently been confirmed, we include two dates, the date when we were able to document the victim's death, and the date on which we think the death occurred.

The methodology adopted by the Syrian Network for Human Rights in documenting the victims can be seen at this link¹ .

This report draws upon the ongoing daily monitoring of news and developments by SNHR's team, and on information from our extensive network of various sources that has been built up over the course of our work since 2011. When we receive information or learn some news about violations via the internet or media outlets, our team works to follow up these reports and attempts to verify information and collect evidence and data. In some cases, researchers are able to visit the incident location promptly. However, this is a rarity in light of the incredibly high security risks, and given the frequency of daily incidents and the scarcity of human and material resources. Therefore, the opportunities available to access evidence vary between one case and another, and consequently the level of certainty in classification of each incident varies. SNHR's customary policy in such cases is to rely on accounts from survivors who experienced the violation firsthand, in addition to analyzing available materials from open sources such as the Internet and media outlets. We also talk with medical personnel who treated the injured in these incidents, examined the deceased victims' bodies, and identified the cause of death. The Syrian Network for Human Rights also provides [a special form](#) that can be filled in with victims' names and personal information so that the Victims Documentation Department can follow up on this information and verify its accuracy and then include it in the database.

¹ "Syrian Network for Human Rights Methodology", Syrian Network for Human Rights, <http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/SNHR_Methodology_en.pdf>



SNHR has analyzed videos and photographs that our team documented, which were posted online, or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media platforms. These videos and photos show, amongst other things, the sites of attacks, and bodies of the victims and the injured, whilst other photos may show the bodies of victims killed under torture, and of victims amongst medical and media personnel who died in attacks carried out by parties to the conflict. We also retain copies of all the videos and photographs included in these reports, which are also reviewed in this report, in a confidential electronic database and in hard disk backup copies, and we ensure always that all these data are stored with their original source. We do not claim, however, that we have documented all cases, given the severe prohibitions, restrictions and persecution by the Syrian Regime forces and some other armed groups.

Our investigations confirm that all of the attacks included in this report that were carried out by the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria targeted civilian areas where we documented no military presence or armories before or during the attacks, and in which the perpetrators failed to issue any warnings to civilians prior to any of the attacks as required by international humanitarian law.

The type and level of evidence available varies from one case to another. In light of the aforementioned challenges, the legal definition of many of the incidents documented may be subject to change based on any new evidence or information which emerge after this report is released. We shall update our data archive with any such items of evidence and information as soon as they become available. Meanwhile, although many incidents don't technically constitute a violation of international humanitarian law under the terms of such legislation, they involved collateral damage, so we have recorded and archived these incidents to document what happened historically and to preserve these as part of the national record, although we don't qualify these specific incidents as crimes.

This report only represents the bare minimum of the actual severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications.



II. The Syrian Regime Bears Primary Responsibility for the Deaths of Syrian Citizens Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

This report does not include all deaths, including those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as we mainly document extrajudicial killings, but there is no doubt that the negligence shown by the Syrian regime and its disastrous mismanagement of the Syrian state in recent years are the primary factors behind the massive numbers of deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic and other disease outbreaks and illnesses, as seen in the regime's neglect of public healthcare and indifference towards citizens' wellbeing, with the state's only genuine protection reserved for the ruling family, its entourage and the regime elite. It should always be remembered that the Syrian regime and its Russian ally have repeatedly been documented as having targeted, bombed and destroyed most medical facilities in Syria, and killed hundreds of medical personnel, according to the SNHR's database, with dozens of these lifesaving medics still classified as having been forcibly disappeared at the regime's hands.

The regime's failure to release arbitrarily detained individuals, particularly the elderly and individuals detained with no charges, provides further clear evidence of the Syrian regime's primary responsibility for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria. The regime, which controls and manages state institutions, has completely failed to provide even the most rudimentary protection to Syrian civilians, but has instead exploited the state institutions to protect and benefit the ruling family in order to ensure their continued rule, even if 13 million Syrian citizens are displaced from their homes to achieve this, with most of those displaced unable to return home since their homes have been ransacked and subjected to widespread looting and destruction by regime forces and affiliated militias.

III. Death Toll of Civilian Victims Documented in May

Since the beginning of 2020, an extensive spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has been seen in most countries worldwide, including Syria, where the pandemic appears to have affected the capabilities of the Syrian regime's army and affiliated Iranian militias, in addition to the recent [cease-fire agreement](#) in and around Idlib; while this has contributed to a reduction in the rate of aerial and ground bombing, thus reducing the rate of their killing of Syrian civilians, it has not stopped them, with the regime and its allies continuing their killing of Syrian citizens. In May, the SNHR documented the deaths of 125 civilians, including 26 children and six women (adult female), bringing the death toll of civilian victims killed at the hands of the perpetrator parties in Syria since the beginning of 2020 up to June 2020 to 910.

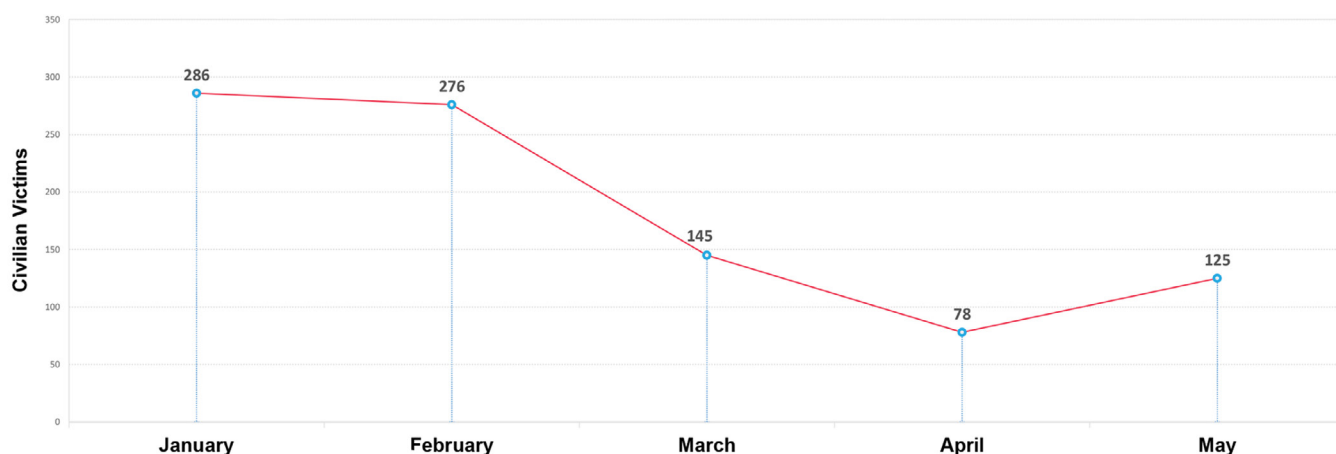


The death toll of civilian victims killed at the hands of the perpetrator parties in Syria since the beginning of 2020 was distributed as follows:



910 civilians were killed in Syria in 2020

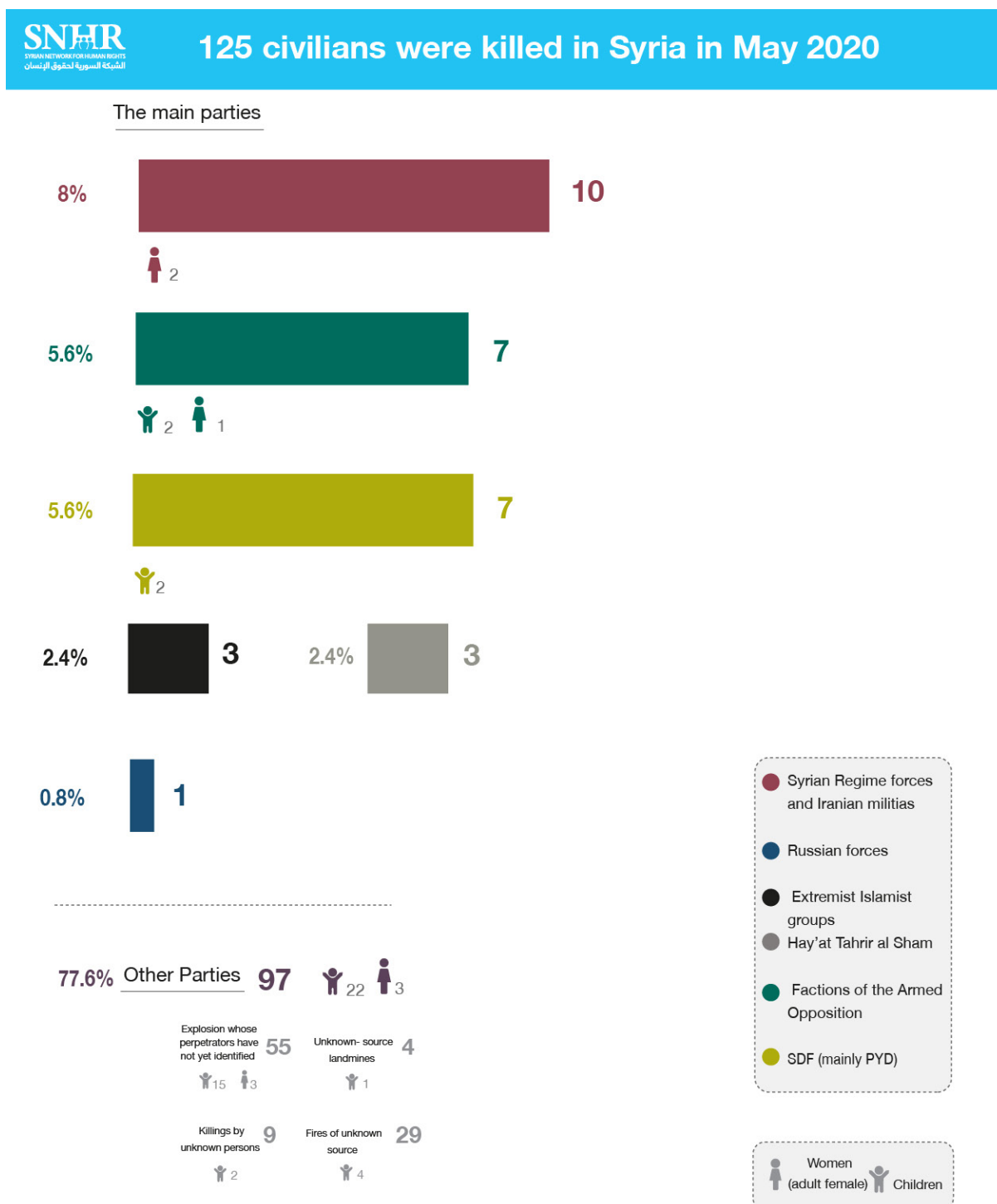
From January to June



The chart above shows a decrease in the death toll in May compared to the previous month, due to the spread of bombings, especially the one that occurred in Afrin city in Aleppo suburbs, which killed 44 civilians.



The death toll we documented in May was distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:



A. The main parties:

- Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):

We documented the deaths of 10 civilians at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, including two women.

- Russian forces:

We documented the death of one civilian at the hands of Russian forces

- Extremist Islamist groups:

- o Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: We documented the deaths of three civilians.

- Factions of the Armed Opposition:

SNHR documented the deaths of seven civilians, including two children and one woman.

- Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party):

SNHR documented the deaths of seven civilians, including two children.

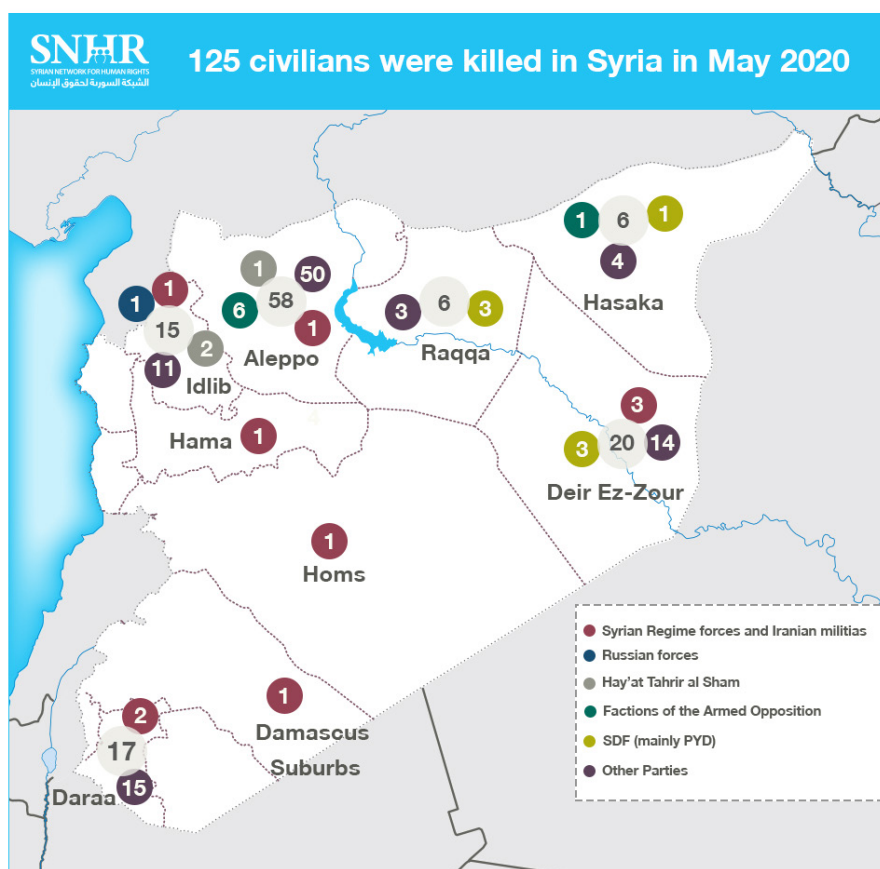
B. Other parties:

We documented the deaths of 97 civilians, including 22 children and three women, at the hands of other parties, distributed as follows:

- Landmines of unknown origin: Four civilians, including one child.
- Fires of unknown source: 29 civilians, including four children.
- Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified: 55 civilians, including 15 children and three women.
- Killings by unknown persons: Nine civilians, including two children.



The death toll of civilian victims killed at the hands of the perpetrator parties documented in May 2020 was distributed across Syrian governorates as follows:



The chart above shows that the highest death toll documented in May was in Aleppo governorate, followed by Deir Ez-Zour governorate.

IV. Death Toll of Victims Who Died Due to Torture, and Victims Amongst Media, Medical and Civil Defense Personnel Documented in May

A. Death toll of victims who died due to torture

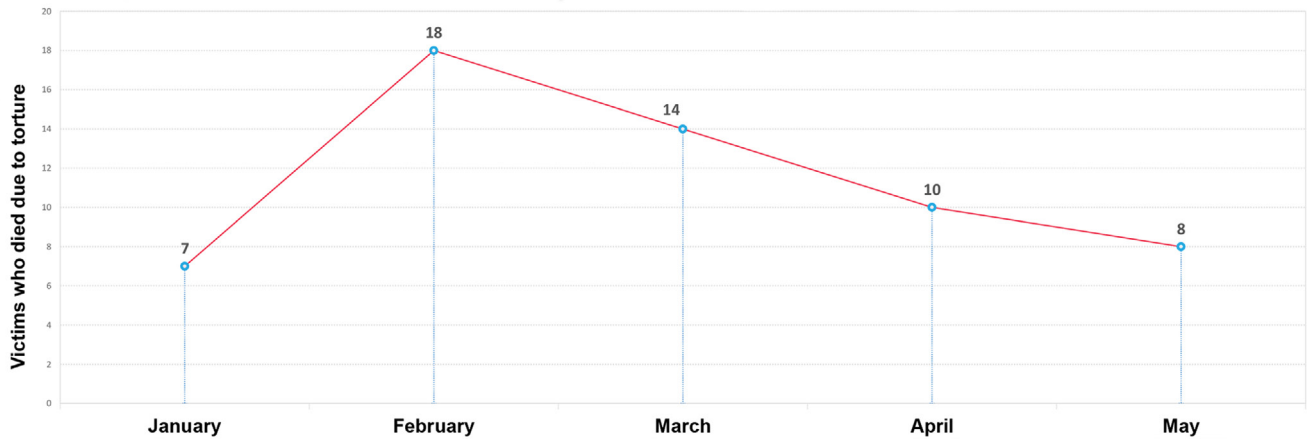
SNHR documented in May 2020 the deaths of eight individuals due to torture, bringing the death toll of victims who died due to torture at the hands of the perpetrator parties in Syria since the beginning of 2020 up to June 2020 to 57.

The death toll of victims who died due to torture at the hands of the perpetrator parties in Syria since the beginning of 2020 was distributed as follows:



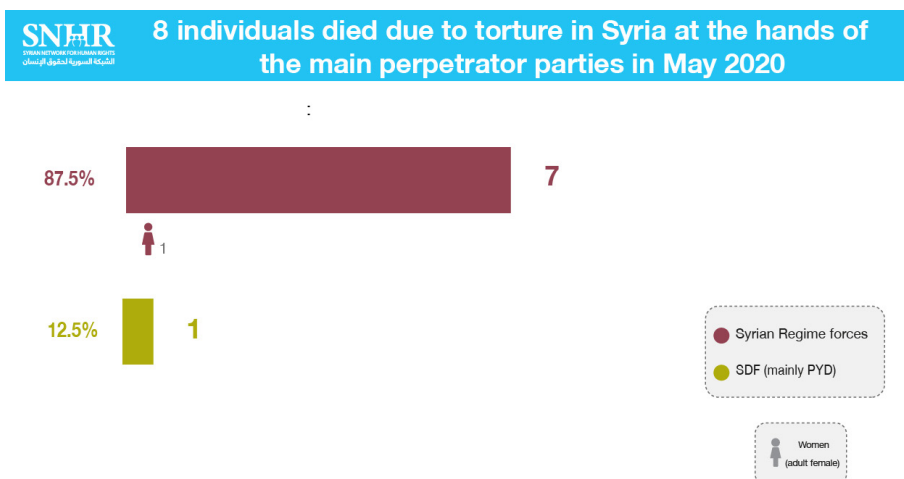
57 individuals died due to torture in Syria in 2020

From January to June



The record of this month constitutes approximately 14% of the year's total to date for torture victims, as this month's record is the lowest compared to the previous three months.

The death toll of victims whom SNHR documented in May their death due to torture was distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:



1. The main parties:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** Seven.
- **Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party):** One.

The most notable cases are:

Mrs. Heyam Muhammad al Nafea, born in 1985, came from al Qouriya city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate. SNHR documented that she was arrested on Tuesday, March 3, 2020, by Syrian Regime forces at the Immigration and Passport Building in Damascus city, and was taken to the regime's infamous Palestine Branch in the city. Since then, she has been classified as forcibly disappeared, as nobody, including a lawyer, was allowed to visit her. On May 11, 2020, Syrian Regime forces notified her family of her death 10 days earlier on May 1, notifying them that they could collect her body from the Tishreen Military Hospital in Damascus city. According to information SNHR has received, she was in a good health at the time of her arrest, indicating that she probably died due to torture and medical negligence.

Ali Hasan Sheikh Muhammad, born in 1977, from Raqqa city, was arrested on July 6, 2015, by Syrian Democratic forces at Marash Binar crossing in in Ein Arab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, while he was travelling along with two other civilians through the crossing to Turkey. Since then, Ali has been classified as forcibly disappeared, as nobody, including any lawyer, has been allowed to visit him or to know his fate. At the beginning of May 2020, his family received information confirming his death due to torture in a Syrian Democratic Forces' detention center at the end of July 2015. SNHR confirms that Syrian Democratic Forces didn't hand over his body to his family; this failure to hand over the bodies of those who die in the Syrian Democratic Forces' detention centers to their families is commonplace, with any person whose body has not been handed over deemed to be still classified as a forcibly disappeared person.



B. Death toll of medical personnel

SNHR didn't document any deaths among medical personnel in May 2020.

C. Death toll of media workers

SNHR didn't document any deaths among media workers in May 2020.

D. Death toll of Civil Defense personnel

SNHR didn't document any deaths among Civil Defense personnel in May 2020.

V. Record of Most Notable Massacres Documented by SNHR in May

SNHR documented at least 28 massacres since the beginning of 2020, including one massacre in May, which occurred due to the explosion of an unknown-source car bomb in Aleppo governorate.

On Tuesday afternoon, April 28, 2020, [a car bomb](#) planted by unknown individuals exploded at the entrance to a local market in a public thoroughfare, known as Rajou Street, in the center of [Afrin](#) city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, with fires resulting from the explosion spreading across a large area due to the presence of a truck loaded with fuel at the site of the explosion. We documented the deaths of at least [44 civilians](#) as a result of [the explosion](#), most of [whose bodies](#) were [severely charred](#), including [nine children](#) and [three women](#), while about 55 others were injured and [sustained burns](#). The Syrian Network for Human Rights is still trying to reach witnesses or survivors of the incident to obtain more details. Afrin city was under the control of Armed Opposition factions supported by Turkish forces at the time of the incident.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

- The evidence we collected indicates that the attacks documented were directed against civilians and civilian objects. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have committed various crimes ranging from extrajudicial killings to detention, torture and enforced disappearance. Their attacks and indiscriminate bombardment have resulted in the destruction of facilities and buildings. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the war crime of attacking civilians has been committed in many cases.



- The Syrian government has not only violated international humanitarian law and customary law, but has also breached a number of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 2139 and resolution 2042 on the release of detainees, as well as resolution 2254, all without any accountability.
- The indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment carried out by the alliance of US-led coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces is considered a violation of international humanitarian law, with the crimes of indiscriminate killing amounting to war crimes.
- Extremist Islamist groups have violated international humanitarian law, causing the deaths of many civilians.
- Factions of the Armed Opposition violated UN Security Council Resolution 2139 through carrying out attacks that are considered to violate customary international humanitarian law, causing civilian casualties or accidental injuries.
- The use of explosive arms to target densely populated areas reflects a criminal and wholly deliberate mentality intended to inflict the greatest possible number of deaths, which is a clear contravention of international human rights law and a flagrant violation of the four Geneva Convention (articles 27, 31, 32).
- We could find no record of any warnings being issued by the Syrian regime, or by Russian or US-led coalition forces prior to any attack in accordance with the requirements of international humanitarian law. This has been the case since the beginning of the popular uprising, providing another blatant demonstration of these forces' total disregard for the lives of civilians in Syria.
- These attacks, particularly bombings, caused massive collateral damage that involved loss of lives, injuries, or significant damage to civilian objects. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.
- The magnitude and frequency of the violations, the disproportionate use of military force, the indiscriminate manner of the bombing, and the coordinated approach of these attacks leads to the inescapable conclusion that these acts are wholly deliberate and based on high-level orders, and as such constitute a part of state policy.

Recommendations:

Security Council

- The Security Council must take additional steps following its adoption of Resolution 2254, which clearly states that “all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such.”



- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible should be held accountable including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes has been repeatedly proven.
- The Security Council should ensure peace and security and implement the principle of responsibility to protect civilians' lives and to save the Syrian people's heritage and historical artefacts from destruction, looting and vandalism.
- The Security Council should adopt a resolution banning the use of cluster munitions in Syria, similar to the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and include advice on how to safely remove the remnants of such dangerous weapons.
- The four other permanent member states should put pressure on the Russian government to end its support for the Syrian regime, which uses chemical weapons, and expose its involvement in this regard.
- The Security Council should request that all relevant United Nations agencies make greater efforts to provide food, medical and humanitarian assistance in areas where fighting has ceased, and in internally displaced persons camps, and follow-up with those States that have pledged voluntary contributions.

International Community

- In light of the split within the Security Council and its utter inability to take any effective action, action should be taken at the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people by protecting them from daily killing, and by lifting sieges, as well as through increasing support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be enacted 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 in dozens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) after all political channels through the Arab League's plan and then Mr. Kofi Annan's plan proved fruitless, along with the Cessation of Hostilities statements and Astana agreements that followed. Therefore, steps should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, while the norm of the 'Responsibility to Protect', which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. By failing to do so, the Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.



- Renew pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- Work on fulfilling justice and achieving accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and to activate the principle of universal jurisdiction.

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 since these attacks were perpetrated by the parties to the conflict.
- Train Syrian organizations to undertake clearance of mines and other unexploded ordnance, and raise local awareness of the dangers of such ordnance.
- Establish a platform that brings together a number of Syrian organizations active in documenting violations and providing humanitarian assistance, in order to facilitate an exchange of skills and experiences within Syrian society.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

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

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

Collect further evidence about the crimes documented in this report.

The United Nations Special Envoy to Syria

- Condemn the perpetrators of crimes and massacres, and those who were primarily responsible for dooming the de-escalation agreements.
- Revive the peace process so that it can resume its natural course despite Russia's attempts to divert and distort it, empowering the Constitutional Committee prior to the establishment of a transitional governing body.

The Syrian regime

- Stop indiscriminate shelling and targeting of residential areas, hospitals, schools and markets, and end use of prohibited weapons and barrel bombs.
- End the acts of torture that have caused the deaths of thousands of Syrian citizens in detention centers.



- Reveal the fate of some 83,000 Syrian citizens arrested by the security services whose fate has been concealed to date.
- Ensure compliance with UN Security Council resolutions and customary humanitarian law.

The Russian regime

- Launch investigations into the incidents included in this report, make the findings of these investigations public for the Syrian people, and hold the people involved accountable.
- Compensate all the damaged centers and facilities, rebuild and rehabilitate them, and compensate all the victims' families, who were killed by the current Russian regime, as well as all the wounded.
- Completely cease the bombing of hospitals, protected objects, and civilian areas, and respect customary international law.
- As a guarantor party in the Astana talks, the Russian regime must stop thwarting de-escalation agreements, and apply pressure on the Syrian regime in order to end all indiscriminate attacks and allow the unconditional passage of humanitarian aid to besieged areas.
- Stop using incendiary weapons in populated areas, compensate the victims and their families for all human and material damage caused by the use of these weapons, and provide treatment for dozens of civilian casualties.
- Provide detailed maps of sites where Russian forces have launched cluster munition attacks, issue these to the United Nations and inform the Syrian public about them, thus facilitating the disposal of unexploded ordnance.
- Begin to achieve a breakthrough in the issue of detainees by revealing the fate of 83,000 people disappeared by the Syrian regime.

The Coalition (Us-led coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces)

- The states of the coalition must unequivocally and sincerely acknowledge that some of their bombing operations have resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians. Rather than attempting denial, these states should take speedy steps to launch serious investigations, and immediately compensate and apologize to the victims and all those affected.
- 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.
- 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. Providing the SDF with weapons and support while knowing that the SDF violates the rules of international humanitarian law can be seen as a contribution to these violations.



- The SDF should form a special committee to investigate incidents of violations committed by SDF members, disclose the details of their findings and apologize for them, hold those responsible accountable, and compensate the victims and affected.

Armed Opposition factions

- Armed Opposition factions must ensure the protection of civilians in all areas under their control. These forces should also take care to distinguish between civilians and military targets and cease any indiscriminate attacks.
- Pledge to cease any arbitrary arrests and investigate incidents that have resulted in violations of international humanitarian law.
- Take punitive action against those who commit violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

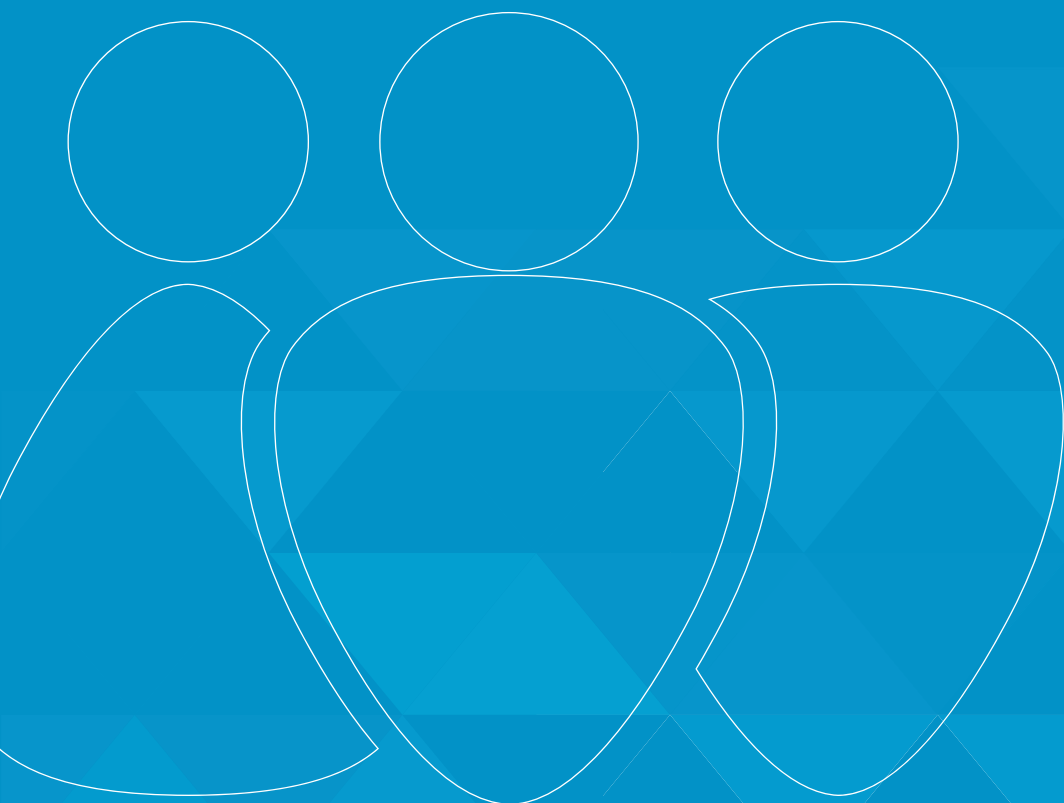
Humanitarian organizations:

Develop urgent operational plans to secure decent shelter for internally displaced persons.

Acknowledgments

We thank all family members, relatives and friends of the victims, along with the eyewitnesses and local activists, whose contributions have enriched this report.





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