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2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ANNOUNCEMENT: The Department of State will release an addendum to this report in mid 2021 that expands the subsection on Women in Section 6 to include a broader range of issues related to reproductive rights.

President Bashar Assad has ruled the Syrian Arab Republic since 2000. The constitution mandates the primacy of Baath Party leaders in state institutions and society, and Assad and Baath Party leaders dominated all three branches of government as an authoritarian regime. An uprising against the regime that began in 2011 continued throughout the year. The 2014 presidential election resulted in the re-election of Assad, and the Baath Party-led National Progressive Front won 177 of the 250 seats in the People’s Council 2020 parliamentary elections. These elections took place in an environment of widespread regime coercion, and many Syrians residing in opposition-held territory did not participate in the elections. Observers did not consider the elections free or fair.

The regime’s multiple security branches traditionally operated autonomously with no defined boundaries between their areas of jurisdiction. Regime-affiliated militia, such as the National Defense Forces, integrated with other regime-affiliated forces and performed similar roles without defined jurisdiction. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the uniformed military, police, and state security forces but possessed limited influence over foreign military or paramilitary organizations operating in the country, including proregime forces such as the Russian armed forces, Iran-affiliated Hizballah, and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Members of the security forces committed numerous abuses.

Regime and proregime forces continued major aerial and ground offensives initiated in 2019 to recapture areas of northwest Syria, killing thousands of civilians and forcing nearly one million persons to flee before the brokering of a ceasefire in March, which largely held through the remainder of the year. The assault, involving the use of heavy weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Syrian and Russian airstrikes repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, settlements for internally displaced persons, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists. As of August the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported there were 6.6 million internally displaced persons, 2.6 million of whom were children, and more than 5.5 million Syrian registered refugees outside the country. The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria found it probable that the regime, its Russian allies, and other proregime forces committed attacks “marked by war crimes” that “may amount to crimes against humanity” during these attacks.

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful or arbitrary killings by the regime; forced disappearances by the regime; torture, including torture involving sexual violence; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including denial of medical care; prolonged arbitrary detention; political prisoners and detainees; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious abuses in internal conflict, including aerial and ground attacks impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure including schools, markets, and hospitals; serious restrictions on free expression, including restrictions on the press and access to the internet, censorship, and site blocking; substantial suppression of the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; undue restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections, including severe restrictions on political participation; high-level and widespread corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for violence against women; coerced abortion; unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers by the regime and other armed actors; trafficking in persons; violence and severe discrimination targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons; existence and use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; and severe restrictions on workers’ rights.

The regime took no steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, or punish officials who committed human rights violations or abuses. Impunity was pervasive and deeply embedded in the security and intelligence forces and elsewhere in the regime.

Regime-linked paramilitary groups reportedly engaged in frequent violations and abuses, including massacres; indiscriminate killings; kidnapping of civilians; extreme physical abuse, including sexual violence; and unlawful detentions. Regime-aligned militias, including Hizballah, repeatedly launched attacks that killed and injured civilians.

Russian forces were implicated in the deaths of civilians resulting from airstrikes characterized by the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria as indiscriminate and resulting in the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, particularly during support of the regime’s military campaign in northwest Syria. These airstrikes destroyed hospitals, shelters, markets, homes, and other integral civilian facilities, damaging medical supplies and equipment and shutting down vital health-care networks, and followed a well documented pattern of attacks with serious and deleterious humanitarian and civilian impact.

The unstable security situation in areas under the control of armed opposition groups continued to foster an environment in which human rights abuses were committed, including killings, extreme physical abuse, and detention.

Armed terrorist groups, such as al-Qa’ida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), committed a wide range of abuses, including unlawful killings and kidnappings, unlawful detention, extreme physical abuse, deaths of civilians during attacks described by the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria as indiscriminate, and forced evacuations from homes based on sectarian identity. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, the group continued to carry out unlawful killings, bombings, and kidnappings, sometimes targeting civilians. The Carnegie Corporation assessed that ISIS benefited from a security vacuum left by the various military forces reducing activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups in northern Syria committed human rights abuses, reportedly targeting Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other civilians, including the arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance of civilians, torture, sexual violence, forced evacuations from homes, looting and seizure of private property, transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey, the cutting of water to civilian populations, recruitment of child soldiers, and the looting and desecration of religious shrines.

Elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minority groups that included members of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, reportedly engaged in human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, acts of corruption, and restrictions on freedom of assembly.

The UN Commission of Inquiry and human rights groups reported that perpetrators often acted with a sense of impunity, and the vast majority of abuses committed since 2011 went uninvestigated.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were numerous reports that the regime and its agents, as well as other armed actors, committed arbitrary or unlawful killings in relation to the conflict (see section 1.g.). No internal governmental bodies meaningfully investigated whether security force killings were justifiable and pursued prosecutions.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), more than 227,180 civilians were killed in the conflict from 2011 to December. Other groups estimated this number exceeded 550,000. This discrepancy was due in part to the vast number of disappeared, many of whom remained missing.

During the year the SNHR reported 1,462 civilians were killed, including at least 200 women and 218 children. The majority of these deaths occurred at the beginning of the year, during a military operation led by the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies against the areas in and around Idlib.

The regime continued to commit extrajudicial killings and to cause the death of large numbers of civilians throughout regime-controlled territories. For example, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reported that the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Assault Corps of the Syrian Arab Army entered al-Quraya on March 27, killed six armed residents in the fighting, and later summarily executed five men and detained others.

The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria (COI) and numerous human rights groups reported the regime continued to torture and kill persons in detention facilities. According to the SNHR, more than 14,500 individuals died due to torture between 2011 and December, including 179 children and

91 women; the SNHR attributed approximately 99 percent of all cases to regime forces, including 115 deaths during the year (see section 1.c.).

Despite a ceasefire established in March, the regime maintained its use of helicopters and airplanes to conduct aerial bombardment and shelling, killing hundreds of civilians during the year. In 2019 the UN secretary-general established a Board of Inquiry (BOI) to investigate attacks on civilian sites shared between humanitarian groups and military actors for the purpose of deconfliction from September 2018 through 2019 in northwest Syria. In April the BOI concluded that, in four of the seven incidents investigated, it “was highly probable” the Assad regime and its allies were responsible for attacks on UN deconflicted hospitals. In March the COI reporting on Idlib determined there were reasonable grounds to believe Russian forces were guilty of the war crime of “launching indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas” and that “progovernment forces repeatedly committed the war crime of deliberately attacking protected objects and intentionally attacking medical personnel. In attacking hospitals, medical units, and health-care personnel, progovernment forces violated binding international humanitarian law to care for the sick and wounded and committed the war crime of attacking protected objects.”

Other actors in the conflict were also implicated in extrajudicial killings (see section 1.g.).

b. Disappearance

There were numerous reports of forced disappearances by or on behalf of regime authorities, and the vast majority of those disappeared since the start of the conflict remained missing. Human rights groups’ estimates of the number of disappearances since 2011 varied widely, but all estimates pointed to disappearances as a common practice. The SNHR reported approximately 1,185 forced disappearances during the year and documented at least 149,360 Syrians were detained or forcibly disappeared between 2011 and December, with the regime responsible for at least 88 percent of those detentions. The regime targeted medical personnel and critics, including journalists and protesters, as well as their families and associates. Most disappearances reported by Syrian and international human rights documentation groups appeared to be politically motivated, and a number of prominent political prisoners remained missing (see section 1.e.).

In July, Syrian journalist Wafa Ali Mustafa told the UN Security Council the number of detained and disappeared was still growing as the regime continued to use detention “as a weapon to terrorize civilians.” As of December the regime issued nearly 17 amnesty decrees, the last of which was in March and included only a small number of cases heard by the Counter-Terrorism Court and military field courts. The decree excluded the vast majority of detainees who were never formally convicted of a crime in any court of law and were classified by the international community as unacknowledged detainees or forcibly disappeared.

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) reported in August that it had requested information from the regime on 113 individuals whom the regime reportedly subjected to enforced disappearance between May 2019 and May 2020. The UNWGEID received no response from the regime on these or other outstanding cases. The UNWGEID also received reports of disappearances, including women and children, perpetrated by various armed groups, including those affiliated with the Turkish armed forces.

According to the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, in February the regime released the bodies of Maher Suleiman al-Dali and Ahmad Ali al-Awad, who were arresting after defecting from the Syrian army. Both had signed reconciliation agreements.

Throughout the year the regime continued publishing notifications of detainees’ deaths in regime detention facilities. According to Families for Freedom, many families were unaware of the status of their detained family members and learned that relatives they believed to be alive had died months or even years earlier. In many cases the regime had denied the presence of these individuals in its detention centers until it released death notifications. The SNHR recorded at least 970 of these notifications but estimated that the number of detainees certified as dead was in the thousands. The regime did not announce publication of notifications on updated state registers, return bodies to families, or disclose locations where remains were interred.

For example, the SNHR received information in June that Wesam Fawwaz Mer’i al-Haj Ali, a college student detained and forcibly disappeared by regime forces in 2013, had died in regime custody. As was frequently the case, the regime did not provide Wesam’s body to the family or officially inform the family of the timing or manner of his death, although the SNHR reported it was likely due to torture.

The COI noted that the families of disappeared persons often feared approaching authorities to inquire about the locations of their relatives; those who did so had to pay large bribes to learn the locations of relatives or faced systematic refusal by authorities to disclose information about the fate of disappeared individuals.

Some terrorist groups and armed opposition groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected regime affiliates, journalists, and activists (see section 1.g.).

The regime made no efforts to prevent, investigate, or punish such actions.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits torture and other cruel or degrading treatment or punishment and provides up to three years’ imprisonment for violations. Human rights activists, the COI, and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), however, reported thousands of credible cases of regime authorities engaging in systematic torture, abuse, and mistreatment to punish perceived opponents, including during interrogations, a systematic regime practice documented throughout the conflict and even prior to 2011. The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights assessed that, while individuals were often tortured in order to obtain information, the primary purpose of the regime’s use of torture during interrogations was to terrorize and humiliate detainees.

While most accounts concerned male detainees, there were increased reports of female detainees suffering abuse in regime custody during the year. Activists maintained that many instances of abuse went unreported. Some declined to allow reporting of their names or details of their cases due to fear of regime reprisal. Many torture victims reportedly died in custody (see section 1.a.).

A military defector, nicknamed “Caesar,” testified outside the country in April that he had been ordered to take photographs of the bodies of victims—including thousands of photographs he later smuggled out of the country—who had been detained, tortured, and extrajudicially killed in regime detention centers between 2011 and 2013. Caesar said the bodies had signs of burning, strangulation, and whipping with cables. NGOs continued to report various forms of torture, including forcing objects into the rectum and vagina, hyperextending the spine, and putting the victim onto the frame of a wheel and whipping exposed body parts. The Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison described the testimonies of 14 former detainees held by the regime in Sednaya Prison and reported prison officials subjected detainees to a wide range of torture as an interrogation tactic and, at times, for no reason at all. The SNHR documented the deaths of at least 33 individuals between March and June, including one woman, due to torture and medical negligence in regime detention centers. For example, the State Security Force arrested Mahmoud Abdul Majid al-Rahil from Daraa on May 4, returning his body to his family three days later. Al-Rahil, whose body bore signs of torture, had previously settled his legal and security status with the regime via a reconciliation agreement and was not engaged in military activity at the time of his arrest. In May the SNHR interviewed 96 individuals released under the March amnesty decree, all of whom had been arrested for their connection to protests. Many reported being subjected to torture by regime security forces as a method for extracting confessions to “terrorism” related crimes.

The COI and Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported regular use of torture against perceived regime opponents at checkpoints and regime facilities run by the Air Force, Political Security Division, General Security Directorate, and Military Intelligence Directorate. Human rights groups identified numerous detention facilities where torture occurred, including the Mezzeh airport detention facility; Military Security Branches 215, 227, 235, 248, and 291; Adra Prison; Sednaya Prison; the Harasta Air Force Intelligence Branch; Harasta Military Hospital; Mezzeh Military Hospital 601; and the Tishreen Military Hospital.

The SNHR estimated that parties of the conflict committed at least 11,520 acts of sexual violence between 2011 and December. Regime forces were responsible for at least 8,020 cases of sexual violence between 2011 and December, including 879 cases inside detention centers and 443 violations against girls younger than age 18. American University’s Syrian Initiative to Combat Sexual and Gender-based Violence stated that regime authorities subjected men, women, and children in detention to sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, sexual torture and abuse, and other forms of humiliating and degrading treatment.

In July, HRW reported the regime and, to a lesser extent, nonstate actors subjected men, boys, transgender women, and nonbinary persons to sexual violence during detention, and that this violence was perpetrated with the intent to torture and terrorize detainees. Those interviewed by HRW described being subjected to rape, threat of rape, genital violence, forced nudity, and sexual harassment. One interviewee, 28-year-old Yousef, stated he was detained by regime intelligence agencies and, once his sexual orientation was revealed, the interrogations increased drastically, accompanied by torture and sexual violence designed to humiliate detainees, particularly those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) assessed in June that the regime perpetrated violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including the detention and torture of medical workers, intending to “make delivery of health care a crime and to criminalize doctors for treating people.”

There continued to be a significant number of reports of abuse of children by the regime. Officials reportedly targeted and tortured children because of their familial relationships, or assumed relationships, with political dissidents, members of the armed opposition, and activist groups. According to reliable witnesses, authorities continued to hold a number of children to compel parents and other relatives associated with opposition fighters to surrender to authorities. According to the SNHR's database, at least 4,815 children were still detained or forcibly disappeared as of September, with at least 100 of those detentions having taken place during the year. In January the COI issued a special report on abuses against children throughout the conflict in Syria. The report noted that regime coerces detained boys as young as 12, subjecting them to severe beatings and torture and denying them access to food, water, sanitation, and medical care. The COI also noted the presence of male and female detainees as young as age 11 recorded in Security Branches 215, 227, 235, and 248 in Damascus. The COI reported that children were made to witness the torture and other abuses inflicted on family members and, on occasions, were forced to inflict torture on other detainees. One COI interviewee described how a 16-year-old boy was forced to electrocute the genitals of another detainee.

The COI reported that, beginning in 2011 and continuing throughout the conflict, security forces subjected detainees to mistreatment in military hospitals, often obstructing medical care or exacerbating existing injuries as a technique of abuse and interrogation.

Numerous human rights organizations concluded that regime forces continued to inflict systematic, officially sanctioned torture on civilians in detention with impunity. There were no known prosecutions or convictions in the country of security force personnel for abuses and no reported regime actions to increase respect for human rights by the security forces.

In April the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany, initiated the first trial for state-sponsored torture in Syria, charging former regime officials Anwar Raslan and Eyad al-Gharib. Raslan was charged with crimes against humanity, rape, aggravated sexual assault, and 58 murders at Branch 251, where he allegedly oversaw the torture of at least 4,000 individuals between April 2011 and September 2012. Al-Gharib was charged with aiding and abetting in crimes against humanity and complicity in some 30 cases of torture.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions remained harsh and in many instances were life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical and psychological abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) assessed in April the conditions in regime prisons were alarming and presented unique risks of a COVID-19 outbreak. The SNHR estimated at least 149,360 Syrians were in detention centers or forcibly disappeared, with the regime responsible for at least 88 percent of those detentions.

Physical Conditions: Prison facilities were grossly overcrowded. Authorities commonly held juveniles, adults, pretrial detainees, and convicted prisoners together in inadequate spaces. Poor conditions in detention centers were so consistent that the COI concluded they reflected state policy. Human rights groups reported that authorities continued to hold children in prison with adults.

Reports from the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) suggested that there continued to be many informal detention sites and that authorities held thousands of prisoners in converted military bases and in civilian infrastructure, such as schools and stadiums, and in unknown locations. Activists asserted the regime housed arrested protesters in factories and vacant warehouses that were overcrowded and lacked adequate sanitary facilities.

In some cases authorities transferred detainees from unofficial holding areas to intelligence services facilities. Detention conditions at security and intelligence service facilities continued to be the harshest, especially for political or national security prisoners. Facilities lacked proper ventilation, lighting, access to potable water or adequate food, medical staff and equipment, and sufficient sleeping quarters.

Inside prisons and detention centers, the prevalence of death from disease remained high due to unsanitary conditions and the withholding of food, medical care, and medication. Local NGOs and medical professionals reported authorities denied medical care to prisoners with pre-existing health needs, such as diabetes, asthma, and breast cancer, and often denied pregnant women any medical care. Released prisoners commonly reported sickness and injury resulting from such conditions. One former detainee, Omar Alshogre, testified the regime detained him as a minor in 2012 and subjected him to extensive torture, including at Branch 215 where he was held in an underground prison cell with hundreds of other detainees. He said malnutrition and disease, including tuberculosis, was prevalent among the detainees.

Information on conditions and care for prisoners with disabilities was unavailable. The OHCHR reported in April that Syrian detainees with disabilities and underlying health conditions were particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

According to the COI, conditions in detention centers run by nonstate actors, such as the al-Qa’ida-linked HTS, violated international law (see section 1.g.).

Administration: There were no credible mechanisms or avenues for prisoners to complain or submit grievances, and authorities routinely failed to investigate allegations or document complaints or grievances. Activists reported there was no ombudsman to serve on behalf of prisoners and detainees. The law provides for prompt access to family members, but NGOs and families reported inconsistent application of the law, with most families waiting years to see relatives and, in many cases, never being able to visit them at all without bribing regime officials.

In areas where regime control was weak or nonexistent, localized corrections structures emerged. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders were in charge of facility administration. Former police forces or members of armed opposition groups operated facilities in areas under the control of opposition forces. Nonstate actors often did not respect due process and lacked training to run facilities.

Independent Monitoring: The regime prohibited independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions, and diplomatic and consular officials had no greater access than in previous years. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) suspended its visits to formal prisons in 2016 and reported making limited progress on restoring family links to relatives in detention. The ICRC was unable to visit intelligence and military detention centers during the year.

The ICRC and Red Crescent continued to negotiate with all parties to gain access to detention centers across the country but were unable to gain access to any regime-controlled facilities during the year. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) provided the ICRC and UN-supported NGOs access to SDF prisons during the year.

Reportedly, the regime often failed to notify foreign governments when it arrested, detained, released, or deported their citizens, especially when the case involved political or national security charges. The regime also failed to provide consular access to foreign citizens known to be in its prisons and, on numerous occasions, claimed these individuals were not in its custody or even in the country.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but a 2011 decree allows the regime to detain suspects for up to 60 days without charge if suspected of “terrorism” and related offenses. The COI and various NGOs, activists, and former detainees reported police held many individuals for longer periods or indefinitely. The law provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, but the regime did not observe this requirement. Arbitrary arrests continued during the year, according to the COI, local news sources, and various human rights organizations.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law generally requires a warrant for arrest in criminal cases, but police often cited emergency or national security justifications for acting without a warrant, which was permitted under the law. Under the constitution and code of criminal procedure, for example, defendants must be informed of the reasons for their arrest, and they are entitled to legal aid and are presumed innocent until convicted by a court in a fair trial. Civil and criminal defendants have the right to bail hearings and possible release from pretrial detention on their own recognizance, but the regime applied the law inconsistently. At the initial court hearing, which could be months or years after the arrest, the accused may retain an attorney at personal expense or the court may appoint an attorney, although authorities did not ensure lawyers’ access to their clients before trial. The ICTJ reported the accused were generally tried without a lawyer and denied the right to present a defense. Judges usually followed the intelligence director’s sentence recommendations, even though it was widely known many confessions were made under torture.

In cases involving political or national security offenses, authorities reportedly often made arrests in secret, with cases assigned in an apparently arbitrary manner to the Counterterrorism Court (CTC), courts-martial, or criminal courts. The CTC, military field courts, and military courts are exempted from following the same procedures as ordinary courts, allowing them to operate outside of the code of criminal procedure and deny basic rights guaranteed to defendants. Numerous human rights organizations asserted that trials before these courts were unfair and summary in nature. The regime reportedly detained suspects incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and denied them the right to a judicial determination of their pretrial detention. In most cases authorities reportedly did not identify themselves or inform detainees of charges against them until their arraignment, often months or years after their arrest. Of the former detainees interviewed by ICTJ, mostly from Sednaya Prison, 99 percent said they were never provided paperwork describing the charges against them during their entire period of detention.

NGOs such as the STJ and the Office of Daraa Martyrs confirmed that reported intelligence branches had arrested at least 500 Syrians who had signed reconciliation agreements with the regime during the last two years. The Office of Daraa Martyrs stated reconciliation agreements did not include amnesty for crimes other than opposing the government; therefore, the regime often fabricated criminal charges against former opposition members. Organizations such as Amnesty International also charged the regime with breaking terms of surrender deals and arresting civilians in Homs, Daraa, and the Damascus countryside.

Arbitrary Arrest: According to NGO reports and confirmed by regime memoranda secured and released by human rights documentation groups, the security branches secretly ordered many arrests and detentions. In areas under regime control, security forces engaged in arbitrary arrests. Activists and international humanitarian organizations stated that regime forces continued to conduct security raids in response to antigovernment protests.

Estimates varied widely on the number of Syrians remaining in arbitrary detention, as the regime continued to withhold information on the status of the vast majority of detainees. Between the start of the conflict in 2011 and March, the SNHR reported at least 149,360 arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances; it attributed 88 percent of these cases to the regime.

In May the ICTJ issued a report stating that the Syrian Arab Army and the four main security services—Political Security Directorate, General Intelligence Directorate, Military Intelligence Directorate, and Air Force Intelligence Directorate—were responsible for the majority of arbitrary arrests and detentions, often on fabricated charges. The SNHR reported that regime forces and proregime militias were responsible for nearly 500 cases of arbitrary arrest in the first half of the year, including eight minors and 11 women. The COI stated regime forces and affiliated militias continued to hold tens of thousands of persons arbitrarily or unlawfully in official and makeshift detention facilities. It further reported that women with familial ties to opposition fighters or defectors were detained for intelligence-gathering purposes or retribution.

In June, Amnesty International reported regime security forces arrested 11 men for participating in peaceful protests in Sweida. The regime threatened to send eight of them to the “antiterrorism” court in Damascus if protests in Sweida continued. The regime reportedly carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in Douma, arresting 12 civilians in June and taking them to an undisclosed location.

The PHR reported that regime forces continued to target specifically health-care workers because of their status as medical professionals and their real or perceived involvement in the provision of health services to opposition members and sympathizers. Survivors reported the regime relied on torture to coerce medical workers to confess to crimes they did not commit and gather information on other health workers and healthcare activities. Additionally, human rights activists said the regime was arresting health-care providers who spoke to international media outlets about the COVID-19 crisis or contradicted the tightly controlled narrative on the impact of the pandemic on the country.

The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) reported authorities continued to arrest men and boys arbitrarily at checkpoints, often citing no reason for their arrest or solely for being of military age. Some who had previously settled their security status with the regime via reconciliation agreements were then transferred to a long-term detention facility or forcibly disappeared.

The HRW reported regime intelligence branches were arbitrarily detaining and disappearing persons in areas retaken by the regime, in violation of reconciliation agreements. The COI reported fear of such arbitrary arrests and detention deterred internally displaced persons (IDPs) from returning to their homes in areas retaken by regime forces.

There also were instances of nonstate armed groups reportedly engaging in arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention (see section 1.g.). The STJ reported that Turkish-supported armed opposition groups (TSOs) detained residents based on their affiliation with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (SNES). For example, the STJ reported that civil police affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of Syrian armed opposition groups receiving support from the government of Turkey, arbitrarily arrested Kurdish civilians Samia Alo, Abdulhamid Shaiko, Mustafa Ahmad Ibrahim, Abdulrahman Mustafa Alo, and Rashid Mustafa Ibo in an April 8 raid, demanding their families pay a fine to secure their release.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem. Authorities reportedly held thousands of detainees incommunicado for months or years before releasing them without charge or bringing them to trial, while many detainees died in prison (see section 1.a.). A shortage of available courts and lack of legal provisions for speedy trial or plea bargaining contributed to lengthy pretrial detentions. There were numerous reported instances when the length of detention exceeded the sentence for the crime. Percentages for the prison and detainee population held in pretrial detention and the length of time held were not available. Syrian human rights groups continued to highlight the plight of detainees and advocate for their release.

Detainee’s Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: By law persons arrested or detained, regardless of whether on criminal or other grounds, are entitled to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention and any delay in obtaining judicial process. If the court finds that authorities detained persons unlawfully, they are entitled to prompt release, compensation, or both. Few detainees, however, had the ability to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court or obtain prompt release and compensation for unlawful detention.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but authorities regularly subjected courts to political influence and prosecutors and defense attorneys to intimidation and abuse. Outcomes of cases where defendants were affiliated with the opposition appeared predetermined, and defendants could sometimes bribe judicial officials and prosecutors. The SNHR reported regime authorities detained and denied access to fair public trial at least 1,730 individuals during the year, including those associated with NGOs, human rights activists, journalists, relief workers, religious figures, and medical providers.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial. The judiciary generally did not enforce this right, and the regime did not respect judicial independence.

The constitution presumes that defendants are innocent until proven guilty, but numerous reports indicated the CTC or courts-martial did not respect this right. Defendants have the right to prompt, detailed notification of the charges against them, with interpretation as necessary, although authorities did not enforce this right, and a number of detainees and their families reported the accused were unaware of the charges against them. Trials involving juveniles or sexual offenses, or those referred to the CTC or courts-martial, are held via video conference instead of in person. The law entitles defendants representation of their choice, but it does not permit legal representation for defendants accused of spying. The courts appoint lawyers for indigents.

The ICTJ reported that, in the majority of cases involving individuals arrested by regime intelligence branches, defendants were held incommunicado throughout their detention and denied access to a lawyer. The SNHR reported detainees on trial in military courts were often transferred to unknown locations without notification to their attorneys or families. Numerous NGOs reported families of individuals detained by the regime continued to be unable to access information on the status of their relatives.

Human rights groups reported that in some cases the regime provided prosecution case files to defense lawyers that did not include any evidence, if they provided anything at all. By law defendants may present witnesses and evidence or confront the prosecution witnesses, but authorities often did not respect this right. Defendants may not legally be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but family members and NGOs routinely reported defendants were tortured and intimidated to acquire information and force confessions, as described in a May ICTJ report.

Convicted persons may appeal verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation. Not all citizens enjoyed these rights equally, in part because interpretations of religious law provide the basis for elements of family and criminal law and discriminate against women. Some personal status laws apply sharia (Islamic law) regardless of the religion of those involved.

Additionally, media and NGO reports suggested the regime denied some, and in certain cases all, of these protections to those accused of political crimes, violence against the regime, or providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in opposition-held areas. Sentences for persons accused of antigovernment activity tended to be harsh, if they reached trial, with violent and nonviolent offenders receiving similar punishments. The regime did not permit defendants before the CTC to have effective legal representation. Although activists reported individuals charged under the counterterrorism law could retain attorneys to move their trial date, according to the International Legal Assistance Consortium, authorities did not allow them to speak during proceedings or retain copies of documents from the court’s file.

In opposition-controlled areas, legal or trial procedures varied by locale and the armed group in control. Local human rights organizations reported that local governing structures assumed these responsibilities. NGOs reported that civilians administered these processes employing customary sharia laws in some cases and national laws in others. Sentencing by opposition sharia councils sometimes resulted in public executions, without an appeals process or visits by family members.

According to local NGOs, opposition-run sharia councils continued to discriminate against women, not allowing them to serve as judges or lawyers or to visit detainees.

In the territories they controlled, Kurdish authorities continued to implement a legal code based on the “Social Charter.” Reports described the Social Charter as a mix of Syrian criminal and civil law with laws concerning divorce, marriage, weapons ownership, and tax evasion drawn from EU law,

but without certain fair trial standards—such as the prohibition on arbitrary detention, the right to judicial review, and the right to appoint a lawyer. The justice system consisted of courts, legal committees, and investigative bodies.

Human rights groups and media organizations continued to report that the HTS denied those it had detained the opportunity in its sharia courts to challenge the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention. The HTS reportedly permitted confessions obtained through torture and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families.

Tens of thousands of men, women, and children from former ISIS held areas remained in the overcrowded al-Hol camp, administered by an international NGO with security assistance provided by the SDF, where living conditions remained challenging. While basic humanitarian needs were met, services were at times reduced at times due to COVID-19, security incidents persisted, and camp residents did not have freedom of movement.

The SDF reportedly provided information to the COI on its procedure for the return of al-Hol inhabitants and facilitated the return of approximately 1,500 inhabitants between December 2019 and February.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were numerous reports of political prisoners and detainees. The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression reported the regime continued to detain civilians systematically. At greatest risk were those perceived to oppose the regime, including peaceful demonstrators, human rights activists, and political dissidents and their families. The four government intelligence agencies—Air Force, Military, Political Security, and General—were responsible for most such arrests and detentions.

Authorities continued to refuse to divulge information regarding the numbers or names of persons detained on political or security-related charges. Human rights groups noted detainees included doctors, humanitarian aid providers, human rights defenders, and journalists.

Prison conditions for political or national security prisoners, especially accused opposition members, reportedly continued to be much worse than those for common criminals. According to local NGOs, authorities deliberately placed political prisoners in crowded cells with convicted and alleged felons and subjected them to verbal and physical threats and widespread torture. Political prisoners also reported they often slept on the ground due to lack of beds and faced frequent searches. According to reports from families, particularly the Families for Freedom collective, authorities refused many political prisoners’ access to family and counsel. Some former detainees and human rights observers reported the regime denied political prisoners access to reading materials, including the Quran, and prohibited them from praying in their cells.

Many prominent civilian activists and journalists detained or forcibly disappeared following the 2011 protests reportedly remained in detention. There were no known developments in the majority of cases of reported disappearances from prior years, including the following persons believed forcibly disappeared by regime forces: nonviolent protester Abdel Aziz Kamal al-Rihawi; Alawite opposition figure Abdel Aziz al-Khair; Kurdish activist Berazani Karro; Yassin Ziadeh, brother of dissident Radwan Ziadeh; human rights lawyer Khalil Ma’touq and his assistant, Mohamed Zaza; human rights activist Adel Barazi; and peace activist and theater director Zaki Kordillo and his son, Mihyar Kordillo.

NGOs continued to report the regime used the counterterrorism law to arrest and convict nonviolent activists on charges of aiding terrorists in trials that violated basic due process rights. Although authorities reportedly brought charges under the guise of countering violent militancy, allegations included peaceful acts such as distributing humanitarian aid, participating in protests, and documenting human rights abuses.

Amnesty: The regime had issued 17 amnesty decrees since 2011, but decrees generally resulted in the release of limited numbers of ordinary criminals. These amnesties excluded detainees who had not been charged with any crimes, which comprised the majority in regime detention. In May the SNHR reported the regime only released 96 detainees in the two months following the March amnesty announcement, arbitrarily detaining 113 others within that same period. Limited releases of detainees occurred within the framework of localized settlement agreements with the regime. During the year regime forces violated prior amnesty agreements by conducting raids and arrest campaigns against civilians and former members of armed opposition factions in areas with signed settlement agreements with the regime.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Regime civil remedies for human rights violations were functionally nonexistent. In areas under their control, opposition groups did not organize consistent civil judicial procedures. The HTS and other extremist groups had no known civil judicial mechanisms in the territories they controlled.

In the areas of northeastern Syria under the control of the SNES, civilian peace and reconciliation committees reportedly resolved civil disputes before elevating them to a court.

Property Restitution

Regime security forces routinely seized detainees’ property, personal items, and electronics. The law also provides for the confiscation of movable and immovable property of persons convicted of terrorism, a common charge for political opponents and other detainees since 2012. Security forces did not catalog these items in accordance with the law, and although detained individuals had the right to retrieve their confiscated belongings after release, authorities often did not return the property. According to media reports and activists, regime forces also seized property left by refugees and IDPs. The CTC could try cases in the absence of the defendant, thus providing legal cover for confiscation of such property left by refugees and IDPs. The situation was further complicated due to the destruction of court records and property registries in opposition-held areas in the years following the 2011 uprising.

The regime continued to use Decree 66 to “redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas” and replace them with “modern” real estate projects. In May the Carnegie Middle East Center called the “Marota City” project in Damascus “the blueprint for future regime-led reconstruction process in Syria used to consolidate its authoritarian rule and crush dissent.” The regime gave residents of the area, known as Bastin al-Razi, 30 days to prove their property rights, an impossible timeframe for those detained, internally displaced, or outside the country due to the conflict.

The regime also continued to implement Law No. 10 to create “redevelopment zones” for reconstruction. Property owners were notified to provide documentary proof of property ownership or lose ownership to the state. In January 2019 the regime extended the window from 30 days to one year for citizens to prove they own land being seized for development under Law No. 10, but the NGO PAX reported it was nearly impossible for thousands of refugees and IDPs to claim their property. Refugees and IDPs reportedly feared regime retribution should they attempt to claim their property, and others were unable to assert their housing, land, and property rights due to land zoning, titling, and documentation requirements. Despite the existence of an appeals process, the SJAC expressed serious concern the law was being implemented in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner.

In August the European Institute of Peace (EIP) reported the regime had prevented IDPs from returning to Wadi Barada, an area formerly held by the opposition where extensive demolitions subsequently took place. It was estimated more than 10,000 displaced residents were unable to return to their homes in Wadi Barada.

The EIP interviewed a former Ain al-Fijeh resident who had received a notice of the regime’s intent to seize his property on charges of supporting terrorism. The resident stated that even his settlement agreement would not be accepted until he surrendered, despite previous regime promises to IDPs that they could return to their homes during settlement negotiations.

Armed groups also reportedly seized residents’ properties. In September the COI reported it had “corroborated repeated patterns of systematic looting and property appropriation” by SNA members in Afrin and Ra’s al-Ayn and that “after civilian property was looted, SNA fighters and their families occupied houses after civilians had fled, or ultimately coerced residents, primarily of Kurdish origin, to flee their homes, through threats, extortion, murder, abduction, torture, and detention.” The COI also reported TSO looting and seizures of schools, businesses, and agricultural machinery.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary searches, but the regime routinely failed to respect these prohibitions. Police and other security services frequently bypassed search warrant requirements in criminal cases by citing security reasons or emergency grounds for entry into private property. Arbitrary home raids occurred in large cities and towns of most governorates where the regime maintained a presence, usually following antigovernment protests, opposition attacks against regime targets, or resumption of regime control.

The regime continued to open mail addressed to both citizens and foreign residents and routinely monitored internet communications, including email (see section 2.a.).

As described in COI reports, the regime employed informer systems against political opponents and perceived national security threats.

The regime reportedly punished large numbers of family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives. Numerous reports confirmed that the regime continued to punish entire families placed arbitrarily on a list of alleged terrorists by freezing their assets. The EIP interviewed a resident of Ain al-Fijeh who reported being arbitrarily detained for six months by regime security forces after several of his family members fled to Idlib.

g. Abuses in Internal Conflict

The regime, proregime militias such as the National Defense Forces, opposition groups, the SDF, and violent extremist groups, such as the HTS and ISIS, as well as foreign terrorist groups such as Hizballah, continued to participate in armed combat throughout the year. The governments of Russia, Turkey, and Iran participated in armed combat and supported armed groups operating in the country.

The most egregious human rights violations and abuses stemmed from the regime’s systemic disregard for the safety and well-being of its people. These abuses manifested themselves in a complete denial of citizens’ ability to choose their government peacefully, law enforcement authorities refusing to protect the majority of individuals from state and nonstate violence, and the use of violence against civilians and civilian institutions. Numerous reports, such as the September COI report, indicated the regime continued to arbitrarily and unlawfully kill, torture, and detain persons, notably including refugees and IDPs who voluntarily returned to regime-controlled territories. Attacks impacting and destroying civilian infrastructure including schools, hospitals, places of worship, water and electrical stations, bakeries, markets, civil defense force centers, densely populated residential areas, and houses were common throughout the country.

As of September there were more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in neighboring countries and 6.6 million IDPs. UNHCR also estimated that as of September there were 11.1 million persons in need of humanitarian assistance, including 1.1 million in hard-to-reach, besieged areas.

Killings: The regime reportedly committed the majority of killings throughout the year (see section 1.a.).

Media sources and human rights groups varied in their estimates of how many persons had been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011; the United Nations stopped publishing estimates of the death toll in 2016. The SNHR estimated more than 220,000 civilians were killed within that time, and other groups attributed more than 550,000 killings to the conflict. This discrepancy was largely due to the large number of missing and disappeared Syrians, whose fates remained unknown. The SNHR attributed 91 percent of civilian deaths to regime and proregime forces.

Regime and proregime forces reportedly attacked civilians in hospitals, residential areas, schools, and settlements for IDPs and Palestinian refugee camps throughout the year; these attacks included bombardment with barrel bombs. These forces used the massacre of civilians, as well as their forced displacement, rape, starvation, and protracted sieges that occasionally forced local surrenders, as military tactics.

Reports from NGOs and a July COI report indicated that in Idlib, hostilities escalated from the beginning of the year until a ceasefire was brokered between Turkey and Russia in March. Before the ceasefire began, airstrikes by regime and proregime forces caused hundreds of civilian deaths in Idlib.

The SNHR reported the regime and Russian forces carried out at least 490 cluster munition attacks from 2011 to December, comprising the majority of cluster munition attacks during that period. The group also reported that attacks launched by these forces resulted in the deaths of at least 1,030 civilians, including 382 children and 217 women, as well as injuries to approximately 4,350 civilians. For example, the SNHR reported that six civilians, including a child and four women, were killed when a fixed-wing warplane believed to be Russian fired missiles on Jedraya on February 5.

Aerial and ground offensives throughout the demilitarized zone destroyed civilian infrastructure including “deconflicted” hospitals, schools, marketplaces, and farmlands. In April the BOI found it “highly probable” that the regime carried out attacks that impacted three health-care facilities, a school, and a refuge for children in northwest Syria, despite these locations coordinates being deconflicted between the United Nations and Russia.

In July the COI issued a report investigating incidents in northwest Syria, finding that the regime and proregime forces were responsible for 534 of the 582 confirmed civilian casualties since the beginning of the year. The COI reported that it had “reasonable grounds to believe that proregime forces committed the war crimes of deliberately attacking medical personnel and facilities by conducting airstrikes,” as well as “the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians,” and “that members of progovernment forces, and in particular the 25th Special Mission Forces Division, committed the war crime of pillage.” The COI further stated that proregime forces likely committed “the war crime of spreading terror among the civilian population.” The report noted that “progovernment forces carried out attacks consistent with clear patterns previously documented by COI, affecting markets and medical facilities,” and that “attacks on schools have emerged as one of the most vicious patterns in the Syrian conflict.”

On January 5, as proregime forces intensified efforts to recapture the town of Ariha, six aircraft launched munitions that damaged a water distribution point where civilians had gathered to collect water, in addition to damaging residential homes, a kindergarten, and a mosque, killing at least 13 civilians. On March 5, far from the front lines of the contested area, proregime forces conducted airstrikes on a poultry farm in Marat Misrin where displaced civilians had been relocated, killing at least 16 civilians, including eight women and three children. The COI indicated in its July report there was reason to believe that Russian Aerospace Forces conducted two consecutive airstrikes in this incident.

Although no use of prohibited chemical weapons was reported during the year, in April the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe the regime was responsible for three chemical weapons attacks on Ltamenah in 2017. These attacks preceded the more deadly sarin attack in nearby Khan Shaykhun less than two weeks later and were part of the same concerted campaign of terror perpetrated by the Assad regime.

Additionally, the PHR, SNHR, and other NGOs concluded that Russia and the regime targeted humanitarian workers, such as the Syria Civil Defense (The White Helmets) as they attempted to save victims in affected communities. In February the *Washington Post* reported that airstrikes and shelling killed aid and medical workers attempting to help civilians in Idlib. Most of the 10,000 aid workers in the area were displaced by the regime’s offensive in the first few months of the year, including 15 percent of the International Rescue Committee staff.

There were numerous reports of deaths in regime custody, notably at the Mezzeh airport detention facility, Military Security Branches 215 and 235, and Sednaya Prison, by execution without due process, torture, and deaths from other forms of abuse, such as malnutrition and lack of medical care (see section 1.a.). In most cases authorities reportedly did not return the bodies of deceased detainees to their families.

Violent extremist groups were also responsible for killings during the year. The SNHR attributed 17 civilian deaths to the HTS in the first half of the year. The HTS arbitrarily detained 19-year-old Mohammed Tano in late 2019 and in April condemned him to death for blasphemy, although activists suspected the HTS executed him after discovering texts criticizing HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. In May the online news outlet *Middle East Eye* reported the HTS killed a civilian in Idlib while using force to disperse a protest. In June the SNHR reported the HTS executed a university student by firing squad at a detention center after detaining him during a raid on his home. There was no trial, and his family was never given his body for burial. In July the COI reported the HTS launched antiregime attacks that affected civilians in regime-controlled areas. On January 21, a nine-year-old boy was killed by a mortar attack reportedly originating from the HTS-controlled part of Aleppo. The COI’s July report found “there are reasonable grounds to believe that members of the HTS committed the war crimes of murder and of passing sentences and carrying out executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court as well as the war crime of cruel treatment, ill-treatment and torture.”

The Wilson Center reported in September that ISIS was responsible for 640 attacks in Syria from October 2019 through June, often targeting civilians, persons suspected of collaborating with security forces and groups that ISIS deemed to be apostates.

Russia, Iran, and Turkey were involved in fighting in Syria during the year. The COI blamed Russia for aerial attacks in northwest Syria throughout the year. Eyewitnesses, a local human rights monitor, and local media reported that an attack carried out by Turkish forces or TSOs on October 16 struck a rural area killing a young boy and injuring others in Ain Issa; the circumstances of this event are in dispute. Official Turkish government sources reported responding to enemy fire on the date in question and in the area that corresponds with this event, with four to six People’s Protection Units (YPG) fighters reportedly “neutralized,” a term Turkish authorities used to mean killed, captured, or otherwise removed from the battlefield. The Turkish government considers the YPG to be the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. According to media, YPG forces have also reportedly fired on Turkish and TSO forces following Turkey’s October 2019 incursion into northeast Syria and in November and December 2020 during fighting in the vicinity of Ayn Issa, including near civilian infrastructure.

During the year TSOs were allegedly engaged in extrajudicial killings. For example, in May the STJ reported TSO Sultan Murad detained and executed Ibrahim al-Youssef, after a failed extortion attempt. In August the Kurdish National Council and the Afrin Post reported that TSO Faylaq al-Sham militants killed a 63-year-old Kurdish Yezidi civilian, Nouri Jammou Omar Sharaf, following an unsuccessful extortion attempt. Human rights monitors also reported several instances of individuals dying under torture in Firqat al-Hamza and SNA Military Police detention. During the year the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), to whom the SNA nominally reports, announced the establishment of a commission within its Ministry of Defense to investigate serious allegations of abuses. The SIG sentenced one SNA fighter to a life sentence for the 2019 killing of the Kurdish politician and secretary general of the Future Syria political party, Hevrin Khalaf, and a range of other

SNA abuses committed during Operation Peace Spring; however, the SIG did not publicly announce this sentencing and subsequently reduced the sentence to 10 years. Human rights and documentation groups expressed a lack of confidence in the credibility of the SIG’s accountability effort.

COI, the SNHR, and other human rights groups reported multiple car bombings, other attacks involving improvised explosive devices, and intra-TSO fighting in TSO-held areas in northern Syria, which resulted in dozens of civilian deaths, and noted the rise in such attacks during the year. While there was generally a lack of attribution for these attacks, Turkish government officials alleged most attacks were carried out by groups affiliated with PKK.

Abductions: Regime and proregime forces reportedly were responsible for the vast majority of disappearances during the year (see section 1.b.).

Armed groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected regime affiliates, journalists, and activists.

The COI noted in its March and September reports that the HTS routinely detained and tortured civilians in territory in northwest Syria under HTS control. According to the COI and HRW, the HTS detained political opponents, perceived regime supporters and their families, journalists, activists, and humanitarian workers critical of the HTS or perceived as affiliated with other rebel groups at odds with the HTS in Idlib. The SNHR reported that approximately 2,115 persons remained in HTS detention as of August, among them political and media activists, 45 of whom reportedly died in detention. For example, the SNHR reported that in August the HTS abducted a pharmacist and director of the midwifery institute in Idlib, Mustafa al-Jazi. His fate remained unknown.

Although ISIS no longer controlled significant territory, the fate of 8,143 individuals forcibly disappeared by ISIS since 2014 remained unknown, according to the SNHR. Among those abducted in northern Iraq were an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, who ISIS reportedly transferred to Syria and sold as sex slaves, forced into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave as “gifts” to ISIS commanders. The Yezidi organization Yazda reported more than 3,000 Yezidi women and children had since escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity, but almost 2,800 remained unaccounted for.

There were no updates in the kidnappings of the following persons believed to have been abducted by ISIS, armed opposition, or unidentified armed groups during the conflict: activists Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazim Hamadi; religious leaders Bolous Yazigi and Yohanna Ibrahim; and peace activist Paulo Dall’Oglio.

The COI reported the SDF continued to arrest civilians, including women and children, and hold them in detention without charge. In March the SNHR reported that since the start of the crisis in 2011, more than 3,000 Syrians, including 169 women and 602 children, were still missing after being detained or forcibly disappeared by the SDF. The SNHR and STJ reported instances of SDF fighters detaining civilians, including journalists, human rights activists, opposition party members, and persons affiliated with the SNA. In some instances the location of the detainees remained unknown. For example, the SNHR reported the SDF detained Muhammad Muhsen al-Ibrahim in March 2019 in a raid on his home in Deir Ez-Zour. The SDF did not provide information on al-Ibrahim’s status until September, when the family learned of his death in detention. The SDF continued to allow the ICRC into detention facilities to monitor and report on conditions. In September the SDF stated they had begun to investigate all charges against their forces outlined in the COI report.

The COI, HRW, Amnesty International, and Syrian human rights monitors reported multiple first-hand accounts of kidnapping and arbitrary detention by TSOs, including the groups Sultan Murad, Faylaq al-Sham, Firqat al-Hamza, and al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and the SNA’s Military Police. The SNHR attributed 185 arbitrary detentions and abductions in the first half of the year to TSO-aligned SNA fighters. The COI, STJ, the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), and other monitors documented a trend of TSO kidnappings of women in Afrin, where some women remained missing for years.

According to the COI, areas where TSOs were active continued to face instability due to increased infighting between the groups during the year. Victims of abductions by TSOs were often of Kurdish or Yezidi origin or were activists openly critical of TSOs or persons perceived to be affiliated with the People’s Protection Units (YPG) or previous Kurdish administration of Afrin. The Afrin Human Rights Organization, the VDC, and Iraqi media outlet *Rudaw* reported the February 27 kidnapping of Areen Dali Hassan, a Yezidi woman, in Afrin City. Areen was believed to be in Firqat al-Hamza captivity in the “Castle Prison” in al-Basuta in Afrin District. In June, Families for Freedom and a coalition of 11 other human rights groups reported that fighting between Jaysh al-Islam and Firqat al-Hamza resulted in the deaths of three civilians and led to the discovery of at least eight women in degrading conditions in Firqat al-Hamza captivity.

The COI reported in September on the transfer of Syrians detained by SNA fighters to the custody of the government of Turkey, indicating collaboration and joint operations between the Turkish government and the SNA which could, if any members were shown to be acting under the effective

command and control of Turkish forces, “entail criminal responsibility for commanders who knew or should have known about the crimes, or failed to take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent or repress their commission.” The Turkish government denied these reports and denied responsibility for Syrian opposition or TSO conduct but broadly acknowledged the need for investigations and accountability related to such reports and relayed that the Turkish-supported SNA had established mechanisms for investigation and discipline. The government of Turkey stated its own conduct in the operation was consistent with international law and that the military took care to avoid civilian casualties throughout.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to the COI and reliable NGO reports, the regime and its affiliated militias consistently engaged in physical abuse, punishment, and torture of opposition fighters and civilians (see sections 1.c. and 1.d.). Numerous organizations and former detainees reported that nearly all detainees in regime detention experienced physical abuse and torture at some point during their detention.

As of March the SNHR estimated parties of the conflict committed at least 11,523 incidents of sexual violence since March 2011. Regime forces and affiliated militias were responsible for the vast majority of these offenses—more than 8,000 incidents in total—including more than 800 incidents inside detention centers and more than 400 against girls younger than age 18 years. The SNHR also reported 3,487 incidents of sexual violence by ISIS and 12 incidents by the SDF. Numerous NGOs reported that persons in areas retaken by regime forces remained reluctant to discuss events occurring in these areas due to fear of reprisals. The Syrian Initiative to Combat Sexual and Gender-based Violence reported most sexual and gender-based abuses by regime forces during the year occurred at checkpoints or in detention (see section 1.d.). In August the SNHR and the All Survivors Project issued a joint statement to the UN Human Rights Council on the prevalence of sexual abuse and rape as a tool of torture used by the regime against men and boys.

There were also reports of armed opposition groups engaging in physical abuse, punishment, and treatment equivalent to torture, primarily targeting suspected regime agents and collaborators, proregime militias, and rival armed groups. Between 2011 and June, the SNHR attributed more than 43 deaths due to torture to armed opposition groups, more than 26 to the HTS (including one child), and more than 33 to ISIS, including a child and 13 women. The SNHR attributed 52 deaths to torture by Kurdish forces.

The SDF was also implicated in several instances of torture, with the SNHR reporting the group used torture as a means of extracting confessions during interrogations. On January 29, the SNHR reported it had received notification that Fajr Ibrahim died in custody allegedly as the result of medical negligence, after being detained by the SDF in February. The SNHR also reported detainee Mua’th al-Muhammad al-Kal from Raqqa, reportedly detained in February for transferring money to ISIS-affiliated family members, asserted that while imprisoned, he was left in solitary confinement without food and was subjected to beating and torture for several days. The SNHR also reported video surveillance obtained in March showed severe overcrowding in Ghwayran Prison. In September the COI reported several instances of repeated torture of detainees in SDF prisons. The SDF continued to implement protocols to ensure torture was not used as an interrogation technique and initiated investigations into specific incidents of torture presented by the COI. In September the SDF also stated they had begun to investigate all charges against their forces outlined in the COI report.

According to the SNHR’s June report on the use of torture in Syria, the HTS continued to carryout detentions and kidnappings of local political opponents and journalists. In June the SNHR reported that members of HTS arrested human rights activist Omar al-Eis and kept him in solitary detention for 126 days. Al-Eis reported hearing sounds of torture every day at the Uqab Prison. In April, HTS fighters abducted Hassan Salh Abs from Sarmin. On April 20, his family received information he had been tortured to death at an HTS detention center. Human rights groups continued to report that the HTS officially denounces secularism and routinely detained and tortured journalists, activists, and other civilians in territory it controlled who were deemed to be have violated the group’s stringent interpretation of sharia. Employing sharia courts, the HTS reportedly denied those arrested the opportunity to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention, permitted confessions obtained through torture, and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families. Media organizations also documented the forced conversion of Druze and Alawite civilians by the HTS, detaining or disappearing those refusing to comply.

The COI, OHCHR, and human rights groups reported that, since January 2018, TSO groups had allegedly participated in the torture and killings of civilians in Afrin and, since October 2019, in the areas taken during Turkish Operation Peace Spring. The COI reported in March, “there are reasonable grounds to believe that members of armed groups under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army committed the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, ill-treatment and torture” in Afrin and the Operation Peace Spring area. The COI in September reported the torture and rape of minors in TSO detention and “corroborated widespread arbitrary deprivation of liberty perpetrated by various Syrian National Army brigades in the Afrin and Ra’s al-Ayn regions.” The Violations Documentation Center and local media reported in July that SNA-affiliated Firqat al-Hamza

had tortured Mahmoud Hassan Omri, a 27-year-old man with a disability, to death in Ras al-Ayn after forcibly disappearing him in November 2019 when he sought to return to his home, which had been seized by the group.

Child Soldiers: Several sources documented the continued unlawful recruitment and use of children in combat. The UN special representative on children and armed conflict reported in its annual report that at least 820 children had been recruited as child soldiers during the reporting period. According to HRW and the COI, numerous groups and factions failed to prevent the enlistment of minors, while elements affiliated with the SDF, the SNA, as well as ISIS and the HTS, actively recruited children as fighters. The COI reported that armed groups “recruited, trained, and used children in active combat roles.”

The UN General Assembly’s annual *Children and Armed Conflict* report to the secretary-general reported the recruitment and use of 820 children (765 boys, and 55 girls) in the conflict between January and December of 2019. According to the report, 798 of the children served in combat roles and 147 were younger than age 15. The report attributed 283 verified cases to SDF-affiliated groups; 245 to the HTS; 191 to Free Syria Army-affiliated groups; 26 to Ahrar al-Sham; one to ISIS; 17 to Jaysh al-Islam; three to Nur al-Din al-Zanki; and 10 to regime forces.

In January the COI reported it continued receiving reports of young boys, some considered by persons who saw them to not be older than age 13, observed at checkpoints staffed by the regime and associated militia in Hama. One interviewee explained to the COI how one of the boys, age 16, joined the regime military forces after ISIS killed his brothers.

The COI continued to receive reports of children being recruited by HTS in Idlib governorate, as proregime forces intensified their offensive. In Aleppo boys between 13 to 17 years of age joined armed groups. One interviewee described the case of a 14-year-old boy who joined Ahrar al-Sham in 2018 along with his older brother to participate in operation “Olive Branch” and served at a checkpoint in Aleppo.

In 2019 the SDF signed an action plan with the UN secretary-general’s special representative for children and armed conflict to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, as well as to identify and separate boys and girls within the group’s ranks and to put in place protection and disciplinary measures related to child recruitment and use. The SDF continued to implement an order banning the recruitment and use in combat of anyone younger than 18, ordering the military records office to verify the ages of those currently enlisted, requiring the release of any conscripted children to their families or to educational authorities in northeast Syria, and ending salary payments. The SDF order also prohibited using children for spying, to act as guards, or to deliver supplies to combatants. The order makes military commanders responsible for appointing ombudsmen to receive complaints of child recruitment and ordered punitive measures against commanders who failed to comply with the ban on child recruitment. During the year the SDF screened out more than 250 minors seeking to join its ranks and continued to develop and refine an age screening mechanism in coordination with the United Nations.

The United Nations confirmed the SDF had demobilized 86 minors (56 girls and 30 boys) during the year and, working with the SNES, returned these minors to their families for community-based reintegration, pursuant to UN requests. In 2019 also the SDF demobilized 86 children.

The SDF and SNES in August announced the establishment of the Complaints Mechanism, a key component of the child soldier demobilization initiative, which provides parents a single SNES and SDF point of contact to inquire about, identify, and demobilize minors from the SDF. The United Nations reported 10 children were recently returned to their parents through this mechanism.

In August the SDF publicly announced it would cease its use of schools for military purposes; the United Nations subsequently confirmed the SDF withdrew from 16 of 28 schools it identified as under SDF use for military purposes, as well as from two other schools.

Also see the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: In January the COI reported, “warring parties have looted and vandalized educational establishments and used schools for military purposes, including as depots, barracks, sniper posts, temporary bases or launching sites. Repeated attacks on educational facilities combined with the complete breakdown of the education system have minimized the opportunities for children to resume their studies and improve prospects for their future.” The COI further concluded it had documented “instances where Government forces deliberately attacked schools, and therefore committed the war crimes of deliberately targeting a civilian object and deliberately attacking civilians.”

In cities where sieges ended and the regime regained control, the SNHR reported the regime and its allies frequently imposed new collective measures to punish communities by restricting humanitarian access; looting and pillaging; expropriating property; extorting funds; engaging in

arbitrary detentions and widespread forcible conscription; detaining, disappearing, or forcibly displacing individuals; engaging in repressive measures aimed at silencing media activists; and destroying evidence of war crimes.

The United Nations estimated that violence in Idlib displaced more than 900,000 persons—80 percent women and children—since December 2019.

According to Amnesty International and numerous other human rights and humanitarian groups, those trapped in the area were crammed into close quarters with IDPs and vulnerable to the regime’s and Russia’s campaign of aerial bombardments impacting civilian infrastructure. The White Helmets documented more than 2,200 airstrikes in January and February, including 32 cluster-bomb attacks and 605 barrel bombs in Idlib, along with Aleppo and Hama. UN officials throughout the year voiced grave concerns about the situation for civilians caught in the Idlib siege. Cross-border assistance remained the only means of reaching persons in and around Idlib.

HRW and various media organizations found that the regime implemented a policy and legal framework to manipulate humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funding to benefit itself, punish perceived opponents, and reward those loyal to it. The regime regularly restricted humanitarian organizations’ access to communities in need of aid, selectively approved humanitarian projects, and required organizations to partner with vetted local actors to ensure that the humanitarian response was siphoned centrally through and for the benefit of the state apparatus, at the cost of preventing aid from reaching the population unimpeded. Organizations continued to report that entities such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) faced difficulties accessing areas retaken by the regime.

The regime frequently blocked access for humanitarian assistance and removed items such as medical supplies from convoys headed to civilian areas, particularly areas held by opposition groups. *Foreign Policy* and HRW reported that the regime had weaponized humanitarian assistance, only allowing the delivery of assistance to loyalist-held areas through regime organizations such as the Syria Trust for Development, which was led by Bashar Assad’s wife, or the SARC.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), more than half of all health facilities were closed or partially functioning, and hundreds of health-care workers had been killed during the conflict. NGOs and media outlets documented repeated and continuing attacks on health facilities and other civilian infrastructure in northwest Syria perpetrated by regime and Russian forces. From March 2011 through March 2020, the PHR reported 595 attacks on at least 350 separate health facilities and documented the killing of 923 medical personnel, with regime and Russian forces responsible for 91 percent of attacks (301 by regime forces and 229 by either Russian or regime forces). In Idlib medical professionals continued to be injured and killed throughout the year. The COI concluded this pattern of attack strongly suggested proregime forces systematically targeted medical facilities and that such acts constituted war crimes. The BOI further reported that Russian and regime forces launched attacks that devastated medical facilities and networks in Idlib. In June, Russia informed the United Nations it would no longer participate in the UN deconfliction mechanism.

The COI reported that the above incidents followed a well documented pattern of attacks with humanitarian and civilian impact conducted by the regime, with Russian and Iranian support.

The 2018 COI report further detailed a practice in which, after hostilities ceased and local truces were implemented, regime and proregime forces required certain individuals from the previously besieged areas to undergo a reconciliation process as a condition to remain in their homes. The option to reconcile reportedly often was not offered to health-care personnel, local council members, relief workers, activists, dissidents, and family members of fighters. In effect, the COI assessed, the “reconciliation process” induced displacement in the form of organized evacuations of those deemed insufficiently loyal to the regime and served as a regime strategy for punishing those individuals. Various sources continued to report cases during the year in which the regime targeted persons who agreed to reconciliation agreements (see sections 1.b., 1.d., and 1.e.).

Regime forces and armed groups also pillaged and destroyed property, including homes, farms, and businesses of their perceived opponents.

The COI and NGOs such as PAX indicated that, taken together with steps such as the enactment of Law No. 10 on the confiscation of unregistered properties, the forcible displacements may fit into a wider plan to strip those displaced of their property rights, transfer populations, and enrich the regime and its closest allies (see section 1.e.).

While the government pushed forward to recapture areas around the M5 highway at the beginning of the year, armed groups such as the HTS launched counterattacks against government positions in Idlib, Aleppo. These attacks, although much fewer and smaller in scale than those by the regime and proregime forces, caused some civilian casualties and destruction of civilian infrastructure. The COI reported that on February 5, armed groups fired three rockets impacting a densely populated area in the government-controlled Hamdaniya neighborhood of western Aleppo. This attack damaged a

hospital and residential home and killed a family of five. The COI described this attack as “indiscriminate, indirect artillery fire of area weapons into densely populated civilian areas.” The COI also reported the HTS sought to intimidate the local population from expressing dissent by beating and detaining participants during protests throughout the year. In April, HTS forces killed a man while breaking up a demonstration. The COI stated the HTS detained journalists and NGO workers for weeks on the basis of their criticism of HTS activities and that HTS had shot and killed detainees trying to escape during airstrikes on the Qasimiah detention facility on January 17. The COI reported other HTS abuses as well, including looting in Atarib, attempts to control and interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and preventing large numbers of girls from attending school.

The COI and international and Syrian NGOs such as the STJ reported throughout the year that TSO groups had engaged in the systematic looting, seizure, appropriation, and destruction of civilian homes and religious sites, particularly those of Kurds and Yezidis, resulting in significant civilian displacement. TSOs also reportedly continued to bar returnees from their properties in northern Syria and informed them that their real or presumed support for the YPG precluded them from living in the area. Confiscated homes were marked with graffiti and then used by armed groups for military purposes or as housing for fighters and their families. According to numerous organizations, including STJ, VDC, and *al-Monitor*, TSOs, including Firqat al-Hamza and Sultan Murad, seized agricultural machinery, water tanks, and other private property in Ras al-Ayn and sold it back to owners. Firqat al-Hamza and Ahrar al-Sharqiya reportedly seized homes and clinics and then charged their owners rent. In August and September, the COI, media organization The Syria Report, and the STJ reported the Syrian Interim Government’s Ras al-Ayn Local Council seized two private properties owned by Kurdish residents in Ras al-Ayn and that the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, a Turkish NGO, then converted the properties into religious centers without compensating the owners, despite petitions made to the Council. The governor of Turkey’s Sanliurfa Province delivered remarks in June for the ribbon-cutting ceremony of one of these converted sites.

TSOs continued to interfere with and disrupt water access to parts of northeast Syria despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The OHCHR reported in September that “Turkish-affiliated armed groups, which control the Alouk water pumping station in Ras al-Ain, have repeatedly disrupted water supplies, affecting access to water for up to one million individuals in the city of al-Hassakeh and surrounding areas, including extremely vulnerable displaced persons in various IDP camps.” According to NGO reporting, Alouk Station was offline for 55 percent of the time between October 2019 and August due to TSO denial of access to maintenance crews and deliberate shutdown of the station. Turkish authorities alleged the frequent shutdowns resulted from inadequate power being provided to the plant from a power generation facility in SDF-controlled area, a claim disputed by the United Nations and NGOs present in northeast Syria.

The COI reported in September that SNA members looted and destroyed religious and archaeological sites in the Afrin region, including Yezidi shrines and graveyards, as well as sites protected by UNESCO. In April the NGO Ezdina documented the destruction of Yezidi shrines in Afrin by TSOs, including the shrines of Sheikh Junaid, Sheikh Hussein, Gilkhan, and Sheikh Rikab. In July the NGO *Bellingcat* reported on the destruction of multiple Yezidi shrines and graves in Afrin, including Qibar cemetery. These organizations also reported cases where TSOs imposed restrictions on religious freedom and harassed Yezidis.

In August, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported continued abuses against the Christian community, including the detention of Radwan Mohammad by Faylaq al-Sham in Afrin on charges of apostasy after he refused to hand his school building over to the group for conversion into an Islamic school. In July, Faylaq al-Sham also prevented Mohammad from preparing his wife’s body for burial due to her faith.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

While the constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, the regime severely restricted this right, often terrorizing, abusing, arresting, or killing those who attempted to exercise this right.

Freedom of Speech: The law contains a number of speech offenses that limit the freedom of expression, including provisions criminalizing expression that, for example, “weakens the national sentiment” in times of war or defames the president, courts, military, or public authorities. For example, Article 376 imposes a one- to three-year sentence on anyone who criticizes or insults the president. The regime routinely characterized expression as illegal, and individuals could not criticize the regime publicly or privately without fear of reprisal. The regime also stifled criticism by invoking provisions of law prohibiting acts or speech inciting sectarianism. The regime monitored political meetings and relied on informer networks.

Freedom of Press and Media, Including Online Media: Although the law provides for the “right to access information about public affairs” and bans “the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists,” press and media restrictions outweighed freedoms. The law contains many restrictions

on freedom of expression for the press, including provisions criminalizing, for example, the dissemination of false or exaggerated news that “weakens the spirit of the Nation” or the broadcasting abroad of false or exaggerated news that “tarnishes” the country’s reputation. The law bars publication of content that affects “national unity and national security,” harms state symbols, defames religions, or incites sectarian strife or “hate crimes.” The law further forbids publication of any information about the armed forces. The law criminalizes the publication on social media of false news that causes fear and panic, with prison sentences up to 15 years with hard labor. Article 287 stipulates that the broadcasting of false or exaggerated news abroad that undermines the prestige of the state or its financial standing is subject to a minimum prison sentence of six months in addition to a fine. Article 309 similarly criminalizes the broadcasting of false news or claims that undermine confidence in the “state currency.”

The regime continued to exercise extensive control over local print and broadcast media, and the law imposes strict punishment for reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to regime requests. The SJAC noted accounts of the regime pressuring doctors, journalists, and patients to suppress reporting on the spread of COVID-19, including one journalist at a state-owned media outlet who was barred from reporting on COVID-19 deaths.

The SNHR reported that only print publications whose reporting promoted and defended the regime remained in circulation. Books critical of the regime were illegal. The regime owned some radio stations and most local television companies, and the Ministry of Information closely monitored all radio and television news broadcasts and entertainment programs for adherence to regime policies. Despite restrictions on ownership and use, citizens widely used satellite dishes, although the regime jammed some Arab networks.

Violence and Harassment: Regime forces reportedly detained, arrested, and harassed journalists and other writers for works deemed critical of the state as well as journalists associated with networks favorable to the regime. Harassment included intimidation, banning individuals from the country, dismissing journalists from their positions, and ignoring requests for continued accreditation. YouTubers and other citizen journalists were routinely detained, intimidated, and tortured, both by the regime and extremist groups. According to NGO reports, the regime routinely arrested journalists who were either associated with or writing in favor of the opposition and instigated attacks against foreign press outlets throughout the country. Reporters without Borders (RSF) reported that regime authorities in May arbitrarily detained Nada Mashraki, who worked as an editor for *Latakia News Network*, after she published a story about judicial corruption. Mashraki was released a month later.

RSF reported that 28 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants remained imprisoned, although it did not specify by whom. The reason for arrests was often unclear. The SNHR reported that at least 350 citizen journalists remained missing as of May after being arbitrarily detained by the regime since the beginning of the conflict.

The regime and, to a lesser extent, the HTS and other armed groups routinely targeted and killed both local and foreign journalists, according to the COI, Freedom House, and the Committee to Project Journalists (CPJ). The CPJ estimated that at least 137 journalists were killed since 2011, while the SNHR estimated more than 707 citizen journalists were killed between March 2011 and May. The SNHR attributed 573 of citizen journalist deaths from 2011 and through 2020 to regime and proregime forces, including 47 individuals who died due to torture.

During the year the CPJ and RSF documented the deaths of two journalists by Russian forces. A Russian airstrike killed Abdul Nasser Haj Hamdan on February 20 while he was documenting the bombardment of Ma’arat al-Naasan in northern Idlib governorate; another Russian airstrike killed freelance photographer Amjad Anas Aktalati on February 4 in Ariha, south of Idlib.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: According to Freedom House, the regime enforced censorship of news sites and social media content more stringently in regime-controlled areas. The regime continued to block circumvention tools used to access censored content, internet security software that can prevent state surveillance, and other applications that enable anonymous communications. Censorship was implemented by the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE) and private internet service provider (ISP) using various commercially available software programs. Decisions surrounding online censorship lacked transparency, and ISPs did not publicize the details of how blocking was implemented or which websites were banned. The STE was known to implement blocking decisions; it was unclear which state agency typically made the decisions, although security and intelligence bodies were believed to play an important role. Websites covering politics, minorities, human rights, foreign affairs, and other sensitive topics were censored or blocked outright.

The regime continued to control strictly the dissemination of information, including on developments regarding fighting between the regime and the armed opposition and the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and prohibited most criticism of the regime and discussion of sectarian problems, including religious and ethnic minority rights and tensions. The Ministries of Information and Culture censored domestic and foreign publications prior to circulation or importation, including

through the General Corporation for the Distribution of Publications, and prevented circulation of content determined critical or sensitive. The regime prohibited publication or distribution of any material security officials deemed threatening or embarrassing to the regime. Censorship was usually more stringent for materials in Arabic.

Local journalists reported they engaged in extensive self-censorship on subjects such as criticism of the president and his family, the security services, Alawite religious groups, and the spread of COVID-19.

According to National Public Radio, despite regime censorship and a campaign of intimidation to suppress information about the spread of COVID-19, medical workers reported the virus was spreading quickly across the country and that government hospitals were overwhelmed. In August the SJAC noted accounts of the regime pressuring doctors, journalists, and patients to suppress reporting on the spread of COVID-19. The media publication *Syria in Context* reported in August that recent satellite imagery showed significant burial activity in Najha cemetery in Damascus, indicating the regime was burying thousands of individuals who died due to COVID-19; Najha is the same cemetery where the regime allegedly buried hundreds of thousands of victims of its notorious detention centers. Doctors in regime hospitals reportedly listed “pneumonia” as the cause of death on death certificates for individuals suspected to have died from COVID-19.

RSF reported journalists fled the advance of regime troops, fearing imprisonment as soon as the regime controlled the province. RSF assessed the regime’s persecution of journalists for more than nine years justified their fears, especially as many of them covered the uprising since its outset, helped to document the regime’s human rights violations, and risked severe reprisals if identified with the opposition.

Libel/Slander Laws: The law criminalizes libel, slander, insult, defamation, and blasphemy, and the regime continued to use such provisions to restrict public discussion and to detain, arrest, and imprison journalists perceived to have opposed the regime.

National Security: The regime regularly cited laws protecting national security to restrict media criticism of regime policies or public officials.

Nongovernmental Impact: According to Freedom House, media freedom varied in territory held by armed opposition groups, but local outlets were typically under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction. The CPJ and RSF reported that extremist opposition groups, such as the HTS, detained, tortured, and harassed journalists (see section 1.g.) and posed a serious threat to press and media freedoms. The COI described HTS targeting female media workers for harassment and threatening detention, causing them to resort to self-censoring and hiding their cameras. In August the SNHR reported that media activist Fayez al-Dgheim was forcibly disappeared by police affiliated with the HTS and that his family had not heard from him, nor were they officially notified of his arrest.

The SNHR also documented HTS members’ assault of 13 citizen journalists on June 10, while they were reporting on the passage of a Russian-Turkish joint patrol on the Latakia-Aleppo International Road. HTS members attacked them and smashed their equipment, accusing them of filming women during their media coverage.

Internet Freedom

In areas controlled by the regime, the STE served as both an ISP and a telecommunications regulator, providing the government with tight control over the internet infrastructure. Independent satellite-based connections were prohibited but heavily employed across the country, given the damage that information and communication technology infrastructure sustained as a result of the conflict. ISPs and cybercafes operating in regime-controlled areas required a permit from the STE and another security permit from the Interior Ministry, and cybercafe owners were required to monitor customers and record their activities. The regime controlled and restricted access to the internet and monitored email and social media accounts.

Freedom House continued to report that self-censorship was widespread online and had increased in recent years as users contended with threats and violent reprisals for critical content. Sensitive topics included President Assad, former president Hafez Assad, the military, the ruling Baath Party, or influential government officials. Other sensitive subjects including religious and ethnic tensions and corruption allegations related to the president’s family were also off-limits. Individuals and groups reportedly could not express views via the internet, including by email, without prospect of reprisal. The regime applied the law to regulate internet use and prosecuted users. The anticybercrime law (also referred to as Law No. 9), which increased penalties for cybercrimes, including those affecting the freedom of expression, remained in place. It also mandates the creation of specialized courts and delegates specialized jurists for the prosecution of cybercrimes in every governorate. RSF asserted the law served as a tool for the regime to threaten online freedom. The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression reported the regime monitored citizens affiliated with the opposition and worked to undermine their activities online. Citizen journalists and

other civilians were frequently targeted based on their digital activism. Hackers linked to Iran continued cyberattacks against Syrian opposition groups to disrupt reporting on human rights violations.

The regime interfered with and blocked internet service, text messages, and two-step verification messages for password recovery or account activation. The regime employed sophisticated technologies and hundreds of computer specialists for filtering and surveillance purposes, such as monitoring email and social media accounts of detainees, activists, and others. The regime did not prosecute or otherwise take action to restrict the security branches’ monitoring and censoring of the internet. The security branches were largely responsible for restricting internet freedom and access; internet blackouts often coincided with security force attacks. According to Freedom House, the regime blocked websites for human rights groups as well as those criticizing the regime’s political, cultural, social, or economic policies; criticizing specific high-level government officials; or mobilizing persons to protest or resist the regime, including those linked to the network of activists known as the Local Coordination Committees.

The regime also restricted or prohibited internet access in areas under attack. Regime officials obstructed connectivity through their control of key infrastructure, at times shutting the internet and mobile telephone networks entirely or at particular sites of unrest. There was generally little access to state-run internet service in besieged areas unless users could capture signals clandestinely from rooftops near regime-controlled areas. Some towns in opposition-held areas had limited internet access via satellite connections. Some activists reportedly gained access independently to satellite internet or through second- and third-generation (2G and 3G) cellular telephone network coverage.

The regime expanded its efforts to use social media, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, to spread proregime propaganda and manipulate online content, including false content aiming to undermine the credibility of human rights and humanitarian groups. The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), a group of proregime computer hackers, frequently launched cyberattacks on websites to disable them and post proregime material. In addition to promoting hacking and conducting surveillance, the regime and groups it supported, such as the SEA, reportedly planted spyware and other malware in at least 71 android applications using COVID-19 lures to target human rights activists, opposition members, and journalists. Local human rights groups blamed regime personnel for instances in which malware infected activists’ computers. Arbitrary arrests raised fears that authorities could arrest internet users at any time for online activities perceived to threaten the regime’s control, such as posting on a blog, tweeting, commenting on Facebook, sharing a photograph, or uploading a video.

Observers also accused the SEA of slowing internet access to force self-censorship on regime critics and diverting email traffic to regime servers for surveillance.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The regime restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Authorities generally did not permit employees of academic institutions to express ideas contrary to regime policy. The Ministry of Culture restricted and banned the screening of certain films.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The regime limited freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution provides for the freedom of peaceful assembly, but the law grants the government broad powers to restrict this freedom.

The Ministry of Interior requires permission for demonstrations or any public gathering of more than three persons. As a rule the ministry authorized only demonstrations by the regime, affiliated groups, or the Baath Party, orchestrating them on numerous occasions. Freedom House reported that residents of Sweida used Facebook to call for protests in January against corruption and deteriorating economic conditions in regime-held areas under the campaign slogan “We Want to Live.” Further protests in Sweida prompted a regime crackdown in June, in which regime security forces and proregime militias assaulted and arbitrarily detained protesters.

According to allegations by human rights activists and press reporting, at times the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the YPG suppressed freedom of assembly in areas under their control. Throughout the year inhabitants in Deir Ez-Zour protested against alleged corruption by SDF officials, lack of access to basic services, reports of forced conscription of youths into the SDF, and lack of information on the status of men and boys detained by the SDF due to suspected affiliations to ISIS. Protests generally occurred throughout northeast Syria on a variety of issues without interference from local authorities; however, the SNHR reported SDF members opened fire on a protest in Mheimida, killing Najm Hussein al-Atwan, and the SDF arbitrarily detained 28 civilians in al-Sh-heil and al-Hawayij following protests in those areas. The SDF reported arresting, trying, and convicting one member of its forces for opening fire and killing an unarmed demonstrator.

During the year the HTS repressed civil society activity and public protests. Media outlets and the SNHR reported HTS militants shot and killed Saleh al-Mrie in April when they opened fire on civilians protesting the opening of a commercial border to link territory controlled by the HTS with regime-held areas.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for the freedom of association, but the law grants the regime latitude to restrict this freedom. The regime required prior registration and approval for private associations and restricted the activities of associations and their members. The executive boards of professional associations were not independent of the regime.

None of the local human rights organizations operated with a license, due to the regime’s practice of denying requests for registration or failing to act on them, reportedly on political grounds, but some functioned under organizations that had requisite government registration. The regime continued to block the multiyear effort by journalists to register a countrywide media association, but journalists in exile continued working to empower the role of freedom of the press and expression through the Syrian Journalist Association, an independent democratic professional association established in 2012 by Syrians in exile.

The regime selectively enforced the 2011 decree allowing the establishment of independent political parties, permitting only proregime groups to form official parties (see section 3). According to local human rights groups, opposition activists declined to organize parties, fearing the regime would use party lists to target opposition members.

Under laws that criminalize membership and activity in illegal organizations as determined by the regime, security forces detained individuals linked to local human rights groups, prodemocracy student groups, and other organizations perceived to be supporting the opposition, including humanitarian groups.

The HTS and other armed groups also restricted freedom of association in areas they controlled. The SNHR reported al-Qa’ida-linked Hurras al-Din kidnapped Khaled Mdallala, a prominent activist and director of the Sham al-Khair Association, on February 24 as part of its effort to repress and restrict civil society organizations operating in Idlib. TSOs reportedly detained residents based on their affiliation with the SNES (see section 1.d.).

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement

The constitution provides for freedom of movement “within the territories of the state unless restricted by a judicial decision or by the implementation of laws,” but the regime, the HTS, and other armed groups restricted internal movement and travel and instituted security checkpoints to monitor such travel throughout the regions under their respective control. Regime attacks on Idlib governorate restricted freedom of movement and resulted in documented cases of death, starvation, and severe malnutrition, while fear of death and regime retribution resulted in mass civilian displacement and additional breakdowns in service provision and humanitarian assistance (see section 1.g.).

In-country Movement: In areas outside of regime control, regime forces blocked humanitarian access, leading to severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care, and death. The violence, coupled with significant cultural pressure, severely restricted the movement of women in many areas. Additionally, the law allows certain male relatives to place travel bans on women.

The regime expanded security checkpoints into civilian areas to monitor and limit movement, and the COI reported regime security officials detained, forcibly conscripted, and extorted residents at checkpoints, at times impeding civilians’ access to health care and education. Regime forces used violence to prevent protests, enforce curfews, target opposition forces, and, in some cases, prevent civilians from fleeing besieged towns. The regime also barred foreign diplomats, including delegations from the United Nations and the OPCW IIT, from visiting most parts of the country and rarely granted them permission to travel outside Damascus. The consistently high level and unpredictability of violence severely restricted movement throughout the country.

In areas they controlled, armed opposition groups and terrorist groups, such as the HTS, also restricted movement, including with checkpoints (see section 1.g.). The COI reported in July that HTS systematically interfered with women’s freedom of movement, harassing unaccompanied women and denying them access to public events under threat of detention. The HTS also attempted to control and interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance, according to COI reporting.

While the Syrian Democratic Council and the SDF generally supported IDP communities in northeast Syria, in June, HRW reported that the SNES was restricting the movement of more than 10,000 foreign women and children suspected to be affiliated with ISIS in a separate section of the al-Hol IDP camp. The COI reported in January that many of the children in al-Hol camp lacked birth registration papers, in some cases because parents were unable to register, jeopardizing their rights to a nationality, hindering family reunification processes, and increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

Foreign Travel: While citizens have the right to travel internationally, the regime denied passports and other vital documents, based on the applicant's political views, association with opposition groups, or ties to geographic areas where the opposition dominated. The regime also imposed exit visa requirements and routinely closed the Damascus airport and border crossings, claiming the closures were due to violence or threats of violence. Syrian passports cost approximately \$800, which many Syrians found prohibitive. Additionally, the regime often banned travel by human rights or civil society activists, their families, and affiliates. Many citizens reportedly learned of the ban against their travel only when authorities prevented them from departing the country. The regime reportedly applied travel bans without explanation or explicit duration, including in cases when individuals sought to travel for health reasons. The regime comprehensively banned international travel of opposition members, often targeting any such individual who attempted to travel. Local media and human rights groups repeatedly stated that opposition activists and their families hesitated to leave the country, fearing attacks and arbitrary detention at airports and border crossings.

The regime also often refused to allow some citizens to return, while millions more Syrians who fled to neighboring countries reportedly feared retribution by the regime should they return. In July the regime implemented a new policy of charging returning refugees a substantial fee to enter the country. The press-monitoring organization *Middle East Monitor* reported this fee presented a barrier to refugee returns. On September 5, Lebanese government officials announced that 17-year-old Zainab Mohammed Al-Ibrahim, a Syrian refugee, had died while she was trapped between the two countries because she could not afford the fee needed to enter into Syria. A regime immigration official stated the regime's policy was to refuse entry to any Syrian unable to pay the fee and that the Lebanese government did not accept Syrians back once they crossed the border.

Women older than 18 have the legal right to travel without the permission of male relatives, but a husband may file a request with the Interior Ministry to prohibit his wife from departing the country. Syrians born abroad to parents who fled the conflict and remained in refugee camps generally did not have access to Syrian citizenship documents. The regime allowed Syrians living outside of the country whose passports had expired to renew their passports at consulates. Many who fled as refugees, however, feared reporting to the regime against which they may have protested or feared the regime could direct reprisals against family members still in the country.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Violence and instability continued to be the primary cause for displacement, much of it attributed to Syrians fleeing regime and Russian aerial attacks, including almost one million persons who were displaced in Idlib during the first three months of the year—the largest single displacement of the conflict. Years of fighting and evacuations repeatedly displaced persons, with each displacement further depleting family assets. The UN estimated more than 6.6 million IDPs were in the country and 2.6 million children and 4.7 million individuals were in need of acute assistance. It also included 1.3 million new IDPs and 184,921 IDP return movements since the start of the year. In July the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recorded 32,170 spontaneous IDP returnees in several areas across the country. Approximately 25,000 of these returns were recorded within and between Aleppo and Idlib governorates. Spontaneous IDP return movements in areas other than northwest Syria remained very low.

The crisis inside the country continued to meet the UN criteria for a level three response—the classification for response to the most severe, large-scale humanitarian crises. UN humanitarian officials reported most IDPs sought shelter with host communities or in collective centers, abandoned buildings, or informal camps.

The regime generally did not provide sustainable access to services for IDPs, offer IDPs assistance, facilitate humanitarian assistance for IDPs, or provide consistent protection. The regime forcibly displaced populations from besieged areas and restricted movement of IDPs. The regime did not promote the safe, voluntary, and dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs and, in some cases, refused to allow IDPs to return home. According to PAX and Impunity Watch, the regime systematically dispossessed Syrians perceived to threaten the regime's authority of their property, presenting an increasingly grave impediment to the return of refugees and IDPs (see section 1.e., Property Restitution). The Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity reported in July that regime repression had led the vast majority of Syrian refugees, as well as IDPs displaced from regime-held areas, to fear returning to their homes.

Syrians with a backlog of service bills or back taxes who were unable to pay their debt to the regime were given a brief window to leave their property, while intelligence forces summarily seized homes and businesses of some former opposition members.

The regime routinely disrupted the supply of humanitarian aid, including medical assistance, to areas under siege as well as to newly recaptured areas (see section 1.g.). NGOs operating from Damascus faced regime bureaucratic obstruction in attempting to provide humanitarian assistance. UN agencies and NGOs sought to increase the flow of assistance to opposition-held areas subject to regime offensives to meet growing humanitarian needs, but the regime increasingly restricted cross-line operations originating from Damascus. In January the Russian government, by threatening to veto resolution drafts maintaining existing crossings for UN cross-border humanitarian assistance measures, forced through a UN Security Council resolution that reduced UN cross-border humanitarian assistance from four crossings to two, cutting off northeast Syria from crucial health-related humanitarian assistance. The provision of cross-border assistance by the United Nations and its humanitarian partners was further restricted to one border crossing with Turkey in July after the Russian and Chinese governments vetoed a resolution that would have extended authorization for cross-border assistance through both Turkey crossings into northwest Syria and reinstated the Iraq crossing into northeast Syria. Turkey placed restrictions on the provision of humanitarian and stabilization aid to areas of northeast Syria from Turkey. Jordan's borders remained closed since mid-March due to COVID-19 prevention measures.

Assistance reached some hard-to-reach locations, but the regime continued to hinder UN and NGO access, and the regime secured control over many of these areas during the year. Humanitarian actors noted that access remained a pressing concern for service delivery in areas controlled by the regime and nongovernmental actors.

Humanitarian conditions in Rukban remained dire due to severely constrained access to the area. The regime and Russian government routinely refused to approve UN requests for assistance delivery. The most recent UN convoy to Rukban took place in October 2019. A UN mission, including a regime-requested health assessment, planned for April 21, was rejected by the Russian government. The convoy was expected to deliver a combination of food, nutritional supplements, and nonfood items to 2,300 households in Rukban. Conditions in the camp remained poor with few deliveries of food and basic provisions permitted by the regime. Rukban residents continued to depart the settlement in small groups, and several hundred returned to regime-held areas since late March, according to UN sources, including at least several dozen who departed for urgent health services not available in the camp. The regime did not permit those who departed to return to the camp.

Armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as the HTS also impeded humanitarian assistance to IDPs. The COI and humanitarian actors reported HTS attempted to control and interfere with the delivery of aid and services in areas of the northwest, including by demanding a share of food packages, cash payments, and housing developments intended for others. For example the HTS reportedly detained and harassed SARC personnel on March 14, occupying offices in Idlib and Ariha and removing and destroying SARC-owned materials. NGOs continued to report bureaucratic challenges in working with the HTS Salvation Government, which impeded delivery of services in the camps.

The SDF and SDC generally facilitated the safe and voluntary return of IDPs during the year, particularly to Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa.

f. Protection of Refugees

The regime inconsistently cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern. The regime provided some cooperation to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

UNHCR maintained that conditions for refugee return to the country in safety and dignity were not yet in place and did not promote, nor facilitate, the return of refugees to the country during the year. Throughout the year, however, the regime and Russian government maintained a diplomatic campaign to encourage the return of refugees to Syria. The Russian government reportedly sought to use the return of Syrian refugees as a means to secure international donations for Syria reconstruction efforts, and in November the regime and Russia held a conference on refugee returns in Damascus. The conference did not address any of the root causes that caused persons to flee the regime or offer actionable steps to secure the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of refugees, and was organized without input or support from an internationally recognized authority on humanitarian or refugee issues.

The COI described in January interviews with Syrian parents who relocated their children, particularly boys, outside of Syria to protect them from violence. In one such case, an estimated 500 unaccompanied children, almost all boys older than 14, were registered in 2013 in a refugee camp near the Syrian border.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: Both regime and opposition forces reportedly besieged, shelled, and otherwise made inaccessible some Palestinian refugee camps, neighborhoods, and sites, which resulted in severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care and humanitarian assistance, and civilian deaths. The Damascus governorate council announced in June a plan to confiscate the property of households in the Palestinian Yarmouk Camp as part of a reconstruction project, displacing Palestinian residents unable to prove ownership of their property. Muammar Dakak, director of technical studies in the Damascus governorate council, announced in July that Yarmouk residents would not receive alternative housing.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the regime has established a system for providing protection to refugees. UNHCR and UNRWA were able to maintain limited protection areas for refugees and asylum seekers, although violence hampered access to vulnerable populations. In coordination with both local and international NGOs, the United Nations continued to provide such individuals essential services and assistance.

Employment: The law does not explicitly grant refugees, except for Palestinians, the right to work. While the regime rarely granted non-Palestinian refugees a work permit, many refugees found work in the informal sector as guards, construction workers, street vendors, and in other manual jobs.

Access to Basic Services: The law allows for the issuance of identity cards to Palestinian refugees and the same access to basic services provided to citizens. The regime also allowed Iraqi refugees access to publicly available services, such as health care and education, but residency permits were available only to those refugees who entered the country legally and possessed a valid passport, which did not include all refugees. The lack of access to residency permits issued by authorities exposed refugees to risks of harassment and exploitation and severely affected their access to public services. The approximately 23,600 non-Palestinian refugees and asylum seekers in the country faced growing protection risks, multiple displacements, tightened security procedures at checkpoints, and difficulty obtaining required residency permits, all of which resulted in restrictions on their freedom of movement.

g. Stateless Persons

Following the 1962 census, approximately 150,000 Kurds lost their citizenship. A legislative decree had ordained the single-day census in 1962, and the government executed it unannounced to the inhabitants of al-Hasakah governorate. Anyone not registered for any reason or without all required paperwork lost their Syrian citizenship from that day onward. The government at the time argued it based its decision on a 1945 wave of alleged illegal immigration of Kurds from neighboring states, including Turkey, to Hasakah, where they allegedly “fraudulently” registered as Syrian citizens. In a similar fashion, authorities recorded anyone who refused to participate as “undocumented.” Because of this loss of citizenship, these Kurds and their descendants lacked identity cards and could not access government services, including health care and education. They also faced social and economic discrimination. Stateless Kurds do not have the right to inherit or bequeath assets, and their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricted their travel to and from the country.

In 2011 President Assad decreed that stateless Kurds in Hasakah who were registered as “foreigners” could apply for citizenship. It was unclear how many Kurds benefited from the decree. UNHCR reported that approximately 40,000 of these Kurds remained unable to obtain citizenship. Likewise, the decree did not extend to the approximately 160,000 “unregistered” stateless Kurds. The change from 150,000 to 160,000 reflected an estimated increase in population since the 1962 census.

Children derive citizenship solely from their father. Because women cannot confer nationality on their children, an unknown number of children whose fathers were missing or deceased due to the continuing conflict were at risk of statelessness. Mothers could not pass citizenship to children born outside the country, including in neighboring countries hosting refugee camps. Children who left the country during the conflict also experienced difficulties obtaining identification necessary to prove citizenship and obtain services.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Although the constitution provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, citizens were not able to exercise that ability. Outcomes reflected underlying circumstances of elections that impeded and coerced the will of the electorate.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Parliamentary elections, which introduced primaries and a two-round election system, were held in July with 1,656 candidates vying for 250 seats. The regime claimed there were no reported violations or infringements, but the *Washington Post* reported that the elections resulted in reports of alleged corruption, even within the regime loyalist community, including fraud, ballot-stuffing, and political interference. Media outlets described low voter turnout, despite compulsory voting requirements enacted under Law No. 8 for military and law enforcement officials, reportedly

intended to bolster support for regime-affiliated candidates. Syrians residing outside the country were not permitted to vote, and those in areas outside regime control often had no or limited access to voting locations. Reports of citizens being pressured to vote were common, and voter privacy was not guaranteed. Polling staff reportedly handed out ballots already filled in with Baath Party candidates. According to observers, the results were rigged in favor of the ruling Baath Party, and losing candidates leveled allegations of fraud, ballot-stuffing, and political interference. Most candidates were either from the Baath Party or associated with it.

In 2017 Kurdish authorities held elections for leaders of local “communes” in an effort to establish new governing institutions to augment regional autonomy. The regime does not recognize the Kurdish enclave or the elections. The Kurdish National Council (a rival to the PYD) called for a boycott, terming the elections “a flagrant violation of the will of the Kurdish people.” Media outlets reported the election was monitored by a small group of foreign experts, including a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which runs the Kurdish Regional Government in neighboring Iraq.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution provides that the Baath Party is the ruling party and assures that it has a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers’ and women’s groups. The Baath Party and nine smaller satellite political parties constituted the coalition National Progressive Front. The Baath-led National Progressive Front dominated the 250-member People’s Council, holding 183 of the 250 parliament seats following the 2020 election. The law allows for the establishment of additional political parties but forbids those based on religion, tribal affiliation, or regional interests.

Membership in the Baath Party or close familial relationships with a prominent party member or powerful regime official assisted in economic, social, and educational advancement. Party or regime connections made it easier to gain admission to better schools, access lucrative employment, and achieve greater advancement and power within the government, military, and security services. The regime reserved certain prominent positions, such as provincial governorships, solely for Baath Party members.

The regime showed little tolerance for other political parties, including those allied with the Baath Party in the National Progressive Front. The regime harassed parties, such as the Communist Union Movement, Communist Action Party, and Arab Social Union. Police arrested members of banned Islamist parties, including Hizb ut-Tahrir (HTS) and the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria. Reliable data on illegal political parties was unavailable.

The PYD generally controlled the political and governance landscape in northeast Syria while allowing for Arab representation in local governance councils. The PYD, however, maintained overall control of critical decisions made by local councils. PYD-affiliated internal security forces at times reportedly detained and forcibly disappeared perceived opponents.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Although there were no formal restrictions, cultural and social barriers largely excluded women from decision-making positions. The government formed after the 2014 election included three female members: Vice President Najah al-Attar, Minister of State for Environmental Affairs Nazira Serkis, and Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Rima al-Qadiri. Women accounted for 13 percent of the members of parliament elected in July. There were Christian, Druze, and Armenian members of parliament but no Kurdish representatives. Alawites, the ruling religious minority, held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities as well as more authority than the majority Sunni sect did.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

Although the law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, the regime did not implement the law effectively. Officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were numerous reports of regime corruption during the year. Corruption continued to be a pervasive problem in police forces, security services, migration management agencies, and throughout the regime.

Corruption: Due to the lack of free press and opposition access to instruments of government and media, there was almost no detailed information about corruption, except petty corruption. Freedom House reported that to secure its support base, the regime regularly distributed patronage in the form of public resources and implemented policies to benefit favored industries and companies. Authorities reportedly awarded government contracts and trade deals to allies such as Iran and Russia, possibly as compensation for political and military aid. Basic state services and humanitarian aid reportedly were extended or withheld based on a community’s demonstrated political loyalty to the regime, providing additional leverage for bribe-seeking officials. PAX and Impunity Watch reported in March that the regime had developed “an intricate legal framework that allows it to expropriate anyone it considers a threat or an inconvenience,” assessing the regime’s intent was to dispossess and permanently displace its opponents, rewarding individuals loyal to the regime in the process.

President Bashar Assad’s cousin, Rami Makhoul, reportedly was known as “Mr. 5 Percent.” As late as 2011, Makhoul reportedly controlled 60 percent of the country’s economy. The Panama Papers, Swissleaks, and most recently the Paradise Papers chronicled his money-laundering and sanctions-busting activities. In May, Makhoul issued several statements criticizing corruption within the regime and outlining allegations of extortion and arbitrary detention targeting his companies. His actions did not create any moves to address systemic corruption in the regime.

Human rights lawyers and family members of detainees stated that regime officials in courts and prisons solicited bribes for favorable decisions and provision of basic services.

Despite a bread crisis, the regime often refused to allow private bakers in areas previously under opposition control to operate. For example in Homs a private baker Muhammad Nour reported he was unable to obtain approval to operate from the National Security Office in Damascus even after offering a bribe of approximately \$11,150 to one of the heads of the security branches in Homs.

Financial Disclosure: There are no public financial disclosure laws for public officials.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The regime restricted attempts to investigate alleged human rights violations, criminalized their publication, and refused to cooperate with any independent attempts to investigate alleged violations. The regime did not grant permission for the formation of any domestic human rights organizations. Nevertheless, hundreds of such groups operated illegally in the country.

The regime was highly suspicious of human rights NGOs and did not allow international human rights groups into the country. The regime normally responded to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by denying the facts of the case or by reporting that the case was still under investigation, the prisoner in question had violated national security laws, or, if the case was in criminal court, the executive branch could not interfere with the judiciary. The regime denied organizations access to locations where regime agents launched assaults on antigovernment protesters or allegedly held prisoners detained on political grounds.

The regime continued to harass domestic human rights activists by subjecting them to regular surveillance and travel bans, property seizure, detention, torture, forcible disappearance, and extrajudicial killings (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees). In September the SJAC issued a report analyzing regime documentation that detailed coordination between regime intelligence officials and Syrian embassy staff in Saudi Arabia and Spain, corroborating long-standing NGO reporting that the regime maintained a global surveillance apparatus to track dissidents’ activities both inside and outside of the country systematically.

Terrorist groups, including the HTS, violently attacked organizations and individuals seeking to investigate human rights abuses or advocating for improved practices. The SDF and other opposition groups occasionally imposed restrictions on human rights organizations or harassed individual activists, in some cases subjecting them to arbitrary arrest.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The regime continued to deny access for the COI, mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to document and report on human rights violations and abuses in the country. The regime did not cooperate fully with numerous UN and other multilateral bodies, resulting in restrictions on access for humanitarian organizations, especially to opposition-controlled areas. In addition the regime did not allow the OPCW IIT to access the sites under investigation in Ltamenah, as required by UN Security Council Resolution 2118.

The UNWGEID continued to request information from the regime on reported cases of enforced disappearances, but it failed to respond. The regime also ignored UNWGEID’s requests for an invitation to visit the country, dating back to 2011. The regime similarly ignored UN and international community calls for unhindered access for independent, impartial international humanitarian and medical organizations to the regime’s detention centers.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape and sexual assault of women, men, and children, but the regime did not enforce the law effectively. Rape is punishable by imprisonment and hard labor for at least 15 years (at least nine years in mitigating circumstances), which is aggravated if the perpetrator is a government official, religious official, or has legitimate or actual authority over the victim. Male rape is punishable by imprisonment for up to three years. The law specifically excludes spousal rape, and it reduces or suspends punishment if the rapist marries the victim. The victim’s family sometimes agreed to this arrangement to avoid the social stigma attached to rape.

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies, NGOs, and media outlets characterized rape and sexual violence as endemic, underreported, and uncontrolled in the country (see sections 1.c. and 1.g.). The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) reported fear of rape was one of the most prominent reasons Syrians fled the country. The COI reported rape and sexual violence continued to play a prominent role in the conflict and was used to terrorize and punish women, men, and children perceived as associated with the opposition. Regime officials in the intelligence and security services perpetrated sexual and gender-based violence with impunity, according to a February report by the Syrian Initiative to Combat Sexual and Gender-based Violence. There were instances, comparatively far fewer, of armed opposition groups reportedly raping women and children. Victims often feared reporting rape and sexual abuse, according to TIMEP, due to the stigma associated with their victimization. HRW reported in July that gay and bisexual men, transgender women, and nonbinary individuals were targeted for sexual violence.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, but it stipulates that men may discipline their female relatives in a form permitted by general custom. According to a February report by the Syrian Initiative to Combat Sexual and Gender-based Violence, violence against women and children was pervasive and increased due to the conflict. Victims did not report the vast majority of cases. In August UNFPA reported an increase in domestic violence cases, especially in Hassia camp, Hassia industrial camp, Hussainiya camp, Wadi Majar farms, and Shamsin. UNFPA and local human rights groups reported women and children were at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as early marriage, child labor, and other forms of exploitation largely due to the economic impact of COVID-19. Security forces consistently treated violence against women as a social rather than a criminal matter. Observers reported that when some abused women tried to file a police report, police did not investigate their reports thoroughly, if at all, and that in other cases police officers responded by abusing the women.

The COI reported in September that armed groups under the SNA detained women and girls, particularly those of Kurdish descent, and subjected them to rape and sexual violence—causing severe physical and psychological harm at the individual level, as well as at the community level, owing to stigma and cultural norms related to “female honor.” On two occasions, in an apparent effort to humiliate, extract confessions and instill fear within male detainees, SNA Military Police officers reportedly forced male detainees to witness the rape of a minor. On the first day, the minor was threatened with being raped in front of the men, but the rape did not proceed. The following day, the same minor was gang-raped, as the male detainees were beaten and forced to watch.

In previous years several domestic violence centers operated in Damascus; the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor licensed them. Local NGOs reported, however, that many centers no longer operated due to the conflict. There were no known government-run services for women outside Damascus. According to human rights organizations, local coordination committees and other opposition-related groups offered programs specifically for protection of women. These programs were not available throughout the country, and none reported reliable funding.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: The law permits judges to reduce penalties for murder and assault if the defendant asserts an “honor” defense, which often occurred. The regime kept no official statistics on use of this defense in murder and assault cases and reportedly rarely pursued prosecution of so-called honor crimes. Reporting from previous years indicated that honor killings increased following the onset of the crisis in 2011. According to a July HRW report, members of the LGBTI community faced death threats from family members when they learned about their sexual orientation and feared being subjected to honor crimes. NGOs working with refugees reported families killed some rape victims inside the country, including those raped by regime forces, for reasons of honor.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of gender but does not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment. The regime did not enforce the law effectively. Sexual harassment was pervasive and uncontrolled. TIMEP reported that women who were widowed, divorced, or separated from their husbands frequently faced sexual harassment from their employers and landlords.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of involuntary sterilization, but OCHA reported in July an increase in coerced abortions in northwest Syria in response to increasing psychosocial stress, poverty, and lack of employment opportunities, compounded by the effects of COVID-19. Former detainees also reported cases of the regime forcing women in regime detention to have abortions.

Discrimination: Although the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Criminal, family, religious, personal status, labor, nationality, inheritance, retirement, and social security laws discriminate against women. For example, if a man and a woman separately commit the same criminal act of adultery, then by law the woman’s punishment is double that of the man. The law generally permits women to initiate divorce proceedings against their spouses, but the law does not entitle a divorced woman to alimony in some cases. Under the law a divorced mother loses the right

to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach age 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family. Personal status laws applied to Muslims are derived from sharia and are discriminatory toward women. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case. While the constitution provides the “right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work,” the law does not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work. Women cannot pass citizenship to their children. The regime’s interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, courts usually granted Muslim women half the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities, male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less. If they refuse to provide this support, women have the right to sue.

The law provides women and men equal rights in owning or managing land or other property, but cultural and religious norms impeded women’s property rights, especially in rural areas.

The Commission for Family Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor share responsibility for attempting to accord equal legal rights to women. Governmental involvement in civil rights claims, including cases against sexual discrimination, was stagnant, and most claims went unanswered.

Women participated in public life and in most professions, including the armed forces, although UNFPA reported the conflict, and more recently COVID-19, reduced women’s access to the public sphere. Various sources observed that women constituted a minority of lawyers, university professors, and other professions.

The HTS reportedly placed similar discriminatory restrictions on women and girls in the territories it controlled. For example, the International Center for the Study of Radicalism reported in September 2019 that the HTS forced women and girls into marriage, imposed a dress code on women and girls, banned women and girls from wearing makeup, required that women and girls be accompanied by a *mahram* or male member of their immediate family, forbade women from speaking with unrelated men or hosting men who were not their husband, forbade widows from living alone, and instructed that classrooms be segregated. The HTS maintained all-female police units to support the Hisbah (religious police force) in enforcing these regulations, sometimes violently, among women. Summary punishments for infractions ranged from corporal punishment, such as lashing, to execution.

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship solely from their father. In large areas of the country where civil registries were not functioning, authorities often did not register births. The regime did not register the births of Kurdish noncitizen residents, including stateless Kurds (see section 2.g.). Failure to register resulted in deprivation of services, such as diplomas for high school-level studies, access to universities, access to formal employment, and civil documentation and protection.

Education: The regime provided free public education to citizen children from primary school through university. Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of six and 12. Enrollment, attendance, and completion rates for boys and girls generally were comparable. Noncitizen children could also attend public schools at no cost but required permission from the Ministry of Education. While Palestinians and other noncitizens, including stateless Kurds, could generally send their children to school and universities, stateless Kurds were ineligible to receive a degree documenting their academic achievement.

Combatants on all sides of the conflict attacked or commandeered schools. The COI reported that repeated attacks on schools, the repurposing of education facilities for military purposes, and the killing and displacement of qualified teachers continued to hamper the ability of children to receive an education and had a disproportionate impact on girls, as well as children displaced from their homes and those with disabilities. Approximately 2.1 million children were out of school (among more than 2.6 million internally displaced Syrian children, including refugees and others in the diaspora); another 1.3 million were at risk for leaving school. In October, UNICEF reported 4.7 million children were in need of humanitarian assistance.

The COI reported the regime allegedly refused to acknowledge school certificates provided by students in grades nine and above, forcing thousands of students to retake exams to enroll in public schools.

The HTS reportedly imposed its interpretation of sharia on schools and discriminated against girls in the territories it controlled (see section 1.g.). The group imposed dress codes on female teachers and pupils, according to the COI, and the STJ reported in April the HTS threatened any woman who failed to abide by the dress code with dismissal. The COI also reported the HTS prevented large numbers of girls from attending school. The COI reported access to education in al-Hol IDP camp remained insufficient.

The SDF ended the use of 12 schools previously converted for military purposes, handing them over to local councils to increase children’s access to education. In areas previously liberated by the SDF from ISIS, more than 526,250 students returned to classes in 741 refurbished buildings and schools previously used or destroyed by ISIS. Many school buildings required extensive repairs, sometimes including clearance of explosive remnants of the war, and administrators required assistance to obtain basic supplies for learning. The SDF reportedly imposed penalties on SDF and school administration staff members who enrolled their children in schools that did not use their curriculum.

Child Abuse: The law does not specifically prohibit child abuse, but it stipulates that parents may discipline their children in a form permitted by general custom. In January the COI reported children, especially girls, were acutely vulnerable to violence and were victims of a broad array of abuses.

NGOs reported extensively on reports of regime and proregime forces, as well as the HTS, sexually assaulting, torturing, detaining, killing, and otherwise abusing children (see sections 1.a., 1.b., 1.c., and 1.g.). The HTS subjected children to extremely harsh punishment, including execution, in the territories it controlled. The regime did not take steps to combat child abuse.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal age for marriage is 18 for men and 17 for women. A boy as young as 15 or a girl as young as 13 may marry if a judge deems both parties willing and “physically mature” and if the fathers or grandfathers of both parties’ consent. STJ reported early and forced marriages were increasingly prevalent, particularly in Idlib. According to World Vision International reporting in July, children were increasingly vulnerable to early and forced marriage due to the extreme financial hardships placed upon families by the conflict, challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 and societal pressures. In August UNFPA reported an increase in early marriage cases, especially in Hassia camp, Hassia industrial camp, Hussainiya camp, Wadi Majar farms, and Shamsin.

Many families reportedly arranged marriages for girls, including at younger ages than typically occurred prior to the start of the conflict, believing it would protect them and ease the financial burden on the family.

There were instances of early and forced marriage of girls to members of regime, proregime, and armed opposition forces.

In previous years ISIS abducted and sexually exploited Yezidi girls in Iraq and transported them to Syria for rape and forced marriage (see section 1.g.). The Free Yezidi Foundation reported that Yezidi women and children remained with ISIS-affiliated families in detention camps due to the intense trauma from their treatment under ISIS and fear. In July, Amnesty International reported the stance of the Yezidi Supreme Spiritual Council and the legal framework of Iraq, which mandates that any child of a Muslim or “unknown” father be registered as Muslim, effectively denied Yezidi children born under ISIS a place within the Yezidi community and presented another barrier to Yezidi women’s return to their home communities.

From 2014 onwards ISIS began forcibly to marry women and girls living in territories under its control. Some of those forced to marry ISIS members were adults, including widows, but the vast majority of cases the COI documented revealed that girls between the ages of 12 and 16 were victims of forced marriage. Many women and girls reportedly were passed among multiple ISIS fighters, some as many as six or seven times within two years. The STJ reported that early and forced marriages were prevalent in areas under HTS control, and Syrians often failed to register their marriages officially due to fear of detention or conscription at regime checkpoints. In September the COI reported cases of SNA members in the Sultan Murad Brigade forcibly marrying Kurdish women in Afrin and Ra’s al-Ayn.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law stipulates penalties for those found guilty of certain forms of child abuse associated with trafficking crimes, including kidnapping and forced “prostitution,” both of which carry a penalty of up to three years in prison. The law considers child pornography a trafficking crime, but the punishment for child pornography was set at the local level with “appropriate penalties.” There were no known prosecutions for child pornography.

The age of sexual consent by law is 15 with no close-in-age exemption. Premarital sex is illegal, but observers reported authorities did not enforce the law. Rape of a child younger than 15 is punishable by not less than 21 years’ imprisonment and hard labor. There were no reports of regime prosecution of child rape cases.

A July report by OCHA on northwest Syria described significant increases in reports of families marrying off their daughters repeatedly for short periods of time in exchange for money, which constitutes sex trafficking.

Displaced Children: The population of IDP children increased for the ninth consecutive year due to the conflict, and a limited number of refugee children continued to live in the country. These children reportedly experienced increased vulnerability to abuses, including by armed forces (see sections 1.c., 1.g., 2.e., and 2.f.).

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

In June the *Jewish Chronicle* newspaper reported there were no known Jews still living in Syria. The Foundation for Jewish Heritage and the American Schools of Oriental Research’s Cultural Heritage Initiatives reported in May the condition of 62 percent of Jewish built heritage sites in Syria was poor, very bad, or beyond repair. The national school curriculum did not include materials on tolerance education or the Holocaust. There is no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards, except for Jews. Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons. The regime-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency frequently reported on the “Zionist enemy” and accused the Syrian opposition of serving “the Zionist project.”

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

While the law provides some protections for persons with disabilities, the regime did not make serious attempts to enforce applicable laws effectively during the year. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for assisting persons with disabilities, working through dedicated charities and organizations to provide assistance.

The destruction of schools and hospitals, most often by regime and proregime forces, limited access to education and health services for persons with disabilities, but government and nongovernment social care institutes reportedly existed for blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, and physical and intellectual disabilities. HRW reported COVID-19 made it increasingly difficult for persons with disabilities to receive medical care. The regime did not effectively work to provide access for persons with disabilities to information, communications, building, or transportation. In its November 2019 report, UNFPA detailed how both public and private spaces—including educational institutions, health-care services, and religious or cultural buildings—were inaccessible to the elderly and persons with disabilities, leading to further ostracism and deprivation. The European Asylum Support Office reported in February that access to facilities and support for persons with disabilities remained limited in Damascus and often nonexistent in other areas of the country. UNFPA further stated that persons with disabilities were sometimes denied aid, as they could not access it, and some distribution centers required presence in person. The COI’s July report noted the challenges facing persons with disabilities when attempting to flee conflict.

Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups

The regime actively restricted national and ethnic minorities from conducting traditional, religious, and cultural activities. The Kurdish population—citizens and noncitizens—faced official and societal discrimination and repression as well as regime-sponsored violence. In July the COI reported instances of the regime torturing, beating, and denying food and water to Kurdish civilians, at times interrogating them about their faith and ethnicity. Regime and proregime forces, as well as ISIS and armed opposition forces such as the Turkish-backed SNA, reportedly arrested, detained, tortured, killed, and otherwise abused numerous Kurdish activists and individuals as well as members of the SDF during the year (see section 1.g.). The COI reported a consistent, discernible pattern of abuses by SNA forces against Kurdish residents in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn, including “[c]ases of detentions, killings, beatings, and abductions, in addition to widespread looting and appropriation of civilian homes.”

The regime continued to limit the use and teaching of the Kurdish language. It also restricted publication in Kurdish of books and other materials, Kurdish cultural expression, and at times the celebration of Kurdish festivals. The Alawite community, to which President Assad belongs, enjoyed privileged status throughout the regime and dominated the state security apparatus and military leadership. Nevertheless, the regime reportedly also targeted Alawite opposition activists for arbitrary arrest, torture, detention, and killing. Extremist opposition groups targeted Alawite communities on several occasions for their perceived proregime stance.

The September COI report stated that women belonging to the Yezidi religious minority were detained and urged to convert to Islam during interrogation. The HTS violently oppressed and discriminated against all non-Sunni Arab ethnic minorities in the territories it controlled, and ISIS members continued to target ethnic and religious minorities in attacks (see section 1.g.).

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct, defined as “carnal relations against the order of nature” and punishable by imprisonment up to three years. In previous years police used this charge to prosecute LGBTI individuals. There were no reports of prosecutions under the law during the year, but the ARC Foundation and the Dutch Council for Refugees reported in June that LGBTI individuals believed they were not able to seek protection from the regime. NGO reports indicated the regime had arrested dozens of LGBTI persons since 2011 on charges such as abusing social values; selling, buying, or consuming illegal drugs; and organizing and promoting “obscene” parties. In July, HRW reported LGBTI persons were subject to “increased and intensified violence based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The sexual violence described included rape, sexual harassment, genital violence, threat of rape of themselves or female family members, and forced nudity by state and nonstate armed groups. This violence took place in various settings, including regime detention centers, checkpoints, central prisons, and within the ranks of the national army.”

Although there were no known domestic NGOs focused on LGBTI matters, there were several online networking communities, including an online LGBTI-oriented magazine. Human rights activists reported there was overt societal discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in all aspects of society.

The HTS reportedly detained, tortured, and killed LGBTI individuals in the territories they controlled (see section 1.g.). HRW reported instances of blackmail and harassment targeting the LGBTI community, many involving men who were perceived as gay.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons with HIV or AIDS, but human rights activists believed such cases were underreported, and the UN Development Program (UNDP) noted that stigma affected access to health care. The UNDP assessed COVID-19 presented barriers access to HIV testing and treatment. HRW reported in April that, due to restrictions on aid delivery to northeast Syria, Kurdish authorities repurposed test kits designed for HIV and polio to respond to the lack of available COVID-19 testing kits.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Yezidis, Druze, Christians, Shia, and other religious minorities were subject to violence and discrimination by ISIS, the HTS, the SNA, and other groups (see section 1.g.).

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

While the law provides for the right to form and join unions, conduct legal labor strikes, and bargain collectively, there were excessive restrictions on these rights. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination but also allows employers to fire workers at will.

The law requires all unions to belong to the regime-affiliated General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). The law prohibits strikes involving more than 20 workers in certain sectors, including transportation and telecommunications, or strike actions resembling public demonstrations. Restrictions on freedom of association also included fines and prison sentences for illegal strikes.

The law requires that government representatives be part of the bargaining process in the public sector, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor could object to, and refuse to register, any agreements concluded. The law and relevant labor protections do not apply to workers covered under civil service provisions, under which employees neither have nor are considered to need collective bargaining rights. The law does not apply to foreign domestic servants, agricultural workers, NGO employees, or informal-sector workers. There are no legal protections for self-employed workers, although they constituted a significant proportion of the total workforce. Foreign workers may join the syndicate representing their profession but may not run for elected positions, with the exception of Palestinians, who may serve as elected officials in unions.

The regime did not enforce applicable laws effectively or make any serious attempt to do so during the year. Penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination.

The Baath Party dominated the GFTU, and Baath Party doctrine stipulates that its quasi-official constituent unions protect worker rights. The GFTU president was a senior member of the Baath Party, and he and his deputy could attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. In previous years the GFTU controlled most aspects of union activity, including which sectors or industries could have unions. It also had the power to disband union governing bodies. Union elections were generally free of direct GFTU interference, but successful campaigns usually required membership in the Baath Party. Because of the GFTU's close ties to the regime, the right to bargain collectively did not exist in practical terms. Although the law provides for collective bargaining in the private sector, past regime repression dissuaded most workers from exercising this right.

There was little information available on employer practices with regard to antiunion discrimination. Unrest and economic decline during the year caused many workers to lose their private-sector jobs, giving employers the stronger hand in disputes.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law does not prohibit all forms of forced or compulsory labor, and such practices existed. The penal code does not define forced labor. The code states, “Those sentenced to forced labor will be strictly required to do work with difficulty on par with their sex, age, and may be inside or outside of the prison.” The penal code allows for forced labor as a mandatory or optional sentence for numerous crimes, such as treason. Authorities may sentence convicted prisoners to hard labor, although according to the International Labor Organization, authorities seldom enforced such a sentence. There was little information available on regime efforts to enforce relevant laws during the year or whether penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

Terrorist groups, including ISIS and the HTS, reportedly forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited some foreigners, including migrants from Central Asia, children, and Western women, to join them. Thousands of Yezidi women and girl captives of ISIS remained missing and were presumed to have been victims of sex trafficking and subjected to domestic servitude (see section 1.g.).

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law provides for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace and prohibits the worst forms of child labor. There was little publicly available information on enforcement of the child labor law. The regime did not make significant efforts to enforce laws that prevent or eliminate child labor. Independent information and audits regarding regime enforcement were not available. The minimum age for most types of nonagricultural labor is 15 or the completion of elementary schooling, whichever occurs first, and the minimum age for employment in industries with heavy work is 17. Parental permission is required for children younger than 16 to work. Children younger than 18 may work no more than six hours a day and may not work overtime or during night shifts, weekends, or on official holidays. The law specifies that authorities should apply “appropriate penalties” to violators; however, there was no information that clarified which penalties were appropriate to assess whether such penalties were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping. Restrictions on child labor do not apply to those who work in family businesses and do not receive a salary.

Child labor occurred in the country in both informal sectors, including begging, domestic work, and agriculture, as well as in positions related to the conflict, such as lookouts, spies, and informants. Conflict-related work subjected children to significant dangers of retaliation and violence.

Various forces, particularly terrorist groups and regime-aligned groups, continued to recruit and use child soldiers (see section 1.g.).

Organized begging rings continued to subject children displaced within the country to forced labor.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Although the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Labor and nationality laws discriminate against women. The labor law prohibits women from working during certain hours and does not allow women to work in jobs deemed hazardous, arduous, or morally inappropriate. Additional regulations prohibit women from working in several industries, including in mining, factories, agriculture, energy, and construction. While the constitution provides the “right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work,” the law does not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work. The Commission for Family Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor shared responsibility for attempting to accord equal legal rights to women. Governmental involvement in civil rights claims, including cases against sexual discrimination, was stagnant, and most claims went unanswered. Women participated in most professions, including the armed forces, although UNFPA reported that violence and lawlessness in many regions reduced women’s access to the public sphere. Various sources observed that women constituted a minority of lawyers, university professors, and other professions.

The constitution does not address discrimination based on sexual orientation, age, or HIV-positive status. Since the law criminalizes homosexuality, many persons faced discrimination due to their sexual orientation.

The law prohibits most forms of discrimination against persons with disabilities, including their access to education, employment, health services, and other state services, but the regime did not enforce these provisions effectively, and Article 130 (b) of the labor law allows an employer to decrease the wages of a person with disabilities whenever his productivity is substantially reduced as attested by a medical certificate. Discrimination occurred in hiring and access to worksites. The law seeks to integrate persons with disabilities into the workforce, reserving 4 percent of government jobs and 2 percent of private-sector jobs for them. Private-sector businesses are eligible for tax exemptions after hiring persons with disabilities.

Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to certain minority groups (see section 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law divides the public-sector monthly minimum wage into five levels based on job type or level of education, almost all of which fell below the World Bank’s poverty indicator. Benefits included compensation for meals, uniforms, and transportation. Most public-sector employees relied on bribery to supplement their income. Private-sector companies usually paid much higher wages, with lower-end wage rates semiofficially set by the regime and employer organizations. Many workers in the public and private sectors took additional manual jobs or relied on their extended families to support them.

The public-sector workweek was 35 hours, and the standard private-sector workweek was 40 hours, excluding meals and rest breaks. Hours of work could increase or decrease based on the industry and associated health hazards. The law provides for at least one meal or rest break totaling no less than one hour per day. Employers must schedule hours of work and rest such that workers do not work more than five consecutive hours or 10 hours per day in total. Employers must provide premium pay for overtime work. There was little information available on regime efforts to enforce relevant laws during the year or whether penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as fraud.

The regime set occupational safety and health standards. The law includes provisions mandating that employers take appropriate precautions to protect workers from hazards inherent to the nature of work. The law does not protect workers who chose to remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety from losing their employment.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for enforcing the minimum wage and other regulations pertaining to acceptable conditions of work. The Ministries of Health and of Social Affairs and Labor designated officials to inspect worksites for compliance with health and safety standards. Workers could lodge complaints about health and safety conditions with special committees established to adjudicate such cases. Wage and hour regulations as well as occupational health and safety rules do not apply to migrant workers, rendering them more vulnerable to abuse.

There was little information on regime enforcement of labor law or working conditions during the year. There were no health and safety inspections reported, and even previous routine inspections of tourist facilities, such as hotels and major restaurants, no longer occurred. The enforcement of labor law was lax in both rural and urban areas, since many inspector positions were vacant due to the conflict, and their number was insufficient to cover more than 10,000 workplaces.

Before the conflict began, 13 percent of women participated in the formal labor force, compared with 73 percent of men. During the year the unemployment rate for both men and women remained above 50 percent, with millions unable to participate in the workforce due to continued violence and insecurity. During the year UNFPA reported that local female employment participation increased in areas such as Damascus, Raqqa, and Daraa, as men were detained or killed.

Foreign workers, especially domestic workers, remained vulnerable to exploitative conditions. For example, the law does not legally entitle foreign female domestic workers to the same wages as Syrian domestic workers. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor oversees employment agencies responsible for providing safe working conditions for migrant domestic workers, but the scope of oversight was unknown. The continued unrest resulted in the large-scale voluntary departure of foreign workers as demand for services significantly declined, but violence and lawlessness impeded some foreign workers from leaving the country.

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