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SACD
Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

Additional information on withdrawal of protection for Syrian refugees

from Damascus and Rural Damascus in Denmark

April 2021



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Annex 1: List of reasons that assessment is flawed.

This Annex provides additional supporting detail and material on several of the primary concerns outlined in our letter. The SACD asserts that Damascus is not safe for refugee return, and challenges this assumption, as well as the methodology of the country of origin reporting underpinning this position. We also provide information that challenges the present application of this position in both policy and practice, through the failure to make individual case decisions in line with the cautionary principles, and without adequate acknowledgement of the individual risks faced by claimants. We lay out the inconsistencies in the Danish Immigration Ministry position in relation to Danish Foreign Policy, as well as that of joint EU policy. It is our hope that this information sheds new light on these issues and assists in providing context to our requests for further information.

Damascus and its countryside are not safe for return

Available data and information challenges the assumption that Damascus and Rural Damascus are safe for refugee return. A reduction in immediate conflict-related violence and atmospheric risks, has little bearing on the individual risks faced by the people of Damascus and Damascus countryside. Like all areas of Syria within the Syrian Regime's control, individuals face ongoing repression and insecurity at the hands of the Syrian regime, its security apparatus, and various militias, which control a dense net of security checkpoints in these areas, and engage in raids, arbitrary arrests and disappearances, forced recruitment into regime's military, kidnappings for ransom, harassment and other forms of inhumane treatment.

The Danish Immigration Service reports on the security situation in Damascus, most recently in October 2020, address only security incidents that involve shootings at checkpoints, Israeli attacks on military installations and incidents of unexploded ordinances. While they surely contribute to general insecurity, these reports fail to address any of the individual threats faced by those living in these areas. SACD research –which has been corroborated by research conducted by others¹– suggests that 75% of displaced persons primarily fear the security sector and the regime's repressive state-sponsored violence and see this as the primary barrier to return. As such, the country of origin reports fail to link drivers of displacement, conflict drivers, and individual protection risks, to the assessment of the security situation.

Annex 1 of this document lists multiple incidents of arrest and arbitrary detention in regime-controlled areas of the country, recorded between the time of the last report in October 2020 and the date of this letter. These incidents do not represent all such incidents, but serve to highlight the fact that these incidents are frequent, and the information about them is easily accessible. Indeed, the SNHR, who have recorded the majority of these incidents, provided information to the October Danish report, but this doesn't appear to be reflected in the final report and its subsequent policy conclusions.

¹ <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/04/16/refugee-attitudes-toward-return-to-syria-pub-76061>

It is important to note that such repression instils the reluctance of victims' families to cooperate and reveal details of their family members' arrest, even confidentially, more especially if the arrested individual is female, due to a well-founded fear that being discovered doing so would result in more torture and further danger for their loved ones and themselves. Instead, families try to negotiate with security forces which usually blackmail these families and demand cash payments, effectively ransoms, that can amount to thousands of dollars in some cases. As a result, the true scale of arbitrary arrest and detention in Syria remains underreported.

Even those who have been 'cleared' by the Syrian regime are at risk, highlighting the arbitrary nature of the threats to personal security in the area. According to SNHR, the regime continues to pursue those who settled their security situation through so-called "reconciliation agreements" including those in Damascus suburbs². SNHR and other human rights organisations have documented 684 such cases of arbitrary arrest in Damascus and its surroundings between the beginning of 2020 and October when the DIS report was issued³. With no security guarantees from the Syrian regime, it is impossible to be assured that any individual returnee would not face similar threats, even if they were in receipt of an approval or vetting from Damascus.

Other than enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment of Syrian youth into the regime's forces sees them regularly sent to death on the country's most dangerous frontlines, in Idlib and north Aleppo. Many male refugees between 18 and 42 fear similar treatment if they return to Syria. On 25th of June 2020, the regime's General Conscription Department issued a list of 400 names of young men from Damascus wanted for forced conscription and checkpoints began arrest campaign to implement this order⁴. Our report "Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians", documented that 68 per cent of total respondents or their relatives were wanted for recruitment in compulsory military service, which was the main cause of fear and feeling of insecurity.

This information is fully consistent with the report SACD issued in 2019, which documented the experience of displaced Syrians who were forced, for various reasons, to return to Assad-held areas, including Damascus and its surroundings. The report⁵ established that some 62% of returnees or their closest relatives have been subjected to arbitrary detention by the regime's security forces. This percentage increases to 75% in the so-called "reconciliation areas", which include parts of Damascus countryside. It thoroughly documents various other forms of harassment and targeting faced by returnees, which clearly demonstrate that the situation in Damascus falls under the definition of the Article 3 of ECHR, invoked by the Danish Immigration Service, which prohibits anyone being subjected to "inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment".

² [http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At least 147 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in May 2020 including 10 Children and 4 Women_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At%20least%20147%20Cases%20of%20Arbitrary%20Arrests%20Documented%20in%20Syria%20in%20May%202020%20including%2010%20Children%20and%204%20Women_en.pdf)

³ <http://www.shaaam.org/news/syria-news/مليشيات-النظام-تنفذ-حملة-اعتقال-هي-الأضخم-جنوب-العاصمة-دمشق.html>

⁴ <https://damascusv.com/archives/25984>

⁵ https://syacd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SACD_Vengeance_Repression_and_Fear_EN.pdf

Concerns around the Methodology of Danish Immigration Service Country of Origin Reports into geographical locations within Syria

Denmark was a co-author of the EASO guidance on Country of Origin reporting, and has stated that this forms the basis for the Danish Immigration Ministry COI reports on Syria (as with other country assessments). These TOR set out clear guidance on how to construct a COI, including detailed guidance on sourcing.⁶ Despite this, Danish COI reporting seems to have several areas of concern; a problematic foundation in the scope of the report, the selection and variety of sources, inconsistent standards for sourcing across Syria reports, and a disconnect between the material gathered from sources in relation to the conclusions of the final report and policy.

Scope

The scope of the October 2020 report is limited, as is that of previous Damascus reports, and subsequent reports on other areas of Syria. The EASO guidance on COI reports highlights the need to set out a TOR, which is included as an Annex in these reports. For each, the TOR is limited in scope and narrows the report prior to commencing the research. The guidance suggests that a narrower approach is appropriate for 'Country Focus reports', but suggests these underpin a Country Overview report' which would take a wider view of relevant protection issues.

No such overview report appears to exist in the Syrian context, in which a wider analysis of protection risks is considered. This oversight leaves significant gaps in the understanding of the Danish Immigration Ministry and Refugee Appeals Board. In the narrow, geographically specific reports, security incidents are conceptualized primarily as conflict-related violence rather than the broad range of security concerns Syrians face in their daily lives. Additional security concerns are tackled solely through the lens of freedom of movement and checkpoints, with no mention of regime raids on properties, and arbitrary arrests and detentions that take place in locations other than at checkpoints, nor the forced military conscriptions that a great many men 18-42 fear. When attempting to establish whether a Syrian would be afforded protection inside Damascus, it is necessary to take a broader view of the potential protection risks they may face pursuant to Article 3 of the ECHR, "inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" on return.

Selection, variety, and standards for sources

There appears to be very little consistency in the number, quality, and nature of sources selected to provide information for the COI reports. In the period since the 2018 Damascus report, the range of sources for Damascus reports has improved, though it remains light and inconsistent. Subsequent reports on Tartous, Latakia, and Quneitra, and then Aleppo, use different configurations of sources. In the former, humanitarian agencies with very little sight of the security conditions represent almost all of the sources, while the Aleppo report appears to use only links from a limited number of websites. Moreover, other sources who have proactively contributed information, have found it only to be used as background or

⁶ https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2019_EASO_COI_Report_Methodology.pdf

have noted privately that they disagree with the assessments made using the information they have provided. EAO guidance gives clear instructions on source selection, vetting, and corroboration. Unusually, the October 2020 report states that the Danish Immigration Service has not been able to corroborate the SNHR information provided, without singling out any other source in this way. Given the highly contentious decisions reached as a result of these COI reports, and even more particularly given that those decisions are not supported by any other country of immigration service in Europe, a review of the sourcing used for these reports should be considered.

Disconnect between testimony and findings

The Danish Immigration Service October report provides an assessment that “the number of security incidents in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates had remarkably decreased in 2020 compared to the year before.” As we illustrated earlier, this assessment is dangerously misleading as the threat facing any returnee remains gravely high. However, even the COI report itself states this, in contradiction of the assessment. In the section 3.3 which deals with profiles of people arrested at checkpoints, the report states, inter alia: *“At the checkpoints in Damascus and Rural Damascus, it is mainly people who are on wanted lists who are arrested. However, people who are not on wanted lists may also risk being harassed, interrogated or arrested at checkpoints. This includes persons who are relatives to prominent armed or political activists and persons who are suspected to be activists. (...) SNHR documented a total of 327 cases of arrests in Damascus and Rural Damascus taking place between January and September 2020. According to SNHR, 250 detainees have been forcibly disappeared, i.e. being unable to communicate with the outside world.”*

The report goes on to say that the Danish Immigration Service has not been able to corroborate the SNHR information provided, however, numbers from the Syria Commission of Inquiry (Scol) are quoted when the COI themselves state in a report issued on 15 September this year: “In Damascus, around Rif Damascus, Suwayda’ and Dara’a, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and torture remain pervasive.”⁷

The COI October report then goes on to say that “it appears from the ACLED data that “violence against civilians” almost exclusively comprises cases of individuals who were killed in prisons, many under torture. However, ACLED data does not contain information about why these individuals were arrested. “Basically, one section of the report clearly states that all people, those on the regime’s “wanted” list, but also others are facing the risk of being arrested at one of the countless checkpoints, while in a different place the report claims it is not known why they were arrested, and face a grave threat of death by torture.

Similarly, the testimonies provided as an Annex to the report state, for example: *“Sometimes people are on wanted lists without knowing it.” “There have been cases of women being arrested at checkpoints for the purpose of extortion.” “People who are relative to and have the same family name as opposition leaders or deserters...face harassment at checkpoints.” “Refugees returning to Syria directly through Damascus Airport or returning from Lebanon either via the official crossings or unofficially through smuggling routes*

⁷ <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/31>

[may be targeted for arbitrary arrest]." "Citizens' ability to move freely and travel between areas fluctuates according to the whims of checkpoint personnel." These quotes show the arbitrary nature of arrests and harassment, even at checkpoints, but this is not well reflected in the report or the subsequent conclusions in policy.

These are only a few of the examples, which effectively illustrate the many contradictions of the DIS report which provides the basis for the Immigration Service's dangerous assessment that Damascus and Damascus countryside are now significantly safer for returnees.

Inconsistency between Danish Ministry of Immigration position, and that of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other EU countries

The Danish Immigration Services October report and the statement of Eva Singer about the security situation in Damascus and its countryside being significantly improved goes against the assessment of the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jeppe Kofod, whose statement about the ongoing impunity for the regime's crimes includes this explicit assessment: "The regime is known for torture and arbitrary detentions. Countless Syrians live in terrifying uncertainty. They fear the worst as their loved ones have disappeared into regime detention facilities. Numerous reports describe the worst forms of torture."⁸ The statement was illustrated with images from a report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the same organization whose reports on arbitrary arrests and kidnappings in Damascus we quoted earlier in the analysis. This is the reality that exploded in full view with another release of "Caesar's photos" of the detainees killed in Assad's prisons. And such detentions continue unabated, including in Damascus.

This position was further advanced in the European Parliament resolution in March 2021, which said: "Reminds all Member States that Syria is not a safe country to return to; believes that any return should be safe, voluntary, dignified and informed, in line with the EU's stated position; calls on all EU Member States to refrain from shifting national policies towards depriving certain categories of Syrians of their protected status, and to reverse this trend if they have already applied such policies;"⁹ and the statement at the conclusion of the Brussels Conference 5 signed by 17 European Foreign Ministers, including Denmark, which said: "more than 6 million have fled their country to escape the regime's atrocities." ¹⁰

These statements, and the evidence of insecurity in Damascus, are directly contradicted by the words of the Danish Minister of Immigration and Integration, Mattias Tesfaye, who indicated that his ministry would be reviewing hundreds of asylum claims, justifying it by saying that "last year, almost 100,000 refugees returned to Syria from the surrounding areas. Of course, their countrymen who have been granted protection in Europe must also go home when conditions in Syria permit."

These numbers are very misleading. There are 13 million displaced Syrians, which makes the quoted number a mere 0.77% of the total number of displaced Syrians. As we have documented in our report

⁸<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/denmark-to-scrap-protections-for-syrian-refugees-from-damascus-37947>

⁹https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0088_EN.html

¹⁰<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/news/article/syria-joint-op-ed-by-jean-yves-le-drian-and-17-of-his-european-counterparts-on>

“Between Hamer and Anvil”¹¹, they are largely people who were forced to return, primarily from Lebanon due to harsh living conditions they are facing in displacement or other personal reasons. The reality they faced upon return resulted in more than 60% of these people now looking for ways to leave Syria again, this time permanently, due to unsafe conditions they faced when they returned - arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment, harassment, inability to reclaim property, etc.

In taking this position, the Danish government is not only presenting two competing and contradictory policy positions, but is doing so as a lone voice among even their closest allies.

Concerns around failure to acknowledge the Appeals Board’s Coordinating Committee guidance on Syrian decisions, and concerns around specific cases

The Refugee Appeals Board has, on four occasions, stated that the principle of caution should be used when assessing Syrian cases. Their first such statement was in June 2019, after reviewing several test cases, when they said: "The Refugee Board has also stated that the Syrian authorities' assessment of which citizens pose a security threat is characterized by arbitrariness and unpredictability, which is why there may be good reason to exercise caution in the assessment and let any reasonably justified doubt come to the good of an applicant / complainant."¹²

In short, the Danish Refugee Appeals Board's own oversight body believes that when there is any doubt about a case it should be found in the favour of the applicant. Since then, 94 cases have been rejected, suggesting that it is almost certain that this principle has not been applied in these decisions. In cases reviewed by the SACD, this principle did not appear to have been applied in the reviews by the Danish Immigration Service, which then relies on the Appeals Board to consider this guidance.

Protection concerns for rejected applicants during review and in immigration detention in Denmark

We have three major protection concerns for rejected asylum seekers in Denmark. The first is obviously their unsafe return to Damascus, which carries enormous risks as outlined already in this appendix. Secondly, the wording of rejection letters causes undue stress, and the conditions of Danish immigration detention centres, where rejected applicants who cannot and will not return to Syria must reside, have been widely criticized for being inhumane living conditions.

¹¹ https://syacd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SACD_Between_Hammer_and_Anvil_EN.pdf

¹² <https://fln.dk/da/Nyheder/Nyhedsarkiv/2019/27062019>

Rejection letters

On reviewing the letters sent to Syrian refugees in Denmark whose protected status has been revoked by the Denmark Immigration Service, it was clear that these letters do not mention that Denmark is not presently able to deport them to Syria. While the letters lay out the automatic appeal process by the Appeals Board, they mention only the need to leave the country immediately if the application withdraws the appeal, and the grants available to the applicant to fund their repatriation if unsuccessful on appeal.

Given that the vast majority of Syrian refugees fear the regime and will not return to Syria voluntarily if their status is withdrawn, or if financial incentives are offered, they will be forced to remain in Denmark. These refugees have already faced enormous trauma and displacement and these letters cause them enormous emotional and mental distress. At the present time, it is our understanding, that if they cannot leave, they will be forced to live in immigration detention centres in Denmark. We will outline concerns about those centres below, but for those who fear detention or death on return to Syria, this is still preferable. These letters must consider the undue harm being caused by these letters, which imply that repatriation to Syria is the logical outcome of a failed appeal, and articulate that failed applicants will still be able to remain in Denmark, albeit in detention.

Detention Centres

As mentioned above, due to the inconsistent Danish policies, whereby foreign and immigration policies are at odds, Denmark is unable to deport Syrians to Syria. As such, failed applicants will be forced to reside in immigration detention centres. These centres have been well documented as being inhumane.

In January 2020, ECRE summarized a critique from the Council of Europe's Anti-Torture Committee (CPT): "The main points of critique from CPT includes "unacceptable" prison like regimes of rules, a "carceral and oppressive" material environment and "clearly inappropriate" material conditions with rooms and sanitary facilities in a "deplorable state of repair". Further, lack of staff, inadequate legal advice and translation, overcrowding, limited health services and lack of comprehensive medical screenings including of mental or physical diseases was criticised by CPT.

Also, the CPT raised critique of the use of disciplinary solitary confinement for extended periods of time and remarked alleged verbal abuse by centre personal and the risk of suicides due to the lack of suicide-proof clothing with detainees "sometimes placed entirely naked in an observation room", a practice that according to CPT "could be considered to amount to degrading treatment".¹³

Next month's UPR review will, we hope, highlight some improvements to these facilities, but the CPT report suggests that they are in no way appropriate long term residences for people who have fled detention, arrest, war crimes, and a decade of conflict. Given that those who would be forced to live in

¹³ <https://www.ecre.org/denmark-council-of-europe-shocked-over-conditions-in-danish-detention-centres-and-threatens-legal-action/>

these centres are doing so because they personally hold real and genuine fears for their physical safety if they are forced to return to Syria, surely both they, and Danish society, would be better served by them being granted protection and able to study, work, and live productive and safe lives in Denmark.

Conclusion

This leads us to the conclusion on the danger of the precedent set by the decision of the Danish Immigration Service not to extend protection to Syrian refugees from Damascus: Syria is not safe for return, not in Damascus or the rest of the country. Partial returns, such as that being promoted by the Danish government, are bound to mortally endanger people who are clearly entitled to protection under the relevant UN protection framework and the EU refugee law. The decision clearly runs contrary to the provisions of the ECHR Article 3, which it invokes as justification, indicating the flawed assessment process in determining the level of threat faced by returnees to Damascus.

Furthermore, such a lack of clarity on criteria in determining the level of threat of being “subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” employed to make this decision, indicates that today it is Damascus and tomorrow the same lax criteria will be applied to Homs, Aleppo, Daraa or any other part of Syria. What this will lead to, without a shadow of a doubt, as our research documents, are new waves of displacement with more people trying to reach Europe and leave Syria, if they survive, permanently.

Annex 2: Security Incidents Since October 2020

These are just some of the most recent examples documented by the SADC and other groups, such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights immediately preceding the Danish Immigration Service report and incidents since October 2020 when the Danish Immigration Service issued its assessment:

- On Sunday, September 20, 2020, personnel from the Syrian Regime's Air Security Force carried out a campaign of arrests at a regime checkpoint near the bridge in al Tayba town, west of Damascus suburbs governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of one female child and three women, who are from Kanaker village in Damascus Suburbs governorate, with all being taken to an undisclosed location."
- Bashar Haitham Al M'aani, from Tafas city in the western suburbs of Daraa governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Wednesday, September 2, 2020, while he was passing through one of the regime's checkpoints in Damascus city, and taken to an undisclosed location.
- Ahmad Hamada Kharyoush, from Kanaker village in the southwest of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Tuesday, September 15, 2020, while he was passed through one of the regime's checkpoints on the road between Khan al Sheeh Camp and Sa'sa' town in Damascus Suburbs governorate, and taken to an undisclosed location.
- Qais Nour al Din Na'im, a 22-year-old college student from al-Suwayda city studying at the second branch of Damascus University's Mechanical Engineering faculty, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Sunday, September 20, 2020, while he was passing through the Qasr al Mutamarat checkpoint in Damascus city, and taken to the city's Political Security branch. We documented that he was released on Tuesday, September 22, 2020.
- On Thursday, June 11, 2020, Syrian Regime forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in Douma city in the Eastern Ghouta, with SNHR documenting the arrest of 12 civilians, taking them to an undisclosed location. It is extremely important to note that such arrests regularly become enforced disappearances as the arrestees are usually not heard from again.
- On Monday, July 13, 2020, Syrian Regime forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in the neighborhoods of al Kurneish, al Qowatli, Khourshid, and Halab al Qadima of Douma city, Eastern Ghouta, with 17 civilians arrested and taken to an undisclosed location.
- On Friday, July 3, 2020, Syrian Regime forces carried out a campaign of arrests at one of the regime's checkpoints at the entrance of al Yarmouk Camp, south of Damascus city. SNHR documented the arrest of six civilians, including one women, who were taken to an undisclosed location.
- On Monday, August 10, 2020, personnel from the Syrian regime's Military Security Force arrested two nurses working at the Hamouriya Medical Center, in Hamouriya town in the Eastern Ghouta,

taking them to an undisclosed location.

- Muhannad Kabtoul, from al Hama village in the Western Ghouta, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Sunday, August 9, in a raid on his home on charges of writing anti-Syrian regime graffiti on walls, and taken to an undisclosed location.
- Fadi al Mbayed, from Harasta city in the Eastern Ghouta, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Tuesday, August 11, in a raid on his real estate office in Harasta city, and taken to an undisclosed location.
- In July, the Syrian Regime Security forces carried out an arrest campaign, taking more than 40 young people from the city of Douma in Eastern Ghouta. Sowt al-Asima's sources said that patrols belonging to the Douma City Police Department participated in the arrests, noting that the latter targeted a number of those wanted for security reasons, as well as others who avoided joining the regime's army to perform mandatory and backup military service. According to these sources, the patrols transferred all the detainees to the building of the State Security Branch in Douma, so that those who avoided military service in the past could be handed over to the military police and be forcibly recruited.

Even a cursory research by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity's own researchers revealed three such cases in the months leading up to the report.

- In early May, a woman displaced from Deir Ezzor who settled in Damascus went to the Immigration Administration in Damascus to seek a permit for her brother to visit Syria. Her brother lives abroad and has not completed his military service. She was detained by the intelligence agents, and her husband was asked to leave. Seven weeks later, they called him to come pick up her body after she passed away under torture.
- On 26 June, G.N., a student at the Hamk University in Damascus, was seen leaving his university at 12pm but never made it home. He is still missing. Similarly, on May 30, S. H., a 13 years old, went missing in Rukn Eddine in Damascus. She has not been seen since. These kidnappings are consistent with prevalent reports of the regime's intelligence services and various militias targeting civilians for arbitrary arrest due to their families being seen as "anti-regime" or simply for ransom to be extracted from the families. Since hearing of the Danish decision, we have documented at least one more case of such enforced disappearance, whose details we were asked not to share, as the family is trying to make contact with the regime's intelligence unit to try and secure the release of their loved one by paying the ransom.
- In September, a town of Kanaker in Damascus countryside was held under siege for 12 days by the regime military after violent demonstrations erupted over arbitrary arrests. On Sept 21, member of the regime's intelligence branch at a security checkpoint near Kanaker arrested three women and a 4-year old girl from the town. As a result, violent protests erupted, demanding their release. The regime retaliated by gathering reinforcements and closing down all the roads that lead to the town and completely besieging it. The head of the Saasaa intelligence branch, Talal Ali, threatened to raid the town unless his demands were not met, which included a payment of 25 million lira and

surrender of a group of men accused of violence, who were ultimately expelled to the north of Syria.

- In early October, The "Action Group for Palestinians of Syria" documented the arrest of dozens of civilians by the regime's intelligence services, including 12 Palestinian refugees from the "Black Stone" neighbourhood, south of the Syrian capital, Damascus. The group's sources indicated that the regime's intelligence services arrested more than 40 young men and women from southern Damascus, including 12 Palestinian refugees, as part of a raid and arrest campaign launched last Sunday. The raid and subsequent arrests came under the pretext of searching for sleeper cells belonging to the Syrian opposition. Activists on the "Voice of the Capital" website said that all the detained youths had recently submitted requests to return to their homes in Hajar al-Aswad, and indicated that the arrests came after conducting a security checks on the applicants. As part of these operations of the regime's intelligence branch, five people from the neighbourhoods of Al-Hajar Al-Aswad and the Yarmouk Camp were arrested after they were allowed to visit their homes.

Since October 2020, the repression in Damascus and Rural Damascus did not let up. Some 46 people have been arbitrarily arrested or forcibly disappeared in Damascus governorate and 86 in Rural Damascus. These are just some of the illustrative examples collected by the Syrian Network for Human Rights:

October 2020

- Ali Katkout, from Harasta city in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Friday, October 2, 2020, after he was summoned to one of the regime's detention centers in Harasta city on charges of being seen in a video alongside personnel affiliated with one of the Armed Opposition factions, and taken to an undisclosed location.
- Ms. Niveen Ismat Othman, aged 33, from Kafr Janna village, which is administratively a part of Sheran district in the suburbs of Aleppo governorate. On Friday, October 9, 2020, Syrian Regime forces arrested her at Damascus International Airport as she was heading from Qameshli city in the suburbs of Hasaka governorate to Damascus city, and took her to an undisclosed location.
- Qasem Muhammad Khalaf al Kasabera, from al Hrak city in the eastern suburbs of Daraa governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Monday, October 26, 2020, while he was passing through one of the regime's checkpoints at the southern entrance to Damascus city, and taken to an undisclosed location.¹⁴

November 2020:

- On Wednesday, November 18, 2020, Syrian Regime forces personnel carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in the Ras al Qaima neighbourhood of Rankous town in Damascus Suburbs governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of four civilians, who were taken to an undisclosed location.
- On Tuesday, November 24, 2020, Syrian Regime forces personnel carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in al Bustan neighbourhood of Harasta city in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of five civilians, who were taken to an undisclosed location.¹⁵

December 2020

- On Sunday, December 6, 2020, Syrian Regime forces arrested five civilians from the western Damascus Suburbs governorate, as they were passing through one of the regime's check- points in Aleppo city, while they were on their way to areas under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition in the suburbs of Aleppo governorate. They were taken to an undisclosed location.
- On Sunday, December 13, 2020, Syrian Regime forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in al Tal city in the western Damascus Suburbs governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of five civilians, who were taken to an undisclosed location.
- Khaled al Dabbas, a doctor, from Kafr Batna town in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Friday, December 11, 2020, in a raid on his clinic in Kafr Batna town, on charges of possessing a secret warehouse of medical supplies and medicine, and taken to an undisclosed location. SNHR notes that Dr. Khaled was amongst those who had concluded a settlement previously.¹⁶

January 2021

- On Saturday, January 16, 2021, Syrian regime forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in Marj al Sultan town in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of eight civilians, all of whom had previously settled their security status, who were taken to an undisclosed location.

¹⁵https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At_least_167_cases_of_arbitrary_arrests_in_Syria_in_November_2020_en.pdf

¹⁶https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Most_of_Arbitrary_Arrests_Detentions_Targeted_Those_Who_Had_Concluded_Settlements_Returning_Refugees_and_IDPs_or_in_Connection_with_Expressing_Opinions_en.pdf

- On Thursday, January 21, 2021, Syrian regime forces arrested a civilian from Damascus city in a raid on his workplace in Harasta city in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, taking him to an undisclosed location.
- On Saturday, January 23, 2021, Syrian regime forces arrested four civilians from Zakya town in the western Damascus Suburbs governorate, while they were passing through one of the regime's checkpoints on the road between al Mqaileiba and Zakya town, and took them to an undisclosed location.
- Hashem al Masri and Muhammad al Masri, former members of Armed Opposition factions, who were among those who had previously settled their security status and joined the ranks of the Syrian regime's Division, from Kanaker village, southwest of Damascus Suburbs governorate, were arrested by Syrian regime forces while they were passing through one of the regime's checkpoints in al Soumariya area in Damascus city, and taken to an undisclosed location.¹⁷

February 2021:

- On Wednesday, February 3, 2021, Syrian regime forces carried out a campaign of raids and arrests in Douma city in the Eastern Ghouta in Damascus Suburbs governorate. SNHR documented the arrest of six civilians, who had previously settled their security status, who were taken to an undisclosed location.
- On Tuesday, February 9, 2021, personnel from the Syrian regime's Military Security Force arrested a civilian (from the Derbas family) from al Yarmouk Camp, south of Damascus city, now living in Yalda town, south of Damascus Suburbs governorate, in front of the municipality building in Yalda town, over making an oral complaint about the living conditions to the governor of Damascus Suburbs during the governor's visit to the town and took him to an undisclosed location.
- On Friday, February 12, 2021, personnel from the Syrian regime's Air Security Force raided a house in Douma city in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, and arrested three civilians, including two women, taking them to one of the regime's detention centers in Harasta city in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate.
- On Tuesday, February 16, 2021, Syrian regime forces personnel arrested a woman and her son from Douma city in the Eastern Ghouta, east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, after raiding their house in al Hajjariya neighborhood in Douma city, in connection with the woman making a phone call to one of her relatives in the areas controlled by the Armed Opposition factions, with the woman and her son taken to the State Security Branch in Damascus city.

¹⁷[https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At least 213 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest Detention Documented in Syria in January 2021 Including 24 Children and Five Women en.pdf](https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At%20least%20213%20Cases%20of%20Arbitrary%20Arrest%20Detention%20Documented%20in%20Syria%20in%20January%202021%20Including%204%20Children%20and%20Five%20Women%20en.pdf)

- Walid Khaled al Hallaj, aged 22, from Kanaker village in the southwest of Damascus Suburbs governorate, was arrested by the Syrian regime's Security Political Force personnel on Tuesday, February 16, 2021, while he was passing through one of the regime's checkpoint in Sahnaya town in west of Damascus Suburbs governorate, and taken to an undisclosed location.¹⁸

¹⁸ [https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At least 171 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest Detention Documented in Syria in February 2021 en.pdf](https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/At%20least%20171%20Cases%20of%20Arbitrary%20Arrest%20Detention%20Documented%20in%20Syria%20in%20February%202021%20en.pdf)