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The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in February 2023

**The Syrian Regime Exploits the Earthquake Disaster to Steal Relief
Aid and Promote Political Propaganda to Break its Political Isolation**

Saturday 04 February 2023

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

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I. Introduction and Methodology

Syria has seen an unprecedented number of violations since the start of the popular uprising for democracy in March 2011. Extrajudicial killings, arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances are at the forefront of the violations which the Syrian people have endured for over a decade. While the Syrian regime and its affiliated militias were the sole perpetrators of these violations for the first seven months or so of the uprising, other parties subsequently joined in, perpetrating their share of human rights violations against Syrians. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has been documenting human rights violations, to the best of our abilities, since the earliest days of the uprising in 2011. In 2012 and 2013, as the numbers of human rights violations rose sharply, our team was confronted by the need to release periodic monthly reports, in order to highlight the continued suffering of the Syrian people. We started releasing eight reports each month, and, in tandem with this, created a large database containing hundreds of thousands of incidents sorted into the various categories of violations that emerged during our documentation work.

By the end of 2018, however, the level of violence had fallen to some degree, which prompted another change in our reporting strategy. At this point, we opted for releasing one monthly report containing the most notable human rights violations in Syria that we were able to document in the previous month. As such, this report focuses on the human rights situation in Syria for February 2023. In this report, we summarize the civilian deaths we've documented in the past month at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling parties, as well as providing details of the numbers of arrests and enforced disappearances. For a detailed explanation of our [methodology](#), please visit the following link.

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

II. Brief on February's Most Notable Developments

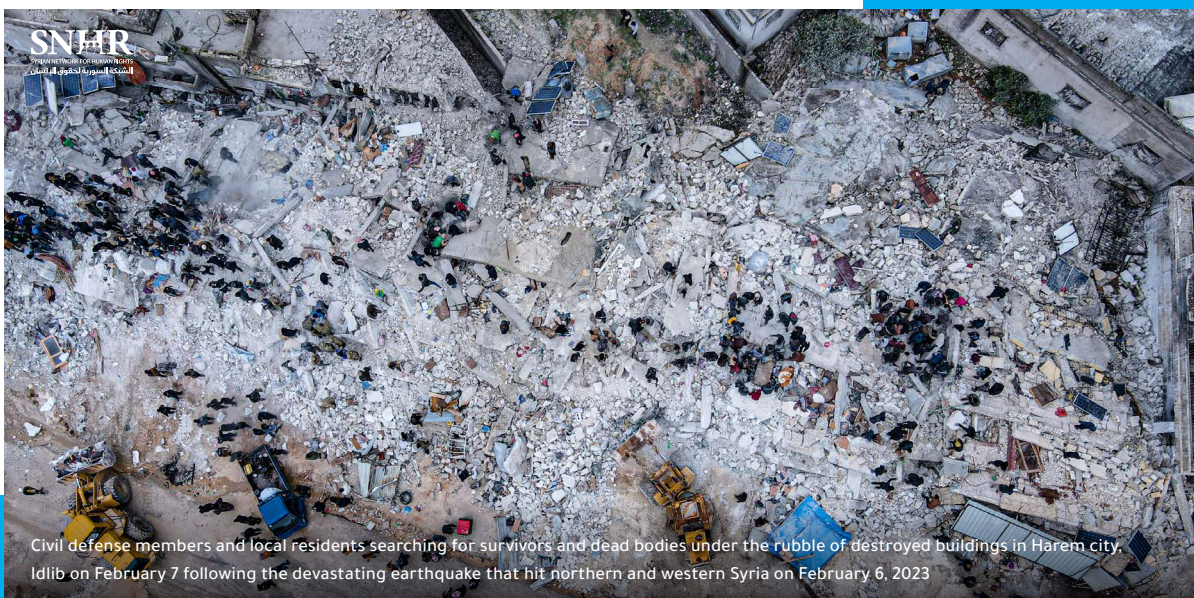
Turkey-Syria Earthquake

At around dawn on February 6, around 04:15, a 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck Southern Turkey and Northern Syria; this was followed by a 7.6 magnitude earthquake about 11 hours later. The epicentre of [the earthquakes was located in the area of Kahramanmaraş in midsouth Turkey](#), near the Turkish-Syrian borders. The two earthquakes and the subsequent aftershocks caused massive human and material losses. The region of northwestern Syria was one of the areas worst affected by the earthquake due to the severe overpopulation there caused by that region housing large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) displaced by the Syrian regime and its allies; these conditions were worsened by the fragility of building structures in those areas that had already been targeted constantly and repeatedly in offensives by the aforementioned forces. These factors significantly increased the number of casualties in the area. In fact, in [a report](#) published on February 27, SNHR documented a total of 2,534 Syrians killed by the earthquake in northwestern Syria, out of a total Syrian earthquake death of 7,259, which also included the victims in regime-controlled areas of Syria and in Turkey; our report also noted that the death toll in northwest Syria was increased by the late arrival of UN and international humanitarian assistance to the areas affected by the earthquake, with the first UN relief aid convoy arriving on February 10. The UN cited different pretexts to explain the unforgivably late arrival of this aid, including earthquake-related damage to the

roads, as well as other logistical issues arising from the devastating earthquake that hit both Turkey and Syria. We, at SNHR, believe, however, that there are other factors that have yet to be revealed, and that require further investigation is required to expose the real reasons behind this fatally late arrival. Such an investigation is essential to avoid further tragedies of this nature, with the late arrival of the relief aid by up to four days leaving the massively overwhelmed and underequipped local civil society groups alone to face the horrors of the earthquake and its aftermath, leading to more people dying needlessly under the rubble.

According to SNHR's estimates, the earthquake resulted in at least 160,000 Syrians losing their residences, most of them IDPs who had already been forced from their homes, often several times, and who were already grappling with dire living conditions. As of this writing, the people are still facing fathomlessly difficult conditions due to the continuing aftershocks. Even after the earthquake, around 80 percent of the area's residents have had to leave their homes and live in the open air in freezing winter conditions in fear of the buildings collapsing on top of them due to aftershocks, which has only exacerbated their suffering, poor living conditions and existing psychological trauma.

Many international organizations have released statements on the situation in the region of northwestern Syria and the effects on its residents. On February 6, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) released [a statement](#) saying that the earthquake affected areas that were already housing a great number of IDPs families in Syria. According to the statement, many of the residents living in those areas had already experienced displacement as many as 20 times previously. The statement added that the ongoing conflict has greatly weakened the country's vital infrastructure, including the health sector, greatly undermining its capability to respond to such emergency cases, with only 59 percent of the total infrastructure working at full capacity across the entire country, making post-earthquake Syria an emergency within an emergency. On the same day, [Amnesty International](#) released a statement stressing that "The international community must immediately mobilize resources to support the rescue and rehabilitation efforts in northern Syria." Meanwhile, in a separate statement, [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\)](#) noted that "all parties to the armed conflict in Syria should allow for the rapid and unfettered passage of humanitarian assistance to civilians in need, for whom this earthquake comes on top of war and displacement.»



Civil defense members and local residents searching for survivors and dead bodies under the rubble of destroyed buildings in Harem city, Idlib on February 7 following the devastating earthquake that hit northern and western Syria on February 6, 2023

On the UN's response to the earthquake

On February 9, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said in [a press conference](#) that the earthquake had hit the region of northwestern Syria in the midst of a worsening humanitarian crisis in the area, with needs reaching unprecedentedly high levels, the worst since the conflict began. In his speech at the press conference, Mr Guterres said, "I would be of course very happy if the Security Council could reach a consensus to allow for more crossings to be used, as we need also to increase our capacity to deliver on crossline operations into Idlib from Damascus." At the same press conference, Mr. Guterres also revealed that the first UN relief aid convoy arrived in northwestern Syria via the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing with Turkey. It must be noted that the convoy that entered on February 9 had been scheduled to arrive prior to the earthquake, meaning that the first aid convoy to enter Syria specifically in response to the earthquake was the one that arrived the next day, February 10.

On February 10, a total of 16 noted international law experts, including former judges at the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court (ICC), together with professors, international judges, and researchers, issued [a letter](#) in which they stressed that there are many mechanisms outside the control of the UN Security Council which could be invoked to deliver humanitarian assistance to Syria. The letter further stressed that the UN needs to use its mandate to save lives, rather than being beholden to a narrow interpretation of international law that unnecessarily blocks the delivery of relief aid to millions of people in the most vulnerable place in the world.

On February 11, SNHR, together with a group of other Syrian and non-Syrian humanitarian groups, issued [a joint statement](#) on the current situation in the region of northwestern Syria following the earthquake that struck the area. The statement called on António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, and Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to direct all UN mechanisms and agencies to work under a direct mandate from the UN General Assembly, overcome any logistical challenges, and use all the border crossings available to access northwestern Syria.

On February 12, Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, said in [a tweet](#), "We have so far failed the people in north-west Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived. My duty and our obligation is to correct this failure as fast as we can." We believe, at SNHR, that this apology should have been in an official statement, rather than a mere tweet, in addition to making a pledge to compensate the families of the victims who died under the rubble because of the late arrival of humanitarian assistance.

On February 13, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, said in [a press release](#) that he "welcomes" the head of the Syrian regime Bashar Assad's agreement to open the two border crossings between Turkey and northwestern Syria at Bab al-Salam and al-Ra'ie for an initial period of three months to allow the passage of humanitarian assistance.

On February 14, Guterres called on the international community to raise \$397 million to meet the humanitarian needs of the people affected by the earthquake in Syria.

On February 15, SNHR released [a report](#) in which it called for launching an investigation into the reason why the UN and international relief aid arrived late following the earthquake and to hold people accountable for the unnecessary deaths of more Syrians. The report stressed that the UN's response was woefully disproportionate to the magnitude of catastrophe unleashed by the earthquake in northwestern Syria, with some UN agencies becoming involved late, while other mechanisms, such as issuing a distress call to mobilize efforts and teams from around the world, were not invoked at all.

On February 15, [HRW](#) released a statement stressing that "the slow humanitarian response to the earthquakes that severely affected opposition-held northwest Syria highlights the inadequacy of the United Nations Security Council-mandated cross border aid mechanism in Syria and the urgent need for alternatives." The statement added that all of the parties to the conflict have obstructed the passage of relief aid into the area.

On February 17, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) released [a situation report](#) on northwestern Syria in the wake of the earthquake. The report stated that between the day of the earthquake, February 6, and February 15, over 4,400 deaths and 8,100 injuries were reported in northwestern Syria, while over 9,000 buildings were partially or completely destroyed in the area due to the earthquake, displacing no fewer than 11,000 people.

On February 21, SNHR, together with a number of human rights and civil society organizations, released [a joint statement](#) stressing that the response to the earthquake should not be exploited as a means to restore relationships with the Syrian regime which has been involved in perpetrating innumerable crimes against humanity against the Syrian people. The statement added that the Syrian regime's theft of UN and international relief aid has been exhaustively proven in reports by numerous respected local and international human rights groups, and is no longer a controversial or questionable assertion, but simply a statement of fact. Indeed, such theft has been a calculated policy used by the Syrian regime since at least 2015, for which the regime has constructed an elaborate framework through its security apparatus, which makes it virtually impossible for any UN or international organizations to operate outside this framework in Syria.

On February 27, the [OCHA](#) released a situation report on the humanitarian response to the earthquake disaster in northwestern Syria, which stated that between the day of the earthquake, February 6, and February 27, a total of 423 trucks carrying aid were deployed to Syria through six UN agencies (1. International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2. UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 3. UN Population Fund (UNFPA), 4. UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 5. World Food Programme (WFP); and 6. World Health Organizations (WHO)). According to the report, the UN resumed its cross-border operations on February 9, three days after the temporary suspension of operations due to the roads being damaged by the earthquake.

Since the first hours after the earthquake, the Syrian regime has exploited the catastrophe for political and financial gains. Many human rights groups have warned of the theft being carried out by the Syrian regime of the relief aid donated and intended for the victims of the earthquake in Syria. The Syrian regime did not send any of the relief aid it received to the areas outside its control, despite the severe damage in those areas, which were the worst affected in Syria. The Syrian regime has also used the earthquake as an opportunity to cover the destruction caused by its military operations in the areas where the regime regained control, where the regime carried out demolitions of hundreds of buildings under the pretext that they were cracked due to the earthquake, [according to pro-regime websites](#), which was also further confirmed by activists we have been in contact with. In the same context, Ghassan al-Shaghri, the director of planning and international cooperation in the Syrian regime government's Minister of Education, said that 2,288 schools were affected by the earthquake, according to an article by [Athr Press](#) published on February 25.

Bombings and military operations

For the second consecutive month, the Idlib region in northwestern Syria saw a relative decline in the frequency of artillery attacks by Syrian regime forces. In February, we recorded sporadic attacks concentrated on the villages and towns of Jabal al-Zawiya in the southern suburbs of Idlib and western suburbs of Aleppo, as well as Sahl al-Ghab in the western suburbs of Hama and the northern suburbs of Latakia, all of which areas are close to the dividing lines with armed opposition factions. One of the artillery attacks, on February 22, which resulted in the deaths of [two civilians](#), saw Syrian regime forces firing a shell targeting civilians on a motorbike in Barza village in the Jabal al-Akrad area, northern Latakia.

On February 27, Syrian regime artillery forces carried out heavy bombardment of multiple areas in northern Idlib, targeting the Idlib-Sarmada public road in northern Idlib, with multiple shells landing in the vicinity of the IDP camps in the area.

On February 17, local residents found the [murdered bodies of at least 40 individuals](#), 15 of them members of the Bani Khaled Tribe, in an area of the eastern al-Sakhna district in the eastern suburbs of Homs. The victims had been shot dead by pro-regime Iranian militias over disputes related to the militias' seizure of the desert truffles harvested by the victims.

February also saw more ground-based attacks by Turkish forces and armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA) on the areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northern suburbs of Aleppo, as well as the areas of Manbej and Ein al-Arab in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo, and Ein Eisa in the northern suburbs of Raqqa.

In northeastern Syria, we documented that [a civilian was shot dead](#) by an international coalition helicopter on February 22 during a raid on his home in Jdeed Ekidat in eastern Deir EzZour by an SDF patrol supported by the helicopter.

Meanwhile, [more civilians were killed by landmines across Syria](#), mostly in Deir Ez-Zour governorate. In February, a total of six civilians, including one child, were killed by landmines across Syria, bringing the 2023 total death toll for victims killed by landmines to date to 13 civilians, including seven children.

Furthermore, February saw [more assassinations of civilians at the hands of unidentified gunmen](#) across Syria, with these killings concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo, Hasaka, and Daraa.

On February 19, Israeli forces carried out an air raid on a populated residential building in Kafrsousa neighborhood in the center of Damascus city. The air raid caused massive destruction to the first four floors of the building and the adjacent parking lot. Two regime soldiers - Colonel Engineer Amjad Ahmad Ali, and a lower-ranking soldier named as Iksim Isbir - were killed in the attack on the building, which is located behind the Iranian School in Kafrsousa neighborhood. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime forces manning the regime's air defense system, stationed in Mount Qasyun and at al-Mazza Military Airbase, attempted to intercept the Israeli missiles by firing rockets, some of which landed in residential neighborhoods in Damascus, killing Lilian al-Ouda, a female pharmacist, and Asif al-Mahmoud, an internist and cardiologist, in al-Mazra'a Square in Damascus city center.

Living and Security Conditions

In February, the economic, living, service, and security conditions continued to decline across all sectors in the Syrian regime's areas of control. The earthquake that hit the area on February 6 caused severe damage, halting the provision of most services, as a power outage occurred for a few days in many of the affected areas and districts, especially in the governorates of Aleppo, [Latakia](#), and Hama. The earthquake also caused [the collapse of water tanks in some areas](#), causing [civilian injuries](#), and cutting off the water supply.

In light of the disastrous living conditions, the Syrian regime's government again increased prices of essential commodities. On February 14, [the Syrian regime's Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection](#) announced that it would be increasing the price of 1 liter of diesel "intended for commercial activities by the Fuel Company and other supplies across Syria" from 3,000 Syrian pounds (S.P.) to 5,400 S.P.., was although the earlier price had been set by the same ministry only a few weeks before, in December 2022. On February 16, the [pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper](#) noted that this decision also applied to non-subsidized diesel which is distributed directly to citizens at cost price by the General Institution for the Distribution of Fuel. All food and grocery supplies also saw a 20 percent price increase on the pre-earthquake prices, according to a report published by [al-Watan Newspaper](#) on February 15.

People living in regime territories have also been grappling with a rampant state of insecurity that further worsened in the wake of the earthquake. Murders and thefts have become common amid a state of mayhem and a lack of proper police investigations into such incidents by the regime security forces.

In Suwayda city, demonstrations continued throughout February, with the protestors condemning the poor services and economic conditions, and calling for the ousting of the Syrian regime and the release of detainees.

In northwestern Syria, civilians' already severe suffering continues to worsen under deteriorating economic and living conditions in parallel with rising prices for food and grocery supplies, all intensified by the people's waning purchasing power due to rampant unemployment and poverty rates, especially in areas housing IDPs camps, while wages also have been in decline. Moreover, the service and health sectors are both grappling with funding crises in light of the mounting humanitarian needs.

The earthquake has also dramatically exacerbated the already intense suffering of civilians in the region of northwestern Syria. All of the services operating there have been adversely affected in the wake of the earthquake. On February 22, the [OCHA](#) stated that the health sector in the region of northwestern Syria had been severely affected by the earthquake, revealing that a total of 47 health facilities in the area were reported as having been damaged in the quake; meanwhile, it added, another 12 health facilities had been put completely out of commission by the earthquake, while a further 18 are only partially operating, all of which affects the access to healthcare for those affected by the earthquake. On February 23, the [UNHCR](#) said in a situation report on the region of northwestern Syria that the earthquake had partially or completely destroyed over 10,000 buildings in the region, leaving 11,000 people homeless.

The Idlib region also saw an increase in the prices of household gas, which rose from \$12.48 for one cylinder to \$13.50, according to [a statement](#) released by the regional Salvation Government on February 18.

The situation in Northeastern Syria is similarly dire, with worsening living and security conditions. Prices of food, fuel and other essential commodities in the region continue to rise due to the controlling forces' failure to regulate the market. Additionally, al-Sabha town in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate saw a demonstration on February 3, calling for the release of detainees, in which the protestors intercepted an oil tanker convoy coming from al-Omar Oil Field, also in Deir Ez-Zour governorate, which was on its way to Hasaka city. In retaliation for this, SDF forces opened fire on the unarmed protestors, [killing a child](#) with special needs. On February 22, SDF members also attacked a post-funeral mourning event in the same town for a civilian who had also been killed by the SDF. [Two civilians, one of them a woman](#), were killed in the SDF's attack on the mourning event.

Forced displacement

In February, the suffering of IDPs in northwestern Syria continued in relation to both living conditions and the humanitarian situation, especially in the wake of the February 6 earthquake, which caused new waves of displacement among the population, many of whom had already been displaced multiple times. On February 18, the [Internal Displacement Monitoring Center \(IDMC\)](#) said that the number of people displaced in the aftermath of the earthquake was as high as 86,000, noting that most of the displacement movements were from Jendaires town in northern Aleppo and the two cities of Salqin and Harem in western Idlib.

The economic situation also continued to deteriorate in light of the steadily escalating humanitarian needs, exacerbated by the decline in support from relief organizations. On February 1, [a rainstorm](#) hit areas in the suburbs of Idlib and Aleppo governorates, and the IDPs camps in northwestern Syria, in tandem with snowfall on the hills in the area, severely damaging about 49 tents, and leading to torrential flooding in the lower areas, effectively cutting off the roads leading to the IDPs' tents due to the large quantities of floodwaters, snow or mud.

In regard to the IDP camps in northeastern Syria, the [UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#) released a press release on February 16 saying that a number UN experts have expressed their grave concern over reports that authorities in northeastern Syria have arrested male children in the Roj Camp. It was reported that the authorities arrested 10 boys, some of them no older than 12 years of age, in the camp on the night of January 31, 2023. The statement reads, "We are extremely concerned that serious harm may befall these boys and fear they may be forcibly disappeared and subject to sale, exploitation and abuse, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, or punishment..."

On February 16, Kyrgyzstan's [Kabir News Agency](#) reported that 18 women and 41 children arrived in Kyrgyzstan after being repatriated from Syria by Kyrgyz authorities. We believe that those repatriated had been detained in camps in northeastern Syria.

In al-Rukban IDP Camp on the Syrian-Jordanian borders in eastern Homs governorate, the residents, estimated at 7,500 people, continue to grapple with extremely difficult living conditions, and a severe shortage of food and medical supplies, as the Syrian regime continues to restrict the entry of flour. Fuel prices in the stricken camp also saw yet another increase in February in tandem with the low temperatures, further deepening the residents' suffering.

On the subject of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, [the Statistics Netherlands \(CBS\)](#) released a report on January 31 saying that the number of asylum seekers in the Netherlands increased by 44 percent in 2022 in relation to the previous year. The report adds that Syrian asylum seekers are the largest group out of all asylum seekers, making up one-third of the total number of asylum seekers in the country with 12,640 Syrian asylum seekers out of 35,535 asylum requests received by the Netherlands in 2022. In terms of Syrians, this constitutes an increase by half compared to the year before.

On February 22, the [European Union Agency](#) for Asylum said that EU countries had received 966,000 asylum requests in the year 2022 with a 50 percent increase from 2021. This increase means 2022 saw the highest number of asylum requests since 2016. The agency added that Syrians accounted for the largest group of asylum seekers. According to the data, 132,000 Syrians requested asylum in EU countries in 2022.

1. The Global Peace Index covers 99.7 percent of the world's population. It is calculated using 23 indicators that vary between quantitative and qualitative in nature. The Index focuses on three domains: 1. Level of societal safety and security; 2. Extent of ongoing domestic and international conflict, and 3. Degree of militarization.

In Lebanon, the [LBC TV Channel](#) reported on February 28, that a Syrian female refugee and her five-year-old daughter had died in a fire that broke out in the tent they were living in in al-Shafaq Camp in the Aarsal area in the north of the country. LBC reported that the cause of the fire remains unknown.

Political and human rights situation

On February 2, the Syrian regime's [Syrian Arab News Agency \(SANA\)](#) quoted Milad Attaya, the Syrian regime's representative to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), as saying in a press conference on the third report by the OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) that the Syrian regime "does not recognize the OPCW's IIT nor its past or future reports because it was founded as a result of pressures applied by the UN, France, and the UK to serve their own agendas." It should be noted that this transparent effort to deny responsibility for its own crimes is not a first for the Syrian regime which has always denied and questioned the findings of any investigations that hold it accountable for the atrocities it has committed against the Syrian people.

On February 2, [Al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper](#) published an interview with Catherine Colonna, France's Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, in which she revealed that the Syrian regime is stubbornly refusing to negotiate on the basis of sustained peace proposed in the Security Council. She added that France is not keen to normalize relations with a regime that has been once again been found responsible for using chemical weapons in Douma city on April 7, 2018, and which has dismissed and rejected the impartial findings reached by investigations conducted by independent experts.

On February 3, the official [Twitter account](#) of the EU mission to Syria tweeted, "There will be no normalizing, no lifting the sanctions, and no reconstruction until Damascus agrees to be involved in a political transition process and fully implement Security Council resolution 2254."

On February 7, the OPCW's Director-General, Fernando Arias, [briefed the Security Council](#) on the findings of the OPCW's IIM published in its third report released on January 27 regarding the chemical attack in Douma city, Damascus suburbs on April 7, 2018. Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, noted that the efforts made by the OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) to settle the 20 outstanding issues with relation to the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapon program have made no progress since the last UN Security Council meeting on this issue. In the aftermath of the OPCW Director-General's briefing, eight states, namely the US, UK, France, Switzerland, Japan, Malta, Albania, and Ecuador, issued [a joint statement](#) stressing that "impunity for the use of chemical weapons, by anyone, in any circumstances, cannot and will not be allowed."

On February 9, the US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued [a resolution](#) authorizing, for 180 days, any transactions related to the earthquake relief efforts in Syria, which had been prohibited under the US sanctions laws. On February 22, the US Department of Treasury published on its official website [a compliance guide](#) clarifying which transactions are authorized in relation to the earthquake relief efforts.

On February 12, [Jordan's Anti-Narcotics Department](#) revealed that Jordanian authorities had thwarted another attempt to smuggle large quantities of narcotics from Syria. The Department added that a total of 181 kg of cannabis and 179,000 captagon (amphetamine) pills had been seized in the operation. SNHR notes that Syria has become a narco-state, with captagon becoming one of the country's most important exports and funding sources for the Syrian regime in recent years. On December 23, 2022, US President Joe Biden passed the Captagon Act, which requested that US agencies create an interagency strategy to dismantle the captagon network linked to the Syrian regime in Syria.

On February 15, [Save the Children](#) said in a statement that unaccompanied children who survived the earthquake in Syria and Turkey need to find their families. The organization warned, "adoption is not an appropriate response for unaccompanied children until local authorities and humanitarian agencies have exhausted all efforts to trace and reunite them with their families and extended community."

On February 15, Ned Price, the spokesperson for the US Secretary of State, said in [a press conference](#) that US does not support the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime. "We are not changing our approach to the Assad regime." he noted. "The humanitarian situation on the ground is our overriding focus at the moment. It is the humanitarian situation that has been made all the more dire and urgent by the earthquake. It's a humanitarian situation that in large part has its roots in the Assad regime's treatment of its own people."

On February 16, Jordan's [Al-Mamlaka TV News Channel](#) reported that Ayman al-Safadi, Jordan's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, met with Bashar Assad, head of the Syrian regime, and Faisal al-Meqdad, the Syrian regime government's Minister of Foreign Affairs. The channel reported that the two ministers discussed "the efforts made to bring about the proper conditions for a voluntary return for refugees and rid Syria of terrorism."

On February 20, the pro-regime [SANA](#) news agency reported that the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad, had conducted a visit to Oman, where he met with the Sultan of Oman, Haitham bin Tariq. On February 27, [SANA](#) reported that Assad met with Sameh Shoukry, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who relayed a message from the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in which, SANA reported, he stressed that "Egypt stands with Syria and is prepared to continue to support the Syrians facing the effects of the earthquake.". It should be noted that normalizing relations with the Syrian regime is a grievous insult to the state that does so, and is, under the international law, an expression of support for the crimes committed by the Syrian regime against the Syrian people. Combating these atrocious violations, including crimes against humanity and war crimes, is a core part of the duties of all the world states as defined by the Geneva Conventions.

On February 23, the [Council of the European Union](#) released a statement in which it noted that, in light of the serious humanitarian crisis made worse by the earthquake, the Council had decided to amend the restrictive measures in place regarding Syria to facilitate the speedy delivery of humanitarian aid. “With this amendment, the EU has waived the need for humanitarian organizations to seek prior permission from EU member states national competent authorities to make transfers or provide goods and services intended for humanitarian purposes to listed persons and entities.” the statement reads.

On February 23, Amnesty International released [a report](#) on the response to the earthquake disaster, in which it confirmed that, “In Syria, the government continues to prevent or restrict aid from entering areas with populations perceived to be opposed to the government.” adding that the regime government has also “prevented aid from reaching predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods in areas under the control of the Kurdish civilian council in Aleppo city.” As of February 15, the report added, “only small rescue teams from Egypt and Spain were sent to assist volunteer groups in northwest Syria. Local organizations told Amnesty International that they received minimal support in terms of heavy machinery and other rescue tools that severely hampered their search and rescue efforts. However, Arab, north-African countries, Iran and others sent support to the Syrian government, which was used only in government-held areas and not in the northwest.”

On February 24, [Reuters](#) quoted a statement broadcast by an Iranian state TV station saying that Iran is likely to sell surface-to-air missiles to the Syrian regime. On the same day, Iran’s state-run [Tasnim News Agency](#) tweeted some phototographs which it said show “parts of the assembly line of the Iranian-made Sayyad-2 surface-to-air rockets which are used as part of the Khordad 15 Air Defense System which will be delivered to Syria.” Supplying the Syrian regime with weapons is a blatant violation of the Caesar Act and of the US and European sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime, which constitutes support for the regime in committing further violations against the Syrian people.

On February 28, the [UN Security Council held](#) a session in which the member states discussed the latest political and humanitarian developments in Syria. During the session, the Security Council called on Geir Pedersen, UN special envoy to Syria, and Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to not politicize aid and to increase humanitarian support to meet the mounting needs in the country.

Accountability and advocacy

On February 2, the [European Court of Human Rights](#) ruled that the Hungarian government must pay a fine of €39,600 to the brother of a Syrian refugee whose death resulted from the actions of Hungarian Border Guards in 2016, when the victim and other refugees were trying to traverse the Tisza River towards Hungary, and were attacked by Hungarian Border Guards who tried to forcibly return them to Serbia using tear gas and throwing rocks at the defenseless refugees, as well as unleashing police dogs against them. The Court found that Hungarian authorities have failed to launch the necessary investigations into the victim’s death.

On February 6-8, SNHR Executive Director Fadel Abdul Ghany held multiple meetings with senior officials from various US government departments, including the White House, the Department of State, Department of Defense, and the Department of Treasury, in order to underscore the crucial importance of human rights issues, which we believe deserve far greater attention from the relevant U.S. government agencies. Even though these meetings had been scheduled for some weeks beforehand, the earthquake meant that humanitarian assistance became a priority focus in many of the meetings. On February 27, [SNHR](#) released a statement on those meetings.

On February 23, the [Associated Press \(AP\) news agency](#) reported that the Berlin district court in the German capital had found a Palestinian-Syrian defendant guilty of a war crime and murder in Syria in 2014, when the convicted man, identified only as Moafak D., used an anti-tank weapon to fire a grenade into a crowd of civilians in the al-Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp in Damascus as they queued for the distribution of aid from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), killing four individuals and seriously wounding two others. The defendant was sentenced to life imprisonment. AP added that the defendant is affiliated with the pro-regime Free Palestine Movement.

On February 25, [SNHR](#) released a statement about Executive Director Fadel Abdul Ghany's participation in an event on February 23, entitled, 'Countering Disinformation: A Shared Responsibility,' which was organized by the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the OPCW, in collaboration with CBWNet, an international network promoting a comprehensive reinforcement of norms against chemical and biological weapons. Speakers and guests at the event, held at the German Embassy in The Hague, discussed the state-sponsored disinformation campaigns which threaten to undermine the effective functioning of international institutions.

On February 28, the US Congress passed Resolution [H. Res. 132](#), which condemns the Syrian regime's efforts to "exploit the [earthquake] disaster to evade international pressure and accountability, including by preventing the United Nations from providing assistance through border crossings between Turkey and Syria." The resolution called for ensuring that no US-funded aid is transferred to the Syrian regime.

III. Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in February

This report summarizes the most notable human rights violations committed by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria that were documented by the SNHR in February.

A. Extrajudicial killing

In January, SNHR documented the death of 81 civilians, including eight children and four women (adult female), most of whom were killed at the hands of Syrian regime forces. We also documented the death of two medical workers, and four individuals who died due to torture. Furthermore, we documented no fewer than one massacre in February. We issued a report on the first of this month detailing the civilian victims documented killed at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria.

The death toll of civilian victims was distributed according to the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria as follows:

A. The main parties:

- **Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):**¹ 39 civilians, including three children and one woman.
- **ISIS (self-proclaimed the Islamic State):** one civilian.
- **Kurdish-led SDF (Democratic Union Party):** seven civilians, including one child and one woman.
- **International coalition forces:** one civilian.

B. Other parties:

We documented the deaths of 33 civilians, including four children and two women, at the hands of other parties, distributed as follows:

- **Landmines whose source we have been unable to identify:** six civilians, including one child.
- **Gunfire whose source we have been unable to identify:** 17 civilians, including one child.
- **Bombings whose perpetrators we have been unable to identify:** three civilians, including one child and one woman.
- **Killings by parties we have been unable to identify:** five civilians, including one child and one woman.
- **Weapon tampering:** one civilian.
- **Turkish border guard:** one civilian.

1. We generally use the term 'the Syrian regime' rather than 'the Syrian government', because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is a totalitarian dictatorship where power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of individuals, namely the President of the Republic and the heads of the security apparatus. Conversely, the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, with no real decision-making power or active role of their own. Syria is under a personalist/family rule, with no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade merely for show. The Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he supposedly presides. The Minister of Justice cannot even summon a low-ranking security office, let alone a security branch head. Syria is ruled by the heads of the security branches with the president.

We are aware that the United Nations and its agencies use the term 'the Syrian government', however, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

B. Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance

In February 2023, SNHR documented at least 137 cases of arbitrary arrest, including six children and three women (adult female), at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria. Most of these arrests were carried out by Syrian regime forces in the governorates of Damascus suburbs, then Damascus, and then Daraa. We issued a report on the second of this month detailing the cases of arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearances which we documented in February at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria.

Cases of arbitrary arrests were distributed according to the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces:** 64 civilians, including one child and two women.
- **HTS:²** seven civilians.
- **All Armed Opposition factions/SNA:** 23 civilians, including one child and one woman.
- **SDF:** 43 civilians, including four children.

C. Attacks on vital civilian facilities

We recorded no attacks on vital civilian facilities in February.

D. Indiscriminate attacks and attacks using prohibited weapons

We documented no indiscriminate attacks or attacks involving the use of prohibited weapons in February.

IV. Attachments

1. [81 Civilians, including Eight Children, Four Women, and Four Victims Who Died due to Torture, Were Documented Killed in Syria, in February 2023](#)
2. [At Least 137 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in February 2023, Including Six Children and Three Women \(Adult Females\)](#)

2. Was designated as a terrorist group by the UN.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- The evidence we have gathered indicates that attacks continue to be directed against civilians and civilian objects. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have committed various crimes, including extrajudicial killings, arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances. In addition, the indiscriminate bombardment and other attacks carried out caused the destruction of facilities and buildings. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the war crime of attacking civilians has been committed in many cases.
- The Syrian regime has not only violated international humanitarian law and customary law, but has also breached a number of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 2139, resolution 2042 on the release of detainees, and resolution 2254, all without any accountability.
- We could find no record of any warnings being issued by the Syrian regime or Russian forces prior to any attack under the requirements of international humanitarian law. This has been the case since the beginning of the popular uprising for freedom, providing another blatant demonstration of these forces' total disregard for the lives of civilians in Syria.
- The magnitude and frequency of the violations, the disproportionate use of military force, the indiscriminate manner of the bombing, and the coordinated approach of these attacks lead to the inescapable conclusion that these acts are wholly deliberate and based on high-level orders, and as such constitute a part of state policy.
- The indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment carried out by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces is considered to be a clear violation of international humanitarian law, with indiscriminate killings amounting to war crimes.
- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has violated international humanitarian law, causing the death of many civilians, as well as damage to vital civilian facilities.
- All Armed Opposition factions/SNA violated UN Security Council Resolution 2139 through carrying out attacks that are considered to violate customary international humanitarian law, causing civilian casualties or accidental injuries.
- All the attacks documented in this report, particularly bombings, caused massive collateral damage that involved loss of lives, injuries, or significant damage to civilian objects. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.
- The use of explosive arms to target densely populated areas reflects a criminal and wholly deliberate mindset, with the perpetrators clearly intending to inflict the greatest possible number of deaths, which is a clear contravention of international human rights law and a flagrant violation of the Geneva IV Convention (arts. 27, 31, 32).

Recommendations

UN Security Council

- The Security Council must take additional steps following its adoption of Resolution 2254, which clearly insists that «all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such.»
- The Syrian issue should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible for violations should be held accountable, while Russia must stop using its veto, as it is a party to the Syrian conflict, and the UNSC states' veto power should be withheld when crimes against humanity and war crimes are committed.
- Ensure peace and security and implement the principle of responsibility to protect civilians' lives and to save the Syrian people's heritage and historical artifacts from destruction, looting and vandalism.
- The Security Council should adopt a resolution banning the use of cluster munitions and landmines in Syria, similar to the existing prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and include advice on how to safely remove the remnants of such dangerous weapons.
- The four other permanent member states should put pressure on the Russian government to end its support for the Syrian regime, which uses chemical weapons, and to expose its involvement in this regard.
- Request that all relevant United Nations agencies make greater efforts to provide food, medical and humanitarian assistance in areas where fighting has ceased, and in internally displaced person camps, and to follow-up with those States that have pledged voluntary contributions.

International Community

- In light of the split within the Security Council and its utter inability to take any effective action, action should be taken on the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people by protecting them from daily killing and by lifting sieges, as well as by increasing support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be enacted in local courts regarding these crimes in order to conduct fair trials for all those who were involved.
- SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 'Responsibility to Protect' in dozens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICR2P) after all political channels through the Arab League's plan and then Mr. Kofi Annan's plan have proved fruitless, along with the Cessation of Hostilities statements and Astana agreements that followed. Therefore, steps should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, while the norm of the 'Responsibility to Protect (R2P)', which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.
- Renew pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- Work on fulfilling justice and achieving accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and to activate the principle of universal jurisdiction.

UN Human Rights Office

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the incidents mentioned in this report and previous reports since these attacks were perpetrated by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

- Launch investigations into the cases included in this report and previous reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide further evidence and data.
- Focus on the issue of landmines and cluster munitions within the next report.

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

- Collect further evidence about the crimes documented in this report.

The United Nations Special Envoy for Syria

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

Syrian regime

- Stop indiscriminate shelling and targeting of residential areas, hospitals, schools and markets, and end the use of outlawed weapons and barrel bombs.
- Ensure compliance with UN Security Council resolutions and customary humanitarian law.

Russian regime

- Launch investigations into the incidents included in this report, make the findings of these investigations public for the Syrian people, and hold those responsible accountable.
- Compensate all the damaged centers and facilities, rebuild and rehabilitate them, and compensate all the families of victims who were killed by the current Russian regime, as well as all the wounded.
- Completely cease the bombing of hospitals, protected objects, and civilian areas, and respect customary international law.
- As a guarantor party in Astana talks, the Russian regime must stop thwarting de-escalation agreements, and apply pressure on the Syrian regime in order to end all indiscriminate attacks and to allow unconditional passage of humanitarian aid to besieged areas.

The Coalition (US-led coalition and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces)

- The states supporting the SDF should apply pressure on these forces in order to compel them to cease all of their violations in all the areas and towns under their control.
- Syrian Democratic Forces must immediately stop conscripting children, hold the officers involved in such violations accountable, and pledge to return all children who have been arrested for conscription immediately.

All Armed Opposition factions/SNA

- The Armed Opposition/SNA must ensure the protection of civilians in all areas under their control. These forces should also take care to distinguish between civilians and military targets and cease any indiscriminate attacks.
- Take punitive action against those who commit violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

Humanitarian Organizations

- Develop urgent operational plans to secure decent shelter for internally displaced persons.
- Provide protected facilities and vehicles, such as medical facilities, schools, and ambulances, with distinctive signs that can be distinguished from long distances.

Acknowledgment

We extend our most sincere gratitude to the victims' families and friends, and to the eyewitnesses and local activists for their significant contribution to this report.



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