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World Report 2023



Syria

Events of 2022

A Syrian family warming up by a fire in Rajo city in Afrin countryside after a snowstorm hit northwest Syria and caused dozens of tents to collapse in January 2022.

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In 2022, civilians in Syria faced another year of grave abuses and severe hardship, perpetuated by the Syrian government and other parties to the conflict and compounded by the worst economic and humanitarian crisis the country has faced since the start of the conflict in 2011. In September, the chair of the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria [warned](#) that the country may again return to “larger-scale fighting.”

[In June, the UN Human Rights Office announced](#) that more than 306,000 civilians were killed in Syria between March 1, 2011, and March 31, 2021. As of August, the Syrian Network for Human Rights [declared](#) that around 111,000 people remain disappeared, most at the hands of the Syrian government.

Although Syria remains unsafe, refugee hosting countries like Turkey and Lebanon began advocating for large-scale returns of Syrian refugees in 2022.

Government-Held Areas (Central, West, and Southwest Syria)

Syrian security forces and government-affiliated militias continue to arbitrarily detain, disappear, and mistreat people across the country, including children, people with disabilities and older people, and returnees and individuals in retaken areas who have signed so-called reconciliation agreements. Authorities also continued to unlawfully confiscate property and restrict access to areas of origin for returning Syrians.

On March 30, the Syrian government [passed a law criminalizing torture](#) and assigning a penalty ranging from three years' imprisonment up to the death penalty where the torture results in death or involves rape. The law also prohibited any authority from ordering torture and invalidated any evidence gathered through torture. However, [according to the COI's September 2022 report](#), "torture and ill-treatment in detention remained systematic, including in Sednaya prison and in several detention facilities operated by Syrian intelligence."

On April 18, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad [ratified a new cybercrimes law](#) aimed at curbing the "misuse of technology," and combatting "cybercrime" in the face of new technologies. The new law introduced harsh punishments for vaguely defined crimes, including "cybercrimes" that target public officials and government employees.

On April 30, a [general amnesty granted](#) by al-Assad for "Syrian citizens detained on 'terrorism-related' crimes," was carried out haphazardly and without transparency and led to the documented release of only a small number of detainees. Thousands remain disappeared, many since 2011, with no information on their whereabouts.

On April 27, footage of executions by Syrian Military Intelligence of at least 41 individuals in 2013 in the Damascus neighborhood of Tadamon was published in the media. On September 16, Agence France Presse (AFP) reported on what former prisoners called the "salt rooms," primitive mortuaries inside Syria's prisons designed to preserve bodies in the absence of refrigerated morgues.

Northwest Syria

Northwest Syria is home to more than 4.1 million civilians, at least half of whom have been displaced at least once since the start of the conflict. Civilians in these areas are effectively trapped, lacking resources to relocate, unable to cross into Turkey, and fearing persecution if they attempt to relocate to government-held areas.

In Idlib and western Aleppo, [indiscriminate attacks by Syrian-Russian military forces](#) on civilians and critical civilian infrastructure [persisted](#) in 2022. One Russian air attack on Idlib on July 22 [killed seven civilians](#), including four children from one family, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Since the beginning of Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, and by March 2022, [the civilian harm monitor Airwars](#) estimated that Russian actions across the country had killed almost 25,000 civilians.

At the same time, [according to the COI](#), Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant anti-government armed group, continued to raid and arbitrarily detain activists, humanitarian workers, and civilians voicing critical opinions. The report also documented continued monopolization of the fuel market and other services as well as confiscation of property at the hands of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated armed group.

Northeast Syria

In May, [Turkish](#) President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened to launch what would be Turkey's fourth military incursion into northeast [Syria](#) since 2016 aimed at driving out the Kurdish-led, [United States-backed](#) Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from areas it controls south of Turkey's border. While at the time of writing no full-scale invasion of the targeted areas had taken place, air

raids by Turkish forces and [mutual bombardment](#) by Turkish-backed local armed groups and the SDF intensified. The Biden Administration has stated that the [900 US troops](#) currently on the ground in Syria would remain for the time being. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, this represents one of the US's largest troop deployments in an active war zone.

Turkey last invaded and occupied parts of northeast Syria in October 2019, where it remains in control. In Turkish-occupied territories, Turkey and local Syrian factions continued to abuse civilians' rights and restrict their freedoms with impunity. Most of northeast Syria remains under the control of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration.

Following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in 2019, about 66,000 men, women, and children (suspected former ISIS members and their families) remained arbitrarily and unlawfully detained in life-threatening, degrading, and often inhuman conditions by the SDF in northeast Syria. They include nearly 43,000 foreigners—about 60 percent of them children from nearly 60 countries who have been held for more than three years without ever being brought before a court. Fewer than three dozen countries are known to have repatriated or helped bring home any of their nationals, and most of these have allowed only a limited number to return.

An [ISIS attack on al-Sina'a prison](#) in Hasakeh city on January 20 triggered a 10-day battle that [drew in US and UK forces to fight alongside the SDF](#), left more than 500 dead and displaced at least 45,000 residents, according to the UN. At time of writing, authorities in northeast Syrian had still not provided a breakdown of how many boys imprisoned in al-Sina'a were missing or dead. During military operations to recapture ISIS attackers and detainees who had escaped the prison, dozens of private buildings housing more than 140 families were destroyed, apparently by the SDF. At the time of writing, the SDF had not provided affected residents with any compensation or plans for reconstruction or alternative housing.

The SDF has also carried out mass arrest campaigns against civilians including activists, journalists, and teachers. In late July 2022, amid heightened tensions with Turkey, the SDF [reportedly arrested](#) at least 16 activists and media workers. [According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), the arrests were carried out under the pretext of “espionage.”

Economic Crisis and Rights Implications

Syrians faced the worst economic crisis since the conflict began in 2011, brought on by the prolonged nature of the armed conflict, economic crises in neighboring Turkey and Lebanon, the Covid-19 pandemic, sanctions, a severe drought, and the economic consequences of the war in the Ukraine.

In 2022, 90 percent of Syrians lived below the poverty line and at least 12 million Syrians out of an estimated remaining population of around 16 million were food insecure, [according to the World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#). More than 600,000 children were chronically malnourished. Access to shelter, healthcare, electricity, education, public transportation, water, and sanitation have all worsened dramatically since the conflict began. People across the country were facing fuel shortages and rising food prices.

In February, the government announced the [exclusion of some 600,000 families](#) from its subsidies program, which includes gas and heating fuels, bread, and other basic commodities such as flour and sugar. The move triggered protests in the southern governorate Suwaida and public criticism online.

In September, a [deadly cholera outbreak](#) spread across northern Syria leading to fears that it may spread to the rest of Syria and the region more broadly.

Obstacles to Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction

At least 14.6 million Syrians needed humanitarian aid across Syria in 2022, an increase of 1.2 million from 2021, [according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#).

Millions in northeast and northwest Syria relied on the cross-border flow of food, medicine, and other lifesaving assistance, including the Covid-19 vaccine. Aid workers told Human Rights Watch that non-UN agencies had nowhere near the UN's capacity to buy supplies and transport them into the northwest. They said that shutting down UN aid supplies and ending UN funding, as Russia has repeatedly threatened to do with its UN Security Council veto, would [deny aid to millions](#) of people.

Non-UN aid groups in northeast Syria said they have been unable to bring in enough aid, particularly for health care, since the UN was forced to [stop](#) its cross-border operations between Iraq and Syria in January 2020.

In July 2022, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have renewed authorization for a full year for the only remaining cross-border humanitarian aid operation through the Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey to northwest Syria, without Damascus's backing. Instead, the Security Council [agreed](#) to extend this critical lifeline for only six months, meaning it would expire in January 2023 in the middle of winter, when needs are greatest. At time of writing, it was unclear if Russia will agree to another renewal of the mandate.

The Syrian government continued to impose severe restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid in government-held areas of Syria and elsewhere in the country and to divert aid to punish those who express dissent. A [lack of sufficient safeguards](#) in procurement practices by UN agencies providing aid in Syria has resulted in a serious risk of financing abusive entities.

Women's Rights

Women in government held areas continued to face discrimination in relation to marriage, divorce, responsibility over children, and inheritance under the Personal Status Law. A woman loses her right to financial maintenance from her husband if she refuses to live with her husband in the marital home without a "legitimate excuse" or if she works outside the marital home without her husband's permission. While authorities amended the law in 2019, removing some references to "disobedience" by women to their husbands, the law still punishes women for some acts of disobedience relating to mobility.

Authorities in 2020 repealed Article 548 of the penal code, which allowed men to receive reduced sentences if they injured or killed their wives or immediate female relatives on finding them engaging in an "illegitimate" sexual act. However, other articles remain that could allow men to receive reduced sentences for violence against women. The penal code also criminalizes adultery in a manner that discriminates against women and provides a longer prison sentence for adultery for women than men.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

[Syrian](#) state and non-state actors have [subjected](#) men, boys, transgender women, and nonbinary people to sexual violence during the Syrian conflict, resulting in severe physical and mental health consequences. Under Article 520 of the Syrian penal code, "unnatural sexual intercourse" is punishable by up to three years in prison.

Displacement Crisis

The displacement crisis remains one of the most dire and protracted consequences of the war. Since the start of the armed conflict in 2011, 12.3 million have been forced to flee the country, according to OCHA, with 6.7 million currently internally displaced across the country.

In Turkey, opposition politicians have made speeches that fuel anti-refugee sentiment and suggest that Syrians should be returned to war-torn Syria. President Erdogan's coalition government has responded with pledges to resettle Syrians in Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria. Against this backdrop of anti-refugee sentiment, Turkey is unlawfully deporting hundreds of Syrian men and some boys to northern Syria.

In Lebanon, the caretaker minister of displaced, Issam Charafeddine, [announced](#) in July a government plan to begin returning 15,000 Syrian refugees to [Syria](#) a month. In September, Lebanon's caretaker prime minister tasked Abbas Ibrahim, head of General Security, the agency responsible for the exit and entry of foreigners that has carried out forcible deportations of Syrians in the past, with negotiating the "voluntary and safe" return of Syrian refugees to Damascus.

In July, it appeared that Denmark's controversial move to designate parts of [Syria](#) "safe," thereby opening the door for the potential return of hundreds of Syrian refugees, was discredited when the Netherlands Council of State ruled that Syrian asylum seekers in the Netherlands cannot be automatically transferred to Denmark. Despite Denmark's designation, most European Union member states, the EU itself, and UN High Commissioner for Refugees, maintain that Syria is not safe for refugee returns.

Returnees to Syria [continue to face a host of human rights violations](#), including arbitrary detention, torture, forced disappearances, and abuse by Syrian authorities. Returning refugees also face extreme economic hardship, unable to afford basic food items. Most find their homes either totally or partially destroyed and are unable to afford the costs of renovation. The Syrian government provides no assistance in repairing homes.

At least 2.4 million of the 6.1 million school-age children in Syria are [out of school](#), and 1 in 3 schools is damaged, destroyed, or used for military or other purposes. Children with disabilities across Syria [faced myriad abuses](#), such as greater risks during attacks and a lack of access to the basic support services they need, including health care, assistive devices, and education. Despite [billions of dollars in aid](#), humanitarian operations in Syria have failed to sufficiently identify and address the rights and needs of children with various types of disabilities.

International Accountability Efforts

On January 13, 2022, a German court [convicted](#) and sentenced Anwar R., a former member of Syria's General Intelligence Directorate, for crimes against humanity. He is the most senior former Syrian government official to be held accountable for serious crimes in [Syria](#).

Earlier in February 2021, the same court [sentenced](#) Eyad A., another former Syrian intelligence official, to four and a half years in prison for aiding and abetting crimes against humanity.

A second trial in Germany involving allegations of torture and murder by state agents during Syria's decade-long brutal armed conflict [started](#) on January 19.

The International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), an evidence-gathering body established by the UN General Assembly in December 2016, continued to gather and preserve evidence for future criminal prosecutions.

The Investigation and Identification Team of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague [continues to investigate](#) responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict. The team has confirmed that Syrian government forces used chemical weapons on multiple occasions.

Key International Actors

The UN-led peace process, including the constitutional committee, made no progress in 2022. Russia, Turkey, the United States, and Iran continue to provide military and financial support to warring factions and to shield them from accountability.

Israel has increasingly and frequently conducted aerial strikes in Syria, including on military targets of the Syrian government's allies Iran and Hezbollah, a powerful Shiite political party and armed group. Such strikes targeted both Aleppo and Damascus airports in 2022. An Israeli attack on Damascus International Airport on June 10 disrupted the delivery of UN aid supplies for about two weeks, the UN said. The US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS continues to fund the SDF and support its operations against ISIS.

In the UN Security Council, the US, and some European Council members have pushed for the reinstatement of the full humanitarian cross-border mechanism. Russia has continued to use its veto power to block expansion of the cross-border aid mandate back to its original four crossing points. At time of writing, there was only one crossing authorized by the Security Council.

Individuals credibly implicated in atrocity crimes, entities within or affiliated to the Syrian government, and ISIS continue to be under robust sanctions by the United States, European Union, and the United Kingdom, in addition to a few sector-wide sanctions that may have had a direct or indirect negative impact on people's rights, especially those who are most vulnerable.