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Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Syria

Executive Summary

President Bashar Assad has ruled the Syrian Arab Republic since 2000. The constitution mandates the primacy of Baath Party leaders in state institutions and society, and Assad and Baath party leaders dominate all three branches of government as an authoritarian regime. An uprising against the regime that began in 2011 continued throughout the year. The 2014 presidential election and the 2016 parliamentary elections resulted in the election of Assad and 200 People’s Council (Syrian parliament) seats for the Baath Party-led National Progressive Front, respectively. Both elections took place in an environment of widespread regime coercion, and many Syrians residing in opposition-held territory did not participate in the elections. Observers did not consider the elections free or fair.

The regime’s multiple security branches traditionally operated autonomously with no defined boundaries between their areas of jurisdiction. Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence reported to the Ministry of Defense, the Political Security Directorate reported to the Ministry of Interior, and the General Intelligence Directorate reported directly to the Office of the President. The Interior Ministry controlled the four separate divisions of police. Regime-affiliated militia, such as the National Defense Forces (NDF), integrated with other regime-affiliated forces and performed similar roles without defined jurisdiction. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the uniformed military, police, and state security forces but possessed limited influence over foreign and domestic military or paramilitary organizations operating in the country, including Russian armed forces, Iran-affiliated Lebanese Hizballah, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and nonuniformed proregime militias, such as the NDF.

Regime and proregime forces launched major aerial and ground offensives in April to recapture areas of northwest Syria, killing thousands of civilians and forcing hundreds of thousands more to flee. In December these forces launched another large-scale assault. The April assault, involving the use of heavy weapons and chemical weapons, and the December assault that involved heavy weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Syrian and Russian airstrikes repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, and farms, many of which were included in UN

deconfliction lists. As of December the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported there were 6.2 million internally displaced Syrians, 2.5 million of whom were children, and more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR.

Significant human rights issues included: reports of unlawful or arbitrary killings by the regime, including those involving the continued use of chemical weapons, among them chlorine and other substances; forced disappearances; torture, including torture involving sexual violence; arbitrary detention; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including denial of medical care; prisoners of conscience; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; a lack of independence of the judiciary; undue restrictions on free expression, including violence against journalists, restrictions on the press and access to the internet, censorship, and site blocking; substantial suppression of the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; undue restrictions on freedom of movement; restrictions on political participation; high-level and widespread corruption; unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers by the regime and other armed actors; trafficking in persons; criminalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) status or conduct; violence and severe discrimination targeting LGBTI persons; and severe restrictions on workers' rights.

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

Regime-linked paramilitary groups reportedly engaged in frequent violations and abuses, including massacres, indiscriminate killings, kidnapping civilians, extreme physical abuse, including sexual violence, and detentions. Regime-affiliated militias, including Hizballah, repeatedly targeted civilians.

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

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

Armed terrorist groups, such as al-Qaida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), committed a wide range of abuses, including massacres, unlawful killings, bombings, and kidnappings; unlawful detention; extreme physical abuse; and forced evacuations from homes based on sectarian identity. Despite the territorial defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in March, ISIS continued to carry out unlawful killings, bombings, and kidnappings, attack members of religious minority groups, and subject women and girls to routine rape, forced marriages, and sex trafficking.

Elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minorities that included members of the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG), reportedly engaged in acts of corruption, unlawful restriction of the movement of persons, and arbitrary arrest of civilians, as well as attacks resulting in civilian casualties.

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

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

There were numerous reports that the regime and its agents, as well as other armed actors, committed arbitrary or unlawful killings in relation to the conflict (see section 1.g.).

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), more than 226,095 civilians were killed in the conflict from 2011 to December. During the year, 3,364 civilians were killed, including 486 women, 842 children, 13 media workers, and 43 medical and humanitarian workers.

In May the *New York Times* reported messages were being smuggled out of regime prisons that hundreds of detainees were being sent to Sednaya Prison, where newly released prisoners reported that executions in the prison were accelerating. Although the regime denied using a crematorium to dispose of prisoners, the regime still has not returned the bodies of thousands of deceased prisoners after releasing death notices in 2018.

The SNHR reported that more than 14,361 individuals died due to torture between 2011 and September, including 178 children and 63 women; the SNHR attributed approximately 99 percent of all cases to regime forces, including 275 deaths during the year (see section 1.a.).

The regime maintained its use of helicopters and airplanes to conduct aerial bombardment and shelling. The regime continued to torture and kill persons in detention facilities. U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated on September 26 that the U.S. government had assessed the regime was responsible for “innumerable atrocities, some of which rose to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the use of chemical weapons, killings, torture, enforced disappearance, and other inhuman acts.”

In December the United Nations secretary-general expressed alarm at the scale of the continuing regime assault on Idlib and reported attacks on evacuation routes as civilians attempted to flee. The same month, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that some 284,000 persons fled from their homes, mainly in southern Idlib. In September the UN high commissioner for human rights Michelle Bachelet stated that the continuing regime assault on Idlib resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians since April, mainly due to airstrikes by

regime forces and their allies but also, to a lesser extent, attacks by nonstate armed groups. The UN high commissioner further stated that the United Nations recorded damage or destruction of 51 medical facilities in Idlib, with two incidents in which the same facilities were repeatedly hit, causing additional casualties among first responders.

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

b. Disappearance

There were numerous reports of disappearances by or on behalf of regime authorities. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI) reported the number of forced disappearances remained high and, according to the SNHR’s database, included many children. Human rights groups’ estimates of the number of disappearances since 2011 varied widely, but all estimates pointed to disappearances as a common practice. In September the SNHR held the regime responsible for 88 percent of the estimated 144,889 forced disappearances from 2011 until February. The SNHR also reported an escalation of forced disappearances this year, stating that recent cases of arbitrary arrests, in which detainees were initially allowed to seek legal representation, became forced disappearances as detainees were transferred to unknown locations and not heard from since. The regime reportedly targeted critics, specifically journalists, medical personnel, antiregime protesters, their families, and associates. Most disappearances reported by activists, human rights observers, and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) appeared to be politically motivated, and a number of prominent political prisoners remained missing (see section 1.e.). In May, Syrians for Truth and Justice and the Office of Daraa Martyrs reported intelligence branches had arrested at least 500 Syrians who had signed reconciliation agreements with the regime. Numerous other NGOs reported cases of Syrians throughout the year, including returning refugees, being arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared despite having signed “reconciliation agreements,” in which the government agreed to grant them clemency.

In July 2018 the regime began publishing notifications of thousands of detainees’ deaths in regime detention facilities. Many of these notices stated that the deaths had occurred several years prior without notification of family members. In many cases the regime had denied the presence of these individuals in its detention centers until it released death notifications. The SNHR recorded at least 930 of these notifications up to September but estimated that the number of detainees certified as dead was in the thousands. The regime did not announce publication of notifications on updated state registers, return bodies to families, or disclose locations where remains were interred. According to numerous NGO and media reports, many families were unaware of the status of their detained family members and learned that relatives they believed to be alive had died months or even years earlier.

In April the family of detained journalist Ali Othman received a certificate from the civil registry stating he died in 2013. He had been arrested in 2012 in Aleppo. The regime claimed he died of natural causes, but unconfirmed reports stated he endured severe torture in multiple regime detention facilities, including Sednaya Prison, the subject of numerous reports of torture and extrajudicial killings since 2011.

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

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

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

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

The law prohibits torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and provides up to three years' imprisonment for violations. Human rights activists, the COI, and local NGOs, however, reported thousands of credible cases of regime authorities engaging in frequent torture, abuse, and inhuman treatment to punish perceived opponents, including during interrogations. In May the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) released an analysis of regime documents exposing clear patterns of widespread, systematic, and officially sanctioned human rights abuses and violations across regime security and intelligence agencies.

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

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

The SNHR released a report in October documenting 72 methods of torture the regime continued to use in detention facilities and military hospitals. The COI reported torture methods remained consistent. These included beatings on the head, bodies, and soles of feet (*falaqua*) with wooden and metal sticks, hoses, cables, belts, whips, and wires; electric shocks, including to genitals; burning detainees with cigarettes; and placement in stress positions for prolonged periods of time. Other reported methods of physical torture included removing nails and hair, stabbings, and cutting off body parts, including ears and genitals. Numerous human rights organizations reported other forms of torture, including forcing objects into the rectum and vagina, hyperextending the spine, and putting the victim onto the frame of a wheel and whipping exposed body

parts. Additionally, officers reportedly continued the practice of *shabeh*, in which they stripped detainees naked, hung them for prolonged periods from the ceiling, and administered electrical shocks. A substantial number of detainees reported being handcuffed and then suspended from the ceiling or a wall by their wrists for hours.

The SJAC, the SNHR, and various human rights and media organizations stated that regime authorities subjected women and girls, as well as men and boys to a lesser extent, in detention in regime political and military institutions to sexual violence, including gang rape, rape, and genital mutilation. The SNHR estimated 889 incidents of sexual violence inside detention centers, including 450 against girls younger than 18, committed by parties to the conflict between March 2011 and September 2019. The SJAC reported security officials subjected detainees to sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, the threat of rape or sexual violence, sexual harassment, torture of sexual organs, and forced stripping.

A male survivor described his sexual organs being repeatedly pulled by pliers, causing permanent damage. A female survivor reported having her breasts and vagina repeatedly electrocuted, while another reported an example of a female detainee being hung by her breasts.

There was no indication regime use of psychological torture decreased. One commonly reported practice was detention of victims overnight in cells with corpses of deceased victims. The SNHR reported psychological torture methods included forcing prisoners to witness the rape of other prisoners, threatening the rape of family members (in particular, female family members), forcing prisoners to undress, and insulting prisoners' beliefs. The SJAC assessed in April that survivors of such abuse often suffered from serious medical complications and psychological trauma, frequently finding themselves stigmatized or shunned when they attempted to return to their communities.

There continued to be a significant number of reports of abuse of children by the regime. The COI noted regular reports of detention and torture of children younger than 13, in some cases as young as 11, in regime detention facilities. Officials reportedly targeted and tortured children because of their familial relations, or assumed relationships, with political dissidents, members of the armed opposition, and activist groups. According to the SNHR's database, at least 4,816 children were still detained or forcibly disappeared as of September, with at least 100 of those detentions having taken place during the year. In October the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict convened a special event on responding to sexual violence in the context of detention at which NGOs presented evidence of such abuses. Reports from the COI and NGOs detailed abuses against children committed by the Assad regime and armed militia groups and described the prevalence of *shabeh*, lynchings, beatings, rape, and forced sexual acts among children, among other abuses. Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights reported in December on the arrest and torture of a young boy, “Badei,” by Al Mezzeh Air Force Intelligence, where he was beaten with pipes, shocked with an electric rod, and whipped while suspended for three days by cuffs which cut into his wrists. He was subsequently beaten, forced into a tire, and strapped to a wooden board which bent his back the

wrong way. According to reliable witnesses, authorities continued to hold a number of children to compel parents and other relatives associated with opposition fighters to surrender to authorities.

The COI reported that, beginning in 2011 and continuing throughout the conflict, security forces subjected detainees to mistreatment in military hospitals, often obstructing medical care or exacerbating existing injuries as a technique in abuse and interrogation. The SNHR reported the torture of a 15-year-old child in Harasta Military Hospital. After the boy's teeth were beaten with a grenade until they broke, regime officials sprayed insecticide all over his body, set him on fire, and wrapped his body with gauze. Subsequently, officials repeatedly removed the gauze, peeled the boy's skin with a blade, and bandaged him with gauze again.

In a May report, the SJAC concluded that regime forces operated with impunity while systematic, officially sanctioned torture continued, as did the widespread practice of arbitrary detention. The General Command of the Army and Armed Forces may issue arrest warrants for crimes committed by military officers, members of the internal security forces, or customs police during their normal duties; military courts must try such cases. Nevertheless, security forces operated independently and generally outside the control of the legal system. There were no known prosecutions or convictions of security force personnel for abuse or corruption and no reported regime actions to increase respect for human rights by the security forces. The SNHR reported in October that regime officials responsible for crimes were often promoted rather than held accountable.

European officials detained two former Syrian officials in Germany, Anwar Raslan and Eyad al-Gharib, and another Syrian official in France on suspicion of torture and other crimes against humanity, primarily for actions that reportedly took place in regime detention facilities.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions remained harsh and in many instances were life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical and psychological abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care. The SNHR estimated at least 215,000 Syrians were in detention centers, with the regime responsible for at least 89 percent of those detentions.

Physical Conditions: Prison facilities were grossly overcrowded. Authorities commonly held juveniles, adults, pretrial detainees, and convicted prisoners together in inadequate spaces. The COI reported in 2018 that authorities continued to hold children in prison with adults. According to the SNHR's database, at least 4,914 children were detained or forcibly disappeared as of September, with at least 224 of those detentions having taken place during the year.

A 2019 report from the COI found that regime detention facilities lacked food, water, space, hygiene, and medical care. According to local and international NGOs, the regime held prisoners and detainees in severely cramped quarters with little or no access to

toilets, hygiene, medical supplies, or adequate food. In May the *New York Times* reported that survivors said unsanitary conditions, neglect, and widespread torture were prevalent in regime detention centers and military hospitals. Poor conditions were so consistent that the COI concluded they reflected state policy.

Reports from multiple international NGO sources continued to suggest there were also many informal detention sites and that authorities held thousands of prisoners in converted military bases and in civilian infrastructure, such as schools and stadiums, and in unknown locations. Activists asserted the regime also housed arrested protesters in factories and vacant warehouses that were overcrowded and lacked adequate sanitary facilities.

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

Inside prisons and detention centers, the prevalence of death from disease remained high due to unsanitary conditions and the withholding of food, medical care, and medication. Local NGOs and medical professionals reported authorities denied medical care to prisoners with pre-existing health needs, such as diabetes, asthma, and breast cancer, and denied pregnant women any medical care. Authorities retaliated against prisoners who requested attention for the sick. Released prisoners commonly reported sickness and injury resulting from such conditions. In May the *New York Times* reported on death and disease in the regime’s detention centers. One survivor interviewed during the investigation was a law student and peaceful protester from Aleppo named Muhannad Ghabbash. He stated that at one of the centers where he was held, he counted 19 cellmates who died from disease, torture, and neglect in a single month. Ghabbash himself survived 19 months of detention and torture at 12 different prisons.

Information on conditions and care for prisoners with disabilities was unavailable.

Conditions in detention centers operated by various opposition groups were not well known, but the COI and local NGOs reported accounts of arbitrary detention, torture, inhuman treatment, and abuse. NGOs reported on dangerous conditions at the prisons and camps where ISIS fighters and their families were held in northeast Syria. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), at the largest of these centers, al-Hol Camp, there was widespread squalor, sexual abuse, and endemic violence. The ICG also reported that all these centers lacked adequate food, clean water, and were often cut off entirely from medical services, in an approach one aid official termed “malign neglect” and “collective punishment.”

According to the COI, conditions in detention centers run by nonstate actors, such as the HTS and ISIS, violated international law (see section 1.g.).

Administration: There were no credible mechanisms or avenues for prisoners to complain or submit grievances, and authorities routinely failed to investigate allegations or document complaints or grievances. Activists reported there was no ombudsman to serve on behalf of prisoners and detainees. The law provides for prompt access to family members, but NGOs and families reported inconsistent application of the law, with some families waiting years to see relatives. The regime continued to detain thousands of prisoners without charge and incommunicado in unknown locations.

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

Independent Monitoring: The regime prohibited independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions, and diplomatic and consular officials had no greater access than in previous years. In October the SNHR called for the regime to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Institute for International Criminal Investigations access to detention centers. The SNHR also called on the regime to respond to various allegations of torture detailed in its October report on the regime’s use of torture. The regime did not respond to the claims.

Some opposition forces invited the COI in 2018 to visit facilities they administered and allowed some international human rights groups, including HRW, to visit. The International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent continued to negotiate with all parties, except ISIS, to gain access to detention centers across the country but was unable to gain access to any regime-controlled facilities during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but a 2011 decree allows the regime to detain suspects for up to 60 days without charge if suspected of “terrorism” and related offenses. The law provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, but the regime did not observe this requirement. Arbitrary arrests continued according to local news sources, and several human rights organizations reported arbitrary detentions in the tens of thousands.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law generally requires a warrant for arrest in criminal cases, but police often cited emergency or national security justifications for acting without a warrant, which was permitted under the law. Police usually brought arrested individuals to a police station for processing and detention until a trial date was set. The law limits the length of time authorities may hold a person without charge to 60 days, but according to various NGOs, activists, and former detainees, police held many individuals for longer periods or indefinitely. Civil and criminal defendants have the right to bail hearings and possible release from pretrial detention on their own recognizance, but the regime applied the

law inconsistently. At the initial court hearing, which could be months or years after the arrest, the accused may retain an attorney at personal expense or the court may appoint an attorney, although authorities did not ensure lawyers’ access to their clients before trial. According to local human rights organizations, denial of access to a lawyer was common.

In cases involving political or national security offenses, authorities reportedly often made arrests in secret, with cases assigned in an apparently arbitrary manner to the Counterterrorism Court (CTC), courts-martial, or criminal courts. The regime reportedly detained suspects incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and denied them the right to a judicial determination of their pretrial detention. In most cases authorities reportedly did not inform detainees of charges against them until their arraignment, often months or years after their arrest. Security detainees did not have access to lawyers before or during questioning or throughout preparation and presentation of their defense.

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

Arbitrary Arrest: Security forces continued previous practices of arbitrary arrests, and detainees had inconsistent legal redress.

In September the COI reported an increase in incidents of arbitrary arrests and detentions of Syrians by regime forces. The SNHR reported that regime forces and proregime militias were responsible for more than 2,797 cases of arbitrary arrest in the first half of the year. Between the start of the conflict in 2011 and March, the SNHR reported almost 146,657 arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances; it attributed almost 90 percent of such cases to the regime. The COI stated regime forces and affiliated militias continued to detain tens of thousands of persons arbitrarily or unlawfully in official and makeshift detention facilities. It further reported that women with familial ties to opposition fighters or defectors were similarly detained for intelligence-gathering purposes or retribution. Regime authorities held the vast majority without due process or access to legal representation or to their families.

In December, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) issued a report on the arrest, detention, and torture of Syrian healthcare workers. PHR’s investigation concluded that regime forces specifically targeted health-care workers because of their status as health-care providers and their real or perceived involvement in the provision of health services to opposition members and sympathizers. Survivors reported the regime relied on torture to coerce medical workers to confess to crimes they did not commit and gather information on other health workers and healthcare activities.

Reports continued of security services arresting relatives of wanted persons to pressure individuals to surrender. Police rarely issued or presented warrants or court orders before an arrest. According to NGO reports and confirmed by regime memoranda

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

Multiple reports from local and international NGOs stated that the regime prevented the majority of those detained from contacting their relatives or obtaining a lawyer. When authorities occasionally released detainees, it was often without any formal judicial procedures. Hundreds of detainees interviewed by human rights groups stated they had been arrested, detained, questioned, often tortured, and released after months or years of detention without seeing a judge or being sentenced.

The SJAC reported authorities continued to arrest men and boys arbitrarily at some checkpoints, often citing no reason for their arrest or solely for being of military age. Some were then transferred to a long-term detention facility or forcibly disappeared.

The COI reported fears of arbitrary arrests and detention prevented internally displaced persons (IDPs) from returning to their homes in areas retaken by regime forces. HRW reported in May that Syrian intelligence branches were arbitrarily detaining and disappearing persons in areas retaken by the regime, in violation of reconciliation agreements. HRW documented 11 cases in the first four months of the year in Ghouta and Daraa; in all cases, those detained had signed reconciliation agreements with the regime. Local organizations, including Syrians for Truth and Justice and the Office of Daraa Martyrs, documented at least 500 arrests in these areas since August. A September COI report also stated that recent returnees to areas such as Daraa, Duma, and Ghouta were being arbitrarily detained and disappeared by regime forces.

There also were instances of nonstate armed groups reportedly engaging in arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention (see section 1.g.). For example, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reported the SDF arbitrarily arrested Hazem al-Faraj, director of Syrian radio station Bissan FM, from his house in the An Nawawi Mosque neighborhood in Raqqa without filing charges.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem. Authorities reportedly held thousands of detainees incommunicado for months or years before releasing them without charge or bringing them to trial, while many detainees died in prison (see section 1.a.). A shortage of available courts and lack of legal provisions for speedy trial or plea bargaining contributed to lengthy pretrial detentions. In previous years there were numerous reported instances when the length of detention exceeded the sentence for the crime. Percentages for the prison/detainee population held in pretrial detention and the length of time held were not available during the year. Syrian human rights groups continued to highlight the plight of detainees and advocate for their release. At an August 7 UN Security Council open debate on the situation of detainees in regime detention centers, UN under-secretary-general for political affairs Rosemary A. DiCarlo and various member states called on the Syrian delegation to immediately release arbitrary detainees, grant independent, impartial monitoring groups access to detention centers, and provide information to families of detainees.

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

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but authorities regularly subjected courts to political influence and prosecutors and defense attorneys to intimidation and abuse. Outcomes of cases with political context appeared predetermined, and defendants could sometimes bribe judicial officials and prosecutors. Regime authorities detained without access to fair public trial tens of thousands of individuals, including those associated with NGOs, human rights activists, journalists, relief workers, religious figures, and medical providers.

Trial Procedures

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

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

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

The International Legal Assistance Consortium (ILAC) and other human rights lawyers reported that in some politically charged cases, the regime provided prosecution case files to defense lawyers that did not include any evidence, if they provided anything at all. Defendants may present witnesses and evidence or confront the prosecution

witnesses, but authorities often did not respect this right. Defendants may not legally be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but family members and the NGOs routinely reported defendants were tortured and intimidated in advance of trial proceedings, as described in a May HRW report. The COI reported the CTC and courts-martial relied on forced confessions and information acquired through torture to obtain convictions.

Convicted persons may appeal verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation. Not all citizens enjoyed these rights equally, in part because interpretations of religious law provide the basis for elements of family and criminal law and discriminate against women. Some personal status laws apply sharia (Islamic law) regardless of the religion of those involved. Additionally, media and NGO reports suggested the regime denied some, and in certain cases all, of these protections to those accused of political crimes, violence against the regime, or providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in opposition-held areas. Sentences for persons accused of antigovernment activity tended to be harsh, if they reached trial, with violent and nonviolent offenders receiving similar punishments. For example, the SNHR reported in May that almost immediately after signing reconciliation agreements with the regime, opposition affiliates in Daraa, “Wael,” and “Farid” were arrested in August after areas outside of regime control were retaken. They were beaten, denied access to a lawyer, and confined for four to five months in Damascus. According to the SNHR, the majority of those tried received five- to 20-year prison sentences. The regime did not permit defendants before the CTC to have effective legal representation. Although activists reported individuals charged under the counterterrorism law could retain attorneys to move their trial date, according to the ILAC, authorities did not allow them to speak during proceedings or retain copies of documents on the court’s file.

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

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

In the territories they controlled, Kurdish authorities created a legal code based on the “Social Charter.” Reports described the Social Charter as a mix of Syrian criminal and civil law with laws concerning divorce, marriage, weapons ownership, and tax evasion drawn from EU law, but without certain fair trial standards—such as the prohibition on arbitrary detention, the right to judicial review, and the right to appoint a lawyer—that are customary in western judicial systems. The justice system consisted of courts, legal committees, and investigative bodies.

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

In the decreasing amount of territory it controlled, ISIS reportedly established courts to preside over its interpretation of sharia headed by judges with varied credentials. The Free Yezidi Foundation reported that ISIS detained civilians, including Yezidis and members of other minority groups in areas under its control, who were accused of violating its rules or suspected of cooperating with enemy forces without proper judicial proceedings.

An October 8 Human Rights Watch press release concluded the SDF held detainees suspected of ISIS affiliation without providing due process. HRW said that civilian authorities in the area asserted they did not “have the necessary infrastructure to prosecute foreign ISIS suspects in line with international due process standards.” HRW urged that countries whose citizens were detained should “immediately ensure that their imprisoned citizens can return home for rehabilitation, reintegration, and appropriate prosecution in line with international standards.”

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were numerous reports of political prisoners and detainees. The SNHR and other NGOs reported the systematic arrest of tens of thousands of citizens since 2011. At greatest risk were those perceived to oppose the regime, including peaceful demonstrators, human rights activists, and political dissidents and their families. The four government intelligence agencies—Air Force, Military, Political Security, and General—were responsible for most such arrests and detentions.

At an August UN Security Council session on detainees in regime detention, the UN under-secretary-general for political and peacebuilding affairs noted the COI had concluded regime arbitrary detention of Syrian civilians was systematic and widespread but reported the total number of political prisoners and detainees was difficult to determine in view of the lack of government information and absence of government transparency. Authorities continued to refuse to divulge information regarding the numbers or names of persons detained on political or security-related charges. Human rights groups noted detainees included doctors, humanitarian aid providers, human rights defenders, and journalists, as well as women and children.

Prison conditions for political or national security prisoners, especially accused opposition members, reportedly continued to be much worse than those for common criminals. According to local NGOs, authorities deliberately placed political prisoners in crowded cells with convicted and alleged felons and subjected them to verbal and physical threats and abuse. Political prisoners also reported they often slept on the ground due to lack of beds and faced frequent searches. According to reports from families, particularly the Families for Freedom collective, authorities refused many

political prisoners’ access to family and counsel. Some former detainees and human rights observers reported the regime denied political prisoners access to reading materials, including the Quran, and prohibited them from praying in their cells.

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

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

Amnesty: In October 2018 the regime granted amnesty to army deserters and civilians who avoided military duty, provided they reported for duty within four months if residing inside Syria and within six months if outside the country. The amnesty did not cover those fighting against the regime or joining the opposition, regarded by the regime as terrorists. Media outlets reported that refugees were skeptical, fearing forced conscription and imprisonment. Limited releases of detainees occurred within the framework of localized settlement agreements with the regime. During the year there were increasing reports of regime forces violating prior amnesty agreements by conducting raids and arrest campaigns concentrated against civilians and former affiliates of armed opposition factions in areas that previously signed settlement agreements with the regime.

In May HRW documented the detention or disappearance of three defectors from the military intelligence and security forces, even though the men had signed reconciliation agreements with the regime.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

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

In the Kurdish-administered parts of northeastern Syria, civilian peace and reconciliation committees reportedly resolved civil disputes before elevating them to a court.

Property Restitution

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

The regime continued to implement Law No. 10, passed in 2018 to create “redevelopment zones” to be slated for reconstruction. Property owners were notified to provide documentary proof of property ownership or risk losing ownership to the state. If an individual does not claim ownership successfully during the one-year period, as amended by Law No. 42, the property reverts to the local regime. An individual can prove ownership in person or through designated proxies.

In March the Syria Legal Network, War Reparations Center, and the NGO PAX reported that the regime’s enacting and implementation of 12 laws and policies since 2011 continued to present barriers to Syrians, particularly returning refugees, trying to recover property in their possession prior to the conflict. In January the regime extended the window from 30 days to one year for citizens to prove they own land being seized for development under Law No. 10, but NGOs stated it would be nearly impossible for thousands of refugees and IDPs to claim their property and that the procedural requirement of the law, coupled with the political context, created significant potential for abuse and discrimination, particularly toward the Sunni population. Subsequently, in a July report, the European Institute of Peace stated many Syrians are unable to assert their housing, land, and property rights due to land zoning, titling, and documentation requirements, and the regime continued to prevent displaced residents from returning to their properties, including by blocking access to the properties or demolishing their properties with no warning and without providing alternative housing or compensation. Despite the existence of an appeals process, NGOs continued to express serious concern the law was being implemented in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner.

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

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary searches, but the regime routinely failed to respect these prohibitions. Police and other security services frequently bypassed search warrant requirements in criminal cases by citing security reasons or emergency grounds for entry into private property. Arbitrary home raids occurred in large cities

and towns of most governorates where the regime maintained a presence, usually following antigovernment protests, opposition attacks against regime targets, or resumption of regime control.

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

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

The regime reportedly punished large numbers of family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives. In July, HRW reported the regime punished entire families placed arbitrarily on a list of alleged terrorists by freezing their assets. HRW interviewed one victim whose house, car, and factory had been seized. Another man living in a regime-controlled area had his family-owned pharmacy seized after his brother appeared on an alleged terrorist list. The family relied on this pharmacy for their income and livelihood. HRW also reported cases of family members being harassed and detained by regime security forces. For example, HRW reported in May that “Iyad,” a media activist, left the country in February because he needed medical treatment that he could not reliably obtain in Damascus due to concerns about being arrested at a checkpoint on the way. After he left, military intelligence officers went to his house and detained his father, mother, and wife. Intelligence officials held the family for a day and interrogated them regarding Iyad’s whereabouts. Iyad said that military intelligence had visited his family four additional times after their release and threatened to rearrest his wife, mother, and father unless they paid them over \$225.

g. Abuses in Internal Conflict

The regime, nongovernment militias such as the NDF, opposition groups, the SDF, and violent extremist groups such as the HTS and ISIS, continued to participate in armed combat throughout the year. The government of Turkey participated in armed combat in the northwest and northeast of the country. The governments of Russia and Iran, as well as foreign terrorist groups such as Hizballah, supported regime forces across the country.

The most egregious human rights violations and abuses stemmed from the regime’s systemic disregard for the safety and well-being of its people. These abuses manifested themselves in a complete denial of citizens’ ability to choose their government peacefully, a breakdown in the ability of law enforcement authorities to protect the majority of individuals from state and nonstate violence, and the use of violence against civilians and civilian institutions. Numerous reports, such as the September COI report, indicated the regime arbitrarily and unlawfully killed, tortured, and detained persons on a large scale, notably including Syrian refugees who voluntarily returned to regime-controlled territories. Attacks against schools, hospitals, places of worship, water and electrical stations, bakeries, markets, civil defense force centers, densely populated residential areas, and houses were common throughout the country. In 2018 the COI

concluded that the methods employed to carry out sieges, as documented by the COI since 2012, amounted to egregious violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law and, in some instances, to war crimes.

As of September there were more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in neighboring countries and 6.2 million IDPs. The regime frequently blocked access for humanitarian assistance and removed items such as medical supplies from convoys headed to civilian areas, particularly areas held by opposition groups.

Media sources and human rights groups varied in their estimates of how many persons have been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented more than 570,000 conflict-related deaths from 2011 until March, while the SNHR estimated more than 220,000 civilians were killed during the same time. This large discrepancy was due to the large number of missing and disappeared Syrians, whose fates remained unknown. The SNHR attributed 89 percent of civilian deaths to regime forces and Iranian-sponsored militias.

The SNHR recorded 23 cluster munitions attacks during the year in Idlib Governorate, 20 of which were attributed to the regime, resulting in the deaths of 10 civilians and injury to many more.

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

There were numerous reports of deaths in custody, notably at the Mezzeh airport detention facility, Military Security Branches 215 and 235, and Sednaya Prison, by execution without due process, torture, and deaths from other forms of abuse, such as malnutrition and lack of medical care.

In most cases authorities reportedly did not return the bodies of deceased detainees to their families, although the regime denied using a crematorium to dispose of prisoner remains.

According to the *Washington Post*, lawyers familiar with the process said the Defense Ministry sent the names of detainees to civil registry offices across the country throughout the year and instructed that these prisoners be registered as dead. The deaths were registered across the provinces of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Latakia. The civil registry offices issued notices that were essentially executive summaries, reportedly listing few details about the deceased. Military hospitals issued other death notices, formal certificates, and medical reports. These routinely listed the cause of death as heart attack or stroke.

In April online media outlet *Syria Call* reported 95 detainees were executed in Sednaya Prison, the majority of whom were held on terrorism-related charges. In May the *New York Times* reported that recently freed prisoners claimed hundreds of detainees were reportedly being sent to Sednaya Prison, where executions were accelerating without due process. In November the Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison reported that almost none of the detainees arrested since 2011 and sent to Sednaya Prison were notified of their sentences.

Investigators with the Center for International Justice and Accountability uncovered regime and military memos acknowledging the deaths of detainees due to torture and filthy conditions. The SNHR documented the deaths of numerous individuals, including one pregnant woman and her baby, as a result of torture at the hands of the regime during the year. On January 12, the SNHR received information confirming death by torture in a regime detention center of Mohammad Osama al Imam, a graduate student from the Mhajrin neighborhood of Damascus, arrested by regime forces in 2017.

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

Reports from NGOs and a September COI report indicated that in Idlib, hostilities escalated in two major waves, first in mid-February and then again at the end of April, causing hundreds of civilian deaths in airstrikes. The SNHR reported 1,432 civilian deaths since April have been documented in Idlib, attributed to Syrian and Russian forces. Aerial and ground offensives throughout the demilitarized zone destroyed civilian infrastructure including “deconflicted” hospitals, schools, marketplaces, and farmlands.

The COI stated that patterns strongly suggest that proregime forces systematically targeted medical facilities and that such attacks may amount to the war crime of deliberately attacking protected objects and intentionally attacking medical personnel.

Regime forces reportedly continued to use prohibited chemical weapons and cluster munitions in densely populated areas and attacks against civilian and protected objects, including schools and hospitals. The regime renewed its use of chemical weapons as part of its military advance in Latakia suburbs, with the SNHR documenting one such attack in al Kbaina village on May 19. In March the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) released a report concluding that a toxic chemical including chlorine was used in an attack in April 2018 in the town of Douma, near Damascus. The OPCW did not assign responsibility for the attack, but the COI previously reported on the attack, stating that a gas cylinder containing a chlorine payload had been delivered by a regime helicopter and struck a multistory residential apartment building located near the southwest Shohada Square. The OPCW also announced in January that a fact-finding mission had been deployed to investigate allegations regarding chemical weapons use in Aleppo in November 2018.

In addition to chemical weapons, the regime also frequently employed prohibited cluster munitions and barrel bombs. The SNHR documented at least 3,420 barrel bombs dropped by Russian and regime helicopters and planes on Idlib between April and September, often striking civilians and civilian infrastructure, including homes, medical facilities, and schools.

Additionally, PHR, the SNHR, and other NGOs concluded that Russia and the regime targeted humanitarian workers, such as the Syria Civil Defense (The White Helmets) as they attempted to save victims in affected communities.

Violent extremist groups were responsible for killings during the year. In January Mohammad al Hussein al Jnaid was arrested by HTS gunmen. In April the SNHR received information confirming his death due to torture in a detention center, although his body has not been returned to his family. The COI reported armed opposition groups committed war crimes by launching indiscriminate, indirect artillery fire into densely populated civilian areas with no apparent legitimate military objective and resulting in the death and injury of civilians. On April 7, Jaysh al-Izzah launched rockets towards Hama, striking the National Hospital, killing civilians, including a child, and injuring some 20 others, including medics, patients, and children.

The SNHR attributed 28 civilian deaths to the HTS in the first half of the year. In June HTS members based in Aleppo launched at least a dozen 120 mm Grad rockets towards Al-Wadihi village located in the southern countryside around Aleppo. The attack killed 13 civilians including four women, five men and four children, all of whom were celebrating a wedding.

Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in March, the SNHR estimated the group was culpable for the deaths of at least 80 civilians during the year, including 11 women and seven children. The COI reported that on October 12, ISIS fighters attacked a makeshift camp and abducted scores of civilians, primarily women and children, later executing some of them for having left ISIS territory. In Suwayda', ISIS fighters went door-to-door, shooting and abducting civilian women, men, and children. The militants spared one survivor per family, often a woman, to tell the story. Upon expending their ammunition, numerous ISIS militants detonated their vests in suicide attacks, including near a crowded market, killing at least 200 civilians and injuring at least 170 others. Two of the would-be bombers were apprehended by Druze civilians near city hospitals before they could detonate their vests and were later publicly hanged by civilians in the provincial capital.

The SNHR attributed more than 116 civilian deaths to Kurdish forces (mainly the YPG) in the first half of the year. Following the October 9 launch of a cross-border Turkish military offensive into northeast Syria, the SNHR documented civilian casualties caused by SDF artillery fire into Turkey, such as two civilians, including an infant, killed by an October 10 strike in Akcakale.

Foreign powers also were implicated in deaths reportedly resulting from indiscriminate use of force.

The SNHR blamed Russia for 316 civilian deaths in the first eight months of the year, including 68 children and 34 women, and more than 6,500 civilian deaths since entry into the conflict. The September COI report stated that in response to attacks against Humaymim Air Base, the Russian Aerospace Forces joined the campaign in Idlib in March. The SNHR also estimated that Russian forces carried out 113 attacks on vital civilian facilities since April, including 15 on places of worship, 24 on schools, 21 on medical facilities, one on a market, and 23 on Syrian Civil Defense facilities. The SNHR estimated that 138 civilians in Idlib and 53 civilians in Hama died in Russian airstrikes during the year. The COI also implicated Russian forces in a continued pattern of attacks affecting crowded marketplaces. For example, media outlets reported that airstrikes led by Russian and Syrian forces on a market in Mara'at al-Numan killed at least 33 civilians and injured more than 100 others.

In October Turkish Armed Forces and Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups (TSOs) launched a military offensive into northeast Syria. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, AI, HRW, and media organizations reported that Turkish Armed Forces and TSOs attacked civilian infrastructure and residential areas, resulting in civilian casualties as well as instances of extrajudicial killings, looting, and property seizures. AI reported the Turkish Armed Forces and TSOs, “displayed shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes.”

The government of Turkey rejected the veracity of these reports and denied responsibility for Syrian opposition or TSO conduct, but broadly acknowledged the need for investigations and accountability related to such reports and relayed that the Turkish-supported Syrian National Army had established mechanisms for investigation and discipline. The government of Turkey stated that its own conduct in the operation was consistent with international law and that the military took care to avoid civilian casualties throughout.

AI, the *Washington Post*, *BBC News*, and the *New York Times* cited information from multiple sources reporting that Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition group Ahrar al-Sharqiya ambushed the convoy of Kurdish politician and secretary general of the Future Syria political party, Hevrin Khalaf, on October 12, extrajudicially killing Khalaf and her driver. Ahrar al-Sharqiya circulated a video on social media of its members executing one Kurdish fighter kneeling along the side of the road with his hands bound behind his back during the same attack. In separate incidents in the same area, Ahrar al-Sharqiya allegedly killed other Syrian civilians at a hastily established checkpoint.

AI and PHR also cited local sources reporting Turkish attacks on civilian infrastructure, including an October 12 airstrike near a school in Salhiye, killing four civilians, and injuring another six.

Reports of civilian casualties differed. As of late October, AI reported at least 218 Syrian civilians had been killed by Turkish and Turkish-supported Syrian opposition forces during the offensive. The Self Administration of Northeast Syria claimed Turkey's Operation Peace Spring had killed 478 civilians as of December. AI and PHR also cited local sources reporting Turkish attacks on civilian infrastructure, including an October 12 airstrike near a school in Salhiye that killed four civilians and injuring another six.

Shelling and bombardment from Turkish forces damaged Aluk Water Station twice in late 2019, cutting off water access to approximately 400,000 persons in Hasakah Province.

Turkish authorities reported that 18 civilians died inside Turkey, including an infant, and 150 were injured as a result of indirect fire they attributed to YPG forces in Syria during Operation Peace Spring. Turkish authorities also reported at least 100 Syrian civilians were killed in Turkey-controlled parts of the country by improvised explosive device (IED) attacks that Turkey attributed to the YPG.

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

Armed groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected regime affiliates, journalists, and activists. There were few updates in the kidnappings of many persons believed abducted by ISIS. As of September the SNHR attributed more than 2,400 continuing detentions and kidnappings to Kurdish forces (mainly the YPG), more than 2,800 to other armed opposition groups, almost 2,000 to the HTS, and more than 8,700 to ISIS.

Although ISIS no longer controlled significant territory, the fate of 8,143 individuals (including both Syrian and foreign national activists, humanitarian workers, and journalists) detained by ISIS remained unknown, according to the SNHR. In March the SDF reported to HRW that it found no detainees when it captured prisons and detention facilities from ISIS forces.

In 2014 ISIS abducted an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yazidis, during attacks against northern Iraq and reportedly took thousands of them to Syria, where they were sold as sex slaves, forced into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or given as “gifts” to ISIS commanders. NGOs and activists, such as Yazda and the Free Yazidi Foundation, reported that while more than 3,000 Yazidi women and children have since escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity, close to 3,000 remained unaccounted for. In June the *Washington Post* reported that a group of 21 women and children were rescued from ISIS and returned to Iraq, as confirmed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Since its establishment, the United Nations estimated that ISIS militants shot, beheaded, burned alive or kidnapped more than 9,000 members of the minority religion, in what the United Nations has called a genocidal campaign against them.

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

Residents in Afrin continued to report that the Turkish-supported Syrian National Army maintained a military presence and there were signs of Turkish administrative control. The COI reported numerous credible allegations of arbitrary arrests, detentions, and torture by armed groups in Afrin, often targeting individuals of Kurdish origin.

The COI reported a car bombing on June 2 in a Kurdish market heavily crowded with residents leaving a nearby mosque, killed at least 13 civilians, including two children, and injured 15 others. Victims of abductions were often of Kurdish origin or perceived as being wealthy and at times were held for ransom. Individuals, including activists openly critical of armed groups or people perceived to be supporters of the regime were regularly detained, tortured, and extorted. According to the STJ, 80 arrests occurred in August alone. The STJ reported that on August 5, the Syrian National Army arrested Sheikh Saed Zada, a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and a member of the executive Sharran local council, at his home in Afrin. After a brief release, Turkish military rearrested him, and his whereabouts were unknown.

Local media sources and human rights groups reported isolated instances of fighters associated with the YPG detaining some journalists, human rights activists, opposition party members, and persons who refused to cooperate with Kurdish armed groups. In some instances the location of the detainees remained unknown.

The COI noted in January that the HTS routinely detained and tortured civilians in territory it controlled. According to the COI, HRW, and NGOs, the HTS detained political opponents, perceived regime supporters and their families, journalists, activists, and humanitarian workers critical of the HTS or perceived as affiliated with other rebel groups at odds with the HTS in Idlib.

In June the HTS detained Maan Bakour, a reporter from opposition-aligned online news outlet *Hama Media Office*, in front of his home in southern Idlib. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), when the *Hama Media Office* contacted the HTS in an attempt to determine his whereabouts and the reason for his detention, the HTS refused to disclose his location or the charges against him. There were no updates to his whereabouts as of year's end.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to the United Nations and reliable NGO reports, the regime and its affiliated militias consistently engaged in physical abuse, punishment, and torture of opposition fighters and civilians (see sections 1.c. and 1.d.). The SNHR reported at least 14,200 individuals died due to torture between 2011 and September and that approximately 99 percent of these deaths were attributable to regime forces. The SNHR attributed to the regime more than 275 deaths due to torture during the year.

With regard to sexual and gender-based violence, such as rape or assault, as a tactic of war, the COI explained in a March 2018 report that during the earlier stages of the conflict, ground operations and house raids gave a greater range of scenarios for regime forces to commit sexual and gender-based abuses. As armed groups proliferated and acquired heavy weaponry, regime forces began to prioritize airstrikes, thus decreasing interaction between regime forces and the wider population. As the conflict progressed, most sexual and gender-based abuses by regime forces, therefore, occurred at checkpoints or in detention.

The SNHR estimated at least 8,097 incidents of sexual violence committed by parties to the conflict between March 2011 and September. Regime forces and affiliated militias were responsible for the vast majority of these offenses—8,069 incidents in total (see section 1.g.)—including 891 incidents inside detention centers and 452 against girls less than 18 years of age. The SNHR estimated that at least 8,000 incidents of sexual violence have been documented by all parties to the conflict since March 2011. Regime forces and affiliated militias were responsible for the majority of these offenses, including approximately 889 reported incidents inside detention centers and about 452 incidents committed against girls younger than 18. The SNHR also reported 14 incidents of sexual violence by the SDF and 10 incidents of sexual violence committed by members affiliated with factions of the armed opposition. Numerous NGOs reported that persons in areas retaken by regime forces remained reluctant to discuss events occurring in these areas due to fear of reprisals.

During the year the SJAC reported regime forces and affiliated militias committed acts of sexual and gender-based violence in detention centers, at checkpoints, and in private homes during house raids. One testimony in the SJAC report was that of a survivor whose house was raided by regime-sponsored militia; fighters raped her and her daughter in front of her husband before killing the daughter and ultimately shooting everyone in the home, including an infant. The mother and two of her daughters escaped by hiding underneath their family members’ dead bodies. In another case, six women were gang-raped and held inside a truck for two days after their families were stopped at a checkpoint in Homs. The men were executed and the children separated, with their fate unknown.

There were also instances of armed opposition groups reportedly engaging in physical abuse, punishment, and treatment equivalent to torture, primarily targeting suspected regime agents and collaborators, proregime militias, and rival armed groups. Between 2011 and September, the SNHR attributed more than 40 deaths due to torture to armed opposition groups, more than 25 to the HTS (including one child), and more than 30 to ISIS, including a child and 13 women. The SNHR attributed 35 deaths to torture by Kurdish forces.

The SDF was also implicated in at least one instance of torture. The SNHR reported the SDF arrested Ali Badr Hasan al Jajan, a civilian from Deir Ezzour, in a July raid on his home. Two weeks later the family received his corpse, which bore signs of torture.

The HTS carried out detentions and kidnappings that targeted local political opponents and journalists. HRW documented 11 cases in which the HTS detained Idlib residents, apparently because of their peaceful work documenting abuses or protesting the group’s rule. Six of those detained were apparently subjected to extreme physical abuse. Syrian rights groups documented hundreds of other cases of detention by the group in Aleppo and Idlib, including at least 184 over a three-month period, according to one organization.

The COI noted in January that the HTS also officially denounces secularism and routinely detained and tortured journalists, activists, and other civilians in territory it controlled who were deemed to have violated the group’s stringent interpretation of sharia.

Employing sharia courts, the HTS reportedly denied those arrested the opportunity to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention, permitted confessions obtained through torture, and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families. A 2019 report by the UN Commission on International Religious Freedom also stated the HTS repressed religious minorities in areas under its control, including by forcibly confiscating the property of Christian families in Idlib. Media organizations also documented the forced conversion of Druze and Alawite civilians in the region, detaining or disappearing those refusing to comply.

In April, British newspaper *The Independent* reported the HTS was imposing greater control over institutions in areas under its control. For example, the Salvation Government, the governance arm of the HTS, shut down Free Aleppo University and arrested several university staff members as well as students.

There were continued reports ISIS also engaged in abuses and brutality against those it captured in or near the shrinking territories it controlled.

Activists, NGOs, and media outlets reported numerous accounts of women in areas under ISIS and HST control facing severe abuses. Female survivors of the offensive to take over the ISIS stronghold in Baghuz reported to the COI they were able to escape ISIS control only after their ISIS husbands had been killed in the fighting. Escapees, mostly women, children, and older persons, described being compelled to flee through open fields in harsh winter conditions, often only at night, and forced to hide to survive, with limited access to food and water. According to a 2019 UN Population Fund survey in northeast Syria, many women and girls wore the hijab to protect themselves from targeted sexual violence by the HTS.

Opposition forces established irregularly constituted courts and detention facilities in areas under their control, which varied greatly in organization and adherence to the rule of law. Some groups upheld the country's law, while others followed a 1996 draft Arab League unified penal code based on sharia or implemented a mix of customary law and sharia. The experience, expertise, and credentialing of opposition judges and religious scholars also varied widely, and dominant armed militias in the area often maintained substantial influence over them.

ISIS claimed it based administration of justice in the territory it controlled on sharia. As detailed by the *New York Times*, ISIS reportedly authorized its police forces, known as *Hisbah*, to administer summary punishment for violations of ISIS' morality code.

Child Soldiers: Several sources documented the continued unlawful recruitment and use of children in combat. HRW reported armed opposition forces used children younger than 18 as fighters. According to HRW and the COI, numerous groups and factions failed to prevent the enlistment of minors, while elements affiliated with the SDF, as well as ISIS and the HTS, actively recruited children as fighters. The COI reported that armed groups “recruited, trained, and used children in active combat roles.”

The SNHR estimated regime forces conscripted at least 2,150 children into their local militias from March 2011 to September, and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces conscripted at least 2,800 children. The SNHR estimated ISIS conscripted at least 4,700 children, while the HTS conscripted at least 2,300 children. Other armed opposition factions conscripted at least 1,650 children.

The UN General Assembly's annual *Children and Armed Conflict* report to the secretary-general reported a 16 percent decrease in the recruitment of child soldiers in Syria in 2018 compared with 2017, with more than 800 cases verified. According to the report, 94 percent of the children served in combat roles and 22 percent were younger than 15. The report attributed 313 verified cases to SDF-affiliated groups; 187 to the HTS; 170 to Free Syria Army (FSA)-affiliated groups; 34 to Ahrar al-Sham; 30 to ISIS; 17 to Jaysh al-Islam; 16 to Nur al-Din al-Zanki; and 10 to regime forces.

In 2018 SDF signed an action plan with the special representative of the UN secretary-general for children and armed conflict to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, as well as to identify and separate boys and girls within the group's ranks and to put in place protection and disciplinary measures related to child recruitment and use. The SDF continued to implement an order banning the recruitment and use in combat of anyone younger than 18, ordering the military records office to verify the ages of those currently enlisted, requiring the release of any conscripted children to their families or to educational authorities in northeast Syria, and ending salary payments. The SDF order also prohibited using children for spying, to act as guards, or to deliver supplies to combatants. The order makes military commanders responsible for appointing ombudsmen to receive complaints of child recruitment and ordered punitive measures against commanders who failed to comply with the ban on child recruitment. On June 29, the SDF issued a plan of action with the United Nations in Geneva on how to protect and help children in the areas under the control of the self-administration of north and east Syria. Despite these steps, there were reported instances of the SDF forcibly conscripting children. For example, the SNHR reported that the SDF abducted and forcibly conscripted a 13-year-old girl, Lund Ismail Aleko, in Qamishle. The SDF and its armed affiliates also reportedly forcibly recruited several other children in the same area, such as 14-year-old Jamal Jabo from Aleppo, who was arrested by armed affiliates of the SDF and forcibly recruited. In April his family was informed of his death as a result of wounds from shrapnel sustained in a landmine explosion during fighting in Baghuz.

NGOs continued to report that the HTS continued to recruit and use children, particularly from financially unstable families, to operate checkpoints. Also see the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/> (<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>).

Other Conflict-related Abuse: PAX stated in a March report that the regime and proregime forces were responsible for the vast majority of siege warfare in the country, committing violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws amounting to war crimes and, in some cases, crimes against humanity. Furthermore, in cities where sieges have ended, PAX reported the regime and its allies frequently imposed new

collective measures to punish communities by restricting humanitarian access; looting and pillaging; expropriating property; extorting funds; engaging in arbitrary detentions and widespread forcible conscription; detaining, disappearing, or forcibly displacing individuals; engaging in repressive measures aimed at silencing media activists; and destroying evidence of war crimes.

Media organizations reported a siege by regime and Russian forces on the Rukban IDP Camp throughout much of year, preventing the delivery of humanitarian supplies and leading to devastating food shortages and deteriorating living conditions for families living in the camp.

Since April nearly 600,000 persons have been displaced from Idlib, representing the largest displacement in the country since the beginning of the war. UN officials throughout the year voiced grave concerns about the situation for civilians caught in the Idlib siege. Cross-border assistance remained the only means of reaching people in and around Idlib. In September UNHCR reported that the escalation of hostilities in the demilitarized zone of Idlib led to 1,089 civilian deaths from April to August, including 304 children.

The de-escalation zone agreement reached under the auspices of the “Astana Group”–Iran, Russia, and Turkey–to improve humanitarian access failed to prevent the crisis in Idlib, as did previous de-escalation agreements brokered elsewhere in the country.

HRW and various media organizations found that the regime implemented a policy and legal framework to manipulate humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funding to benefit itself, punish perceived opponents, and reward those loyal to it. The regime regularly restricted humanitarian organizations’ access to communities in need of aid, selectively approved humanitarian projects, and required organizations to partner with vetted local actors to ensure that the humanitarian response was siphoned centrally through and for the benefit of the state apparatus, at the cost of preventing aid from reaching the population unimpeded. Chatham House reported in July that humanitarian organizations operating in the country often acceded to the demands of the regime to avoid losing access to Syrians in desperate need of aid or being shut down. The result, according to Chatham House, was the establishment of an environment in which the regime was able to deny food assistance deliveries to hundreds of thousands of civilians for military and political purposes. For example, Crisis Action reported that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) faced difficulties accessing new captured areas retaken by the regime.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), half of all health facilities were closed or partially functioning and the conflict had killed hundreds of health-care workers. Since April, PHR reported 57 medical facilities, including hospitals, clinics, and ambulances had been damaged in attacks.

NGOs and media outlets documented repeated and ongoing attacks on health facilities and other civilian infrastructure in northwest Syria perpetrated by the Syrian regime and Russian forces. From March 2011 through December, PHR corroborated 588

attacks on at least 350 separate health facilities and documented the killing of 914 medical personnel, with regime and Russian forces responsible for 91 percent of attacks (301 by regime forces and 229 by either Russian or regime forces). In Idlib alone, at least 15 medical professionals were killed during the year. The COI concluded this pattern of attack strongly suggested proregime forces systematically targeted medical facilities and that such acts constituted war crimes. Due to these reports, the UN secretary-general established an internal UN board of inquiry to investigate a series of incidents that occurred in northwest Syria since the signing of the Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area between Russia and Turkey in September 2018. The findings of the investigation are due to the UN secretary-general in January 2020.

PHR reported that regime and Russian forces attacked Kafr Nabl Surgical Hospital in southern Idlib 12 times since June 2014, most recently in July. The hospital's administrators shared the facility's coordinates with UNOCHA and the facility's humanitarian status was verified by the UN. Within the UN's deconfliction mechanism, the exact location of the facility and its status were then shared with parties to the conflict. It was nevertheless attacked multiple times after its coordinates were shared. For example, the September COI report describes an incident on April 4 in which regime forces launched a surface-to-surface rocket attack, consisting of at least three rockets with prohibited cluster munitions, in Kafr Nabl (southern Idlib), damaging numerous civilian homes along with a commercial shop and a public market. At least 14 civilians were killed and 50 others injured, mostly women and children. The COI noted that, fearing further attacks, the majority of schools and hospitals in Kafr Nabl town closed in response to the attack, depriving thousands of education and medical assistance. The SNHR, PHR, the *New York Times*, as well as other NGOs and media organizations placed culpability on Russian forces. Eyewitness accounts and information from Syrian human rights groups cited Syrian and Russian helicopters and MiG-23 warplanes in the area on the date of the strike. The hospital is located in a populated civilian area, away from military facilities, and there was no evidence to suggest its status as a medical facility was compromised at any point during the conflict. Furthermore, PHR documented attacks on four separate facilities within the same area of southern Idlib, all carried out on May 5. On that day, Syrian government or Russian forces struck the Kafr Nabl Surgical Hospital, the Nabd al-Hayat Hospital, the Kafr Zita Surgical Hospital (also known as the Cave Hospital), and the Termala Women and Children's Hospital. International NGOs and media organizations used witness accounts and videos, time-coded cockpit recordings of Russian pilots, plane spotter logs, and security camera footage to trace a November 6 follow-up attack on Kafr Nabl Surgical Hospital to Russia.

Physicians for Human Rights, as well as the COI and various other NGOs, reported that the above incidents followed a well-documented pattern of attacks with humanitarian and civilian impact conducted by the Syrian regime, with Russian and Iranian support. The incidents listed here as well as others (such as those part of the UN Board of Inquiry's investigation) were part of sequenced attacks on multiple health-care facilities in the same geographical locations, indicating the targeting of not only those individual facilities, but of local health networks and referral systems. In 2018 the COI concluded some of the attacks on medical facilities by proregime forces in Idlib constituted a war crime.

In December alone, the regime’s attacks on Idlib resulted in the displacement of nearly 284,000 persons, bringing the total number of IDPs from the area to almost 700,000. In the last weeks of December, the regime’s forces dropped barrel bombs in Maaret al-Norman, resulting in the deaths of a child and a White Helmets volunteer.

The regime and its allies continued forcibly displacing civilians for reasons other than military necessity (see section 2.d.).

The 2018 COI report further detailed a practice in which, after hostilities ceased and local truces were implemented, regime and proregime forces required certain individuals from the previously besieged areas to undergo a reconciliation process as a condition to remain in their homes. The option to reconcile reportedly often was not offered to health-care personnel, local council members, relief workers, activists, dissidents, and family members of fighters. In effect, the COI assessed that the “reconciliation process” induced displacement in the form of organized evacuations of those deemed insufficiently loyal to the regime and served as a regime strategy for punishing those individuals. Various sources continued to report cases during the year in which the regime targeted Syrians who agreed to reconciliation agreements (see sections 1.b., 1.d., and 1.e.). For example, upon returning to Daraa pursuant to a reconciliation agreement, a former opposition police commander was reportedly arrested by air force security and later found dead with multiple gunshot wounds. The Atlantic Council reported that arbitrary arrests were common in areas retaken by the regime through local truces and that many of the detainees were forcibly conscripted. AI reported cases of forced displacement taking place in Aleppo, Daraa, and Damascus led by regime forces with support of Russian forces.

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

International media reported widely on regime forces and armed groups attacking and destroying religious as well as UNESCO-listed world heritage sites. At a UNESCO event in July, representatives of UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites noted the many instances of visible damage to cultural heritage sites. Regime forces and armed groups also pillaged and destroyed property, including homes, farms, and businesses of their perceived opponents.

Prior to October 9, there were up to 130,000 IDPs living in 12 long-term camps or large informal settlements across northeast Syria. These included the al-Hol Camp in Hasakah, where some 70,000 displaced persons—mostly the families of detained Islamic State fighters—resided. During the Turkish military incursion into northeast Syria, at least two camps were forced to cease operations.

CCSD and other local NGOs and media organizations reported in November that TSOs had engaged in the systematic looting, appropriation, and burning of civilian homes, particularly those of Kurds, resulting in significant civilian displacement. TSOs also

reportedly continued to bar returnees from their properties in northwest Syria and informed them that their real or presumed support for the YPG precluded them from living in the area. Confiscated homes were marked with graffiti and then used by armed groups for military purposes or as housing for fighters and their families. According to STJ, in November TSOs al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Faylaq al-Majed conducted ethnically and politically motivated property seizures in addition to other abuses against the local population in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, including politically motivated detentions, physical abuse, and theft. TSOs reportedly demanded that property owners provide land deeds as proof of ownership in order to reclaim seized properties. The Syriac Strategic Research Center reported in November that TSOs seized and looted the 205 houses and 120 commercial and industrial sites belonging to the 75 Christian families that had fled Ras al-Ayn as a result of the Turkish offensive.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

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

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

Press and Media, Including Online Media: Although the law provides for the “right to access information about public affairs” and bans “the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists,” press and media restrictions outweighed freedoms. The law contains many restrictions on freedom of expression for the press, including provisions criminalizing, for example, the dissemination of false or exaggerated news that “weakens the spirit of the Nation” or the broadcasting abroad of false or exaggerated news that “tarnishes” the country’s reputation. The law bars publication of content that affects “national unity and national security,” harms state symbols, defames religions, or incites sectarian strife or “hate crimes.” The law further forbids publication of any information about the armed forces.

The regime continued to exercise extensive control over local print and broadcast media, and the law imposes strict punishment for reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to regime requests. Freedom House reported that only a few dozen print publications remained in circulation, reduced from several hundred prior to the conflict. A number of quasi-independent periodicals, usually owned and produced by individuals with regime connections, published during the year. Books critical of the regime were illegal.

The regime owned some radio stations and most local television companies, and the Ministry of Information closely monitored all radio and television news broadcasts and entertainment programs for adherence to regime policies. Despite restrictions on ownership and use, citizens widely used satellite dishes, although the regime jammed some Arab networks.

Violence and Harassment: Regime forces reportedly detained, arrested, and harassed journalists and other writers for works deemed critical of the state as well as journalists associated with networks favorable to the regime. Harassment included intimidation, banning individuals from the country, dismissing journalists from their positions, and ignoring requests for continued accreditation. According to reliable NGO reports, the regime routinely arrested journalists who were either associated with or writing in favor of the opposition and instigated attacks against foreign press outlets throughout the country. The SNHR reported that authorities in February arrested Ahmad Orabi, who worked as a news correspondent for *al Ayyam* newspaper and Ana Press, despite having previously signed a reconciliation agreement with the regime. In January a U.S. federal court found the regime had perpetrated targeted murder to intimidate journalists, inhibit newsgathering and the dissemination of information, and suppress dissent, and found it liable for the 2012 death of American journalist Marie Colvin. The court ordered the regime to pay \$302 million in punitive damages, which it has not paid.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported that 26 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants remained imprisoned, although it did not specify by whom, and the CPJ reported that at least five journalists remained missing or held hostage as of November. The reason for arrests was often unclear. RSF reported that at least 25 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants died in regime detention between 2011 and October. For example, in July the CPJ reported that a prison official informed the family of Alaa Nayef al-Khader al-Khalidi in July that the photojournalist died due to torture while in regime custody at Sedayna Prison.

The regime and ISIS routinely targeted and killed both local and foreign journalists, according to the COI, the CPJ, and RSF. The CPJ estimated that 129 journalists were killed since 2011, while RSF estimated more than 260 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants were killed during the same period. The CPJ attributed more than half of journalist deaths between 2011 and 2017 to regime and proregime forces.

During the year the CPJ, RSF, and the SNHR documented the deaths of six journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants. Anas Al-Dyab was killed in a Russian airstrike while documenting the bombardment of Khan Sheikhou; Amjad Hassan Bakir was killed when a missile struck the Free Idlib Army vehicle in which he was riding as an embedded journalist covering the regime’s offensive in Idlib Governorate; Mohammad Jomaa was killed by a mine in Deir Ezzour in an area that had recently been retaken by the SDF; and Omar Al-Dimashqi was killed by the explosion of an IED placed under his car by an unidentified attacker.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The regime continued to strictly control the dissemination of information, including on developments regarding fighting between the regime and the armed opposition, and prohibited most criticism of the regime and

discussion of sectarian problems, including religious and ethnic minority rights. The Ministries of Information and Culture censored domestic and foreign publications prior to circulation or importation, including through the General Corporation for the Distribution of Publications, and prevented circulation of content determined critical or sensitive. The regime prohibited publication or distribution of any material security officials deemed threatening or embarrassing to the regime. Censorship was usually more stringent for materials in Arabic.

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

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

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

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

Nongovernmental Impact: According to Freedom House, media freedom varied in territory held by armed opposition groups, but local outlets were typically under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction. The CPJ and RSF reported that extremist opposition groups, such as the HTS, detained and tortured journalists (see section 1.g.) and posed a serious threat to press and media freedoms. The CPJ reported that four members of the HTS abducted Syrian reporter Ahmed Rahal, a reporter for the Syrian pro-civil rights news website *Al-Dorar al-Sahmia*, after raiding his home in September. The SNHR reported that the family of Samer Saleh al Salloum, an activist responsible for the printing and distribution of *al Gherbal* political magazine and *Zawrak* children’s magazine, was informed in August that he had reportedly been executed in detention by the HTS in April.

In July the CPJ reported that the HTS arbitrarily detained Jumaa Haj Hamdou, a reporter for the Syrian pro-civil rights opposition news website *Zaman al-Wasl*, at his home in western Aleppo. He was not charged and was released after six days. Fathi Ibrahim Bayoud, the editor in chief of *Zaman al-Wasl*, told the CPJ he believed Hamdou was detained because of his reporting.

Internet Freedom

The regime controlled and restricted access to the internet and monitored email and social media accounts. In Freedom House’s 2019 *Freedom on the Net Report*, the country remained a dangerous and repressive environment for internet users. Individuals and groups could not express views via the internet, including by email, without prospect of reprisal. The regime applied the law to regulate internet use and prosecute users. The anticybercrime law (also referred to as Law No. 9) increases penalties for cybercrimes, including those affecting the freedom of expression, remained in place. It also mandates the creation of specialized courts and delegates specialized jurists for the prosecution of cybercrimes in every governorate. RSF asserted the law served as a tool for the regime to threaten online freedom. As of late in the year, at least 14 citizen journalists remained imprisoned by the regime, many on charges related to their digital activism. Hackers linked to Iran continued cyberattacks against Syrian opposition groups to disrupt reporting on human rights violations.

The regime interfered with and blocked internet service, text messages, and two-step verification messages for password recovery or account activation. The regime employed sophisticated technologies and hundreds of computer specialists for filtering and surveillance purposes, such as monitoring email and social media accounts of detainees, activists, and others. The regime did not attempt to restrict the security branches’ monitoring and censoring of the internet. The security branches were largely responsible for restricting internet freedom and access; internet blackouts often coincided with security force attacks. The regime censored websites related to the opposition, including the websites of local coordination committees as well as media outlets.

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

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

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

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The regime restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Authorities generally did not permit academic personnel to express ideas contrary to regime policy. Authorities reportedly dismissed or imprisoned university professors in regime-held areas for expressing dissent and killed some for supporting regime opponents. Combatants on all sides of the war attacked or commandeered schools. The Ministry of Culture restricted and banned the screening of certain films.

During the conflict students, particularly those residing in opposition-held areas, continued to face challenges in taking nationwide exams. For example, school districts in Dar’a were affected by the influx of new pupils to the governorate due to hostilities, forcing many schools to hire unqualified staff and begin operating in shifts to accommodate all the pupils. The COI reported that thousands of students had to repeat classes and retake examinations as a result. Areas liberated by the SDF from ISIS reopened local schools. In Raqqa city and the surrounding rural regions, more than 130,000 students returned to classes in 322 refurbished buildings and schools previously used or destroyed by ISIS. Many school buildings required extensive repairs, sometimes including clearance of explosive remnants of the war, and administrators required assistance to obtain basic supplies for learning.

The SDF also reportedly imposed penalties for SDF and school administration staff members who enrolled their children in schools that did not use their curriculum.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The regime limited freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

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

The Ministry of Interior requires permission for demonstrations or any public gathering of more than three persons. As a rule the ministry authorized only demonstrations by the regime, affiliated groups, or the Baath Party, orchestrating them on numerous occasions.

According to allegations by Kurdish activists and press reporting, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the YPG sometimes suppressed freedom of assembly in areas under their control. Throughout the year inhabitants in Deir Ezzor protested against alleged corruption by SDF officials, lack of access to basic services, reports of forced conscription of youths into the SDF, and lack of information on the status of men and boys detained by the SDF due to suspected affiliations to ISIS

following the coalition offensive to liberate Baghuz from ISIS control. Protests generally occurred throughout northeast Syria on a variety of issues without interference from local authorities.

During the year multiple media outlets reported that the HTS increased its repression of civil society activity in August due to widespread protests held in opposition to the group. The SNHR reported that the HTS arrested approximately 182 persons as of August, among them political and media activists, 45 of whom reportedly died in detention.

Freedom of Association

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

The regime often denied requests for registration or failed to act on them, reportedly on political grounds. None of the local human rights organizations operated with a license, but many functioned under organizations that had requisite government registration. The regime continued to block the multiyear effort by journalists to register a countrywide media association. Despite regime efforts, journalists in exile founded the Syrian Journalist Association as an independent democratic professional association in 2012 to empower the role of freedom of the press and expression.

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

Under laws that criminalize membership and activity in illegal organizations as determined by the regime, security forces detained hundreds of persons linked to local human rights groups and prodemocracy student groups. The death notices released by the regime shed light on this practice. For example, HRW described the forcible disappearance by the regime during the year of many young protest organizers, civil society leaders, and local coordination committee members. This included Sahar, a community leader and head of the Women’s Affairs Bureau in Daraa, who was detained without cause at a local checkpoint. In several cases documented by HRW, intelligence branches either arrested or repeatedly harassed relatives of civil society activists and people who fled the country to gain information about their wanted family members or force them to return.

The HTS restricted the activities of organizations it deemed incompatible with its interpretation of Islam. HTS forces detained Munawir Hamdeen, a relief worker at the Big Heart organization in Idlib, after severely beating him at his home in 2016. After five months of detention, Hamdeen pleaded guilty to the charge of adultery and was held in detention until August, when his body was found outside the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) center in Idlib.

c. Freedom of Religion

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

d. Freedom of Movement

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

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

The regime expanded security checkpoints into civilian areas to monitor and limit movement. Regime forces reportedly used snipers to prevent protests, enforce curfews, target opposition forces, and, in some cases, prevent civilians from fleeing besieged towns. The regime also barred foreign diplomats from visiting most parts of the country and rarely granted them permission to travel outside Damascus. The consistently high level and unpredictability of violence severely restricted movement throughout the country.

In areas they still controlled, armed opposition groups and terrorist groups, such as the HTS, also restricted movement, including with checkpoints (see section 1.g.). The COI reported in September it had received accounts of harassment, including of women, arbitrary arrest, unlawful search and seizure of property, and demands for bribes at checkpoints administered by the HTS and other armed actors.

While the Syrian Democratic Council and the SDF generally supported IDP communities in northeast Syria, in July HRW reported that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria was restricting the movement of more than 11,000 foreign women and children suspected to be affiliated with ISIS in a separate section of the al-Hol IDP Camp. The UN secretary-general also released a report on children and armed conflict stating that 1,248 children of 46 nationalities were deprived of their liberty to move freely by the SDF due to their actual or alleged association with ISIS.

Until the territorial defeat of ISIS in March, ISIS restricted the movement in areas under its control of regime supporters or assumed supporters, especially the Alawite and Shia populations, as well as Yezidi, Christian, and other captives. The Free Yezidi Foundation further reported that Yezidis were held against their will by ISIS. ISIS reportedly did not permit female passengers to traverse territory it controlled unless accompanied by a close male relative.

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

The regime also often refused to allow citizens to return. According to several media outlets, Richard Kouyoumjian, Lebanon’s minister of social affairs, stated in March that the regime accepted less than 20 percent of the refugees who attempted to return to the country from Lebanon.

Syrians born abroad to parents who fled the conflict and remained in refugee camps generally did not have access to Syrian citizenship documents. The regime allowed Syrians living outside of the country whose passports had expired to renew their passports at consulates. Many who fled as refugees, however, feared reporting to the regime against which they may have protested or feared the regime could direct reprisals against family members still in the country.

Women older than 18 have the legal right to travel without the permission of male relatives, but a husband may file a request with the Interior Ministry to prohibit his wife from departing the country.

e. Internally Displaced Persons

During the year violence continued to be the primary reason for displacement, much of it attributed to regime and Russian aerial attacks. Regime and proregime evacuations of besieged areas, often overseen by Russian forces, forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of persons. Years of conflict and evacuations repeatedly displaced persons, and each displacement depleted family assets. In September the United Nations estimated there were more than 6.2 million IDPs in the country, including 2.5 million children and five million individuals in need of acute assistance. This number included 1.5 million new IDPs since the start of the year. In May UNOCHA recorded 27,969

spontaneous IDP returnees in several areas across the country. The greatest number of these returns were recorded in Homs with 8,290 returnees, approximately 45 percent of whom were displaced within the governorate. Deir Ezzor received the second-largest number of IDP returnees with 5,373 spontaneous returns, while 4,349 returns were recorded in rural Damascus. The fourth largest number of returnees was recorded in Aleppo, with 3,592 returnees, followed by Daraa with 3,098 recorded spontaneous returns. UN humanitarian officials reported that most IDPs sought shelter with host communities or in collective centers, abandoned buildings, or informal camps. The humanitarian response to the country was coordinated through a complex bureaucratic structure. The crisis inside the country continued to meet the UN criteria for a level 3 response—the global humanitarian system’s classification for response to the most severe, large-scale humanitarian crises.

The regime generally did not provide sustainable access to services for IDPs, did not offer IDPs assistance, did not facilitate humanitarian assistance for IDPs, and provided inconsistent protection. The regime forcibly displaced populations from besieged areas and restricted movement of IDPs. The regime did not promote the safe, voluntary, and dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs and, in many cases, refused to allow IDPs to return home (see section 1.e., Property Restitution).

According to HRW, the regime confiscated more than 70 residential households with all internal contents in the Eastern Ghouta Region. The regime restricted access to many of the neighborhoods and converted several properties into military headquarters. In November the Middle East Institute reported that regime security and intelligence forces had seized a number of homes and other properties belonging to local residents using several different methods. Those with a backlog of service bills or back taxes who were unable to pay their debt to the regime were given a brief window to leave their property, while some former opposition members had their homes and businesses summarily seized by intelligence forces. The regime routinely disrupted the supply of humanitarian aid, including medical assistance, to areas under siege as well as to newly recaptured areas (see section 1.g.).

The SARC functioned as the main partner for international humanitarian organizations working inside the country to provide humanitarian assistance in regime- and some opposition-controlled areas. NGOs operating from Damascus faced regime bureaucratic obstruction in attempting to provide humanitarian assistance. UN agencies and NGOs sought to increase the flow of assistance to opposition-held areas subject to regime offensives to meet growing humanitarian needs, but the regime increasingly restricted cross-line operations originating from Damascus. The UN and its humanitarian partners continued to provide cross-border assistance from Turkey and Iraq during the year. While humanitarian aid was provided cross-border from Turkey to northwest Syria (Idlib and Aleppo) via two border crossings, Turkey placed restrictions on the provision of humanitarian and stabilization aid to areas of northeast Syria from Turkey.

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

service delivery in areas controlled by the regime and nongovernmental actors. The United Nations reported that only seven humanitarian assistance convoys accessed hard-to-reach areas during the year.

In September the United Nations and SARC delivered humanitarian assistance to 15,000 individuals and facilitated the voluntary return of nearly 400 individuals at Rukban Camp in southeast Syria near the Jordanian border. In early November the United Nations and SARC delivered humanitarian assistance to approximately 45,000 persons in need and provided an emergency vaccination campaign to protect some 5,000 children against measles, polio, and other diseases. Humanitarian conditions in Rukban remained dire due to inconsistent access to the area. The regime frequently took months to approve aid convoy requests, and Jordan declined requests to deliver aid from its side of the border, although it allowed a small, exceptional delivery by an NGO from Jordan during Ramadan. The United Nations reported that, since February, approximately half of the camp’s estimated population, or 18,000 individuals, left the camp through the regime-established transit point, primarily towards collective shelters in Homs, where the United Nations and SARC provided services, before moving onwards.

Armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as the HTS and ISIS, also impeded humanitarian assistance to IDPs. Humanitarian actors reported that the HTS impeded the delivery of aid and services in areas of the northeast, making it difficult to effectively respond to displacement near Idlib. For example, in March the United Nations criticized Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups, including the FSA, for providing inconsistent, restricted access to IDPs in Afrin. In October the United Kingdom temporarily suspended the delivery of aid to Idlib Province due to the HTS taxes on aid trucks. The United Kingdom subsequently resumed aid delivery and, as of November, was still delivering aid to Idlib. NGOs continued to report bureaucratic challenges in working with the HTS Salvation Government, which impeded delivery of services in the camps.

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

f. Protection of Refugees

UNHCR maintained that conditions for refugee return to the country in safety and dignity were not yet in place and did not promote, nor facilitate, the return of refugees to the country during the year. Throughout the year, however, the regime and Russia maintained a diplomatic campaign to encourage the return of refugees to Syria. While Russia reportedly was eager to use the return of Syrian refugees as a means to secure international donations for Syria reconstruction efforts, the regime adopted a more cautious approach on promoting the return of refugees, reportedly due to its suspicion that many Syrian refugees supported the opposition.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: The regime inconsistently cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons

of concern. The regime provided some cooperation to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Both regime and opposition forces reportedly besieged, shelled, and otherwise made inaccessible some Palestinian refugee camps, neighborhoods, and sites, which resulted in severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care and humanitarian assistance, and civilian deaths.

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

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

Access to Basic Services: The law allows for the issuance of identity cards to Palestinian refugees and the same access to basic services provided to citizens. The regime also allowed Iraqi refugees access to publicly available services, such as health care and education, but residency permits were available only to those refugees who entered the country legally and possessed a valid passport, which did not include all refugees. The lack of access to residency permits issued by authorities exposed refugees to risks of harassment and exploitation and severely affected their access to public services. The approximately 45,000 non-Palestinian refugees and asylum seekers in the country faced growing protection risks, multiple displacements, tightened security procedures at checkpoints, and difficulty obtaining required residency permits, all of which resulted in restrictions on their freedom of movement. The COI reported a rise in sexual- and gender-based violence and child-protection concerns among refugees, including child labor, school dropouts, and early marriages.

g. Stateless Persons

Following the 1962 census, approximately 150,000 Kurds lost their citizenship. A legislative decree had ordained the single-day census in 1962, and the government executed it unannounced to the inhabitants of al-Hasakah Governorate. Anyone not registered for any reason or without all required paperwork became “foreign” from that day onward. The government at the time argued it based its decision on a 1945 wave of alleged illegal immigration of Kurds from neighboring states, including Turkey, to Hasakah, where they allegedly “fraudulently” registered as Syrian citizens. In a similar fashion, authorities recorded anyone who refused to participate as “undocumented.” Because of this loss of citizenship, these Kurds and their descendants lacked identity

cards and could not access government services, including health care and education. They also faced social and economic discrimination. Stateless Kurds do not have the right to inherit or bequeath assets, and their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricted their travel to and from the country.

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

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

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

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

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Municipal elections were held in September 2018 with approximately 40,000 candidates vying for more than 18,000 council seats in areas controlled by the regime. According to media outlets, opposition figures claimed a low turnout because most citizens considered the elections to be of limited value. Opposition sources, according to online media outlet *Al-Monitor*, alleged the regime forced civil servants to cast their votes. Multiple reports indicated the regime denied access to ballot boxes to voters residing in Daraa Province, which the regime brought under its control earlier in the year following a military offensive. According to observers the results were rigged in favor of the ruling Baath Party. Most of the candidates were either from the Baath Party or associated with it.

In 2016 the country held geographically limited parliamentary elections, the results of which citizens living outside regime control rejected. The 2014 presidential election, in which Bashar Assad ostensibly received 88.7 percent of the vote, was neither free nor fair by international standards. Voters faced intimidation by regime security forces, and the regime forcibly transported state employees in Damascus to polling centers, according to observers and media. Media reports described low overall voter turnout,

even among those living in relatively stable areas with access to polling stations. Authorities allowed only persons in regime-controlled territory, certain refugee areas, and refugees who left the country after obtaining official permission to vote.

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

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution provides that the Baath Party is the ruling party and assures that it has a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers’ and women’s groups. The Baath Party and nine smaller satellite political parties constituted the coalition National Progressive Front. The Baath-led National Progressive Front dominated the 250-member People’s Council, holding 200 of the 250 parliament seats following the 2016 election. A 2011 decree allows for the establishment of additional political parties but forbids those based on religion, tribal affiliation, or regional interests.

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

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

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

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities in the political process, and they did participate. Although there were no formal restrictions, cultural and social barriers largely excluded women from decision-making positions. The regime formed after the 2014 election included three female members: Vice President Najah al-Attar, Minister of State for Environmental Affairs Nazira Serkis, and Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Rima al-Qadiri. Thirteen percent of the members of parliament elected in 2016 were women. There were Christian, Druze, and Kurdish members of parliament. In 2017 Hammouda Sabbagh

became the first Orthodox Christian to be elected speaker of parliament. Alawites, the ruling religious minority, held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities as well as more authority than the majority Sunni sect did.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

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

Corruption: Due to the lack of free press and opposition access to instruments of government and media, there was almost no detailed information about corruption, except petty corruption. Freedom House reported that to secure its support base, the regime regularly distributed patronage in the form of public resources and implemented policies to benefit favored industries and companies. Authorities reportedly awarded government contracts and trade deals to allies such as Iran and Russia, possibly as compensation for political and military aid. Basic state services and humanitarian aid reportedly were extended or withheld based on a community's demonstrated political loyalty to the regime, providing additional leverage for bribe-seeking officials.

For example, President Bashar Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, reportedly was known as “Mr. 5 Percent” or “Mr. 10 Percent,” depending on the size of the deal. As late as 2011, Makhlouf reportedly controlled 60 percent of the country's economy. The Panama Papers, Swissleaks, and most recently the Paradise Papers chronicled his money-laundering and sanctions-busting activities (see section 1.e., Property Restitution).

Human rights lawyers and family members of detainees stated that regime officials in courts and prisons solicited bribes for favorable decisions and provision of basic services. In a December report, PHR provided the account of Dr. Youssef, a Syrian surgeon arrested on charges of providing “support to terrorists” for offering medical services to protesters who were shot by regime intelligence forces. Youssef was subjected to extensive torture in regime detention and only released after his family bribed regime authorities.

NGOs reported instances of elements affiliated with the SDF engaging in acts of corruption in northeast Syria. The SNHR reported increasing levels of corruption by civil councils in Deir Ezzour, comprised predominantly of SDF officials in northeast Syria, resulting in the unequal distribution of humanitarian assistance to family members of SDF officials and those willing to pay bribes.

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

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

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

The regime was highly suspicious of international human rights NGOs and did not allow them into the country. The regime normally responded to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by denying the facts of the case or by reporting that the case was still under investigation, the prisoner in question had violated national security laws, or, if the case was in criminal court, the executive branch could not interfere with the judiciary. Amnesty International (AI), for example, attempted with little success to engage regime authorities on human rights concerns, including torture and other mistreatment, enforced disappearances, and deaths in custody, through various means since 2011. The regime denied organizations access to locations where regime agents launched assaults on antigovernment protesters or allegedly held prisoners detained on political grounds. The United Nations reported that the regime also actively restricted the activities of humanitarian aid organizations, especially along supply routes and access points near opposition-controlled areas (see section 1.g.).

There were numerous reports the regime harassed domestic human rights activists by subjecting them to regular surveillance and travel bans, property seizure, detention, torture, forcible disappearance, and extrajudicial killings (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees). In May, HRW reported on “Samir,” a human rights activist working with the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Swiss Department for Foreign Affairs in Daraa. He left Daraa in January after he found out he was wanted by the Criminal Intelligence branch for working with aid groups and receiving funding from foreign entities for his work in contravention of the Counterterrorism Law of 2012. A contact inside the Military Intelligence branch warned him that authorities intended to arrest him, prompting his immediate departure. A few days later, his family received an official summons from the regime.

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

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The regime continued to deny access for the COI, mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to document and report on human rights violations and abuses in the country. It did not cooperate fully with numerous UN bodies, resulting in restrictions on access for humanitarian organizations, especially to opposition-controlled areas.

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

Women

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

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies, NGOs, and media outlets characterized rape and sexual violence as endemic, underreported, and uncontrolled in the country (see sections 1.c. and 1.g.). Humanitarian organizations reported that women, men, and community leaders consistently identified sexual violence as a primary reason their families fled the country. The COI reported that rape and sexual violence continued to play a prominent role in the conflict and was used to terrorize and punish women, men, and children perceived as associated with the opposition, as did terrorist groups such as the HTS and ISIS. There were instances, comparatively far fewer, of armed opposition groups reportedly raping women and children. The HTS and ISIS also reportedly forced women and girls into sexual slavery.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, but it stipulates that men may discipline their female relatives in a form permitted by general custom. According to a May UNFPA report, violence against women and children was pervasive and increasing due to the conflict and the lack of economic opportunity for men. Victims did not report the vast majority of cases. Security forces consistently treated violence against women as a social rather than a criminal matter. Observers reported that when some abused women tried to file a police report, police did not investigate their reports thoroughly, if at all, and that in other cases police officers responded by abusing the women.

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

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: The law permits judges to reduce penalties for murder and assault if the defendant asserts an “honor” defense, which often occurred. The regime kept no official statistics on use of this defense in murder and assault cases and reportedly rarely pursued prosecution of so-called honor crimes. There were no officially reported honor killings during the year, but reporting from previous years

indicated that honor killings increased since the onset of the crisis in 2011. NGOs working with refugees reported families killed some rape victims inside the country, including those raped by regime forces, for reasons of honor.

The terrorist groups ISIS and the HTS permitted and committed so-called honor killings in territories under their control (see section 1.g.).

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of gender but does not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment. The regime did not enforce the law effectively. Sexual harassment was pervasive and uncontrolled. For example, a 2019 UNFPA report cited an adolescent girl from Idlib who was blackmailed and harassed by a stranger who took revealing photos of her in a changing room and threatened to share them with her family.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization by the regime, but the Free Yezidi Foundation reported that ISIS forced some Yezidi women whom they had impregnated to have abortions (see section 1.g.).

Discrimination: Although the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Criminal, family, religious, personal status, labor, nationality, inheritance, retirement, and social security laws discriminate against women. For example, if a man and a woman separately commit the same criminal act of adultery, then by law the woman's punishment is double that of the man. The law generally permits women to initiate divorce proceedings against their spouses, but the law does not entitle a divorced woman to alimony in some cases. Under the law a divorced mother loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach age 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family. Personal status laws applied to Muslims are derived from sharia and are discriminatory toward women. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case. While the constitution provides the “right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work,” the law does not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work. Women cannot pass citizenship to their children. The regime's interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, courts usually granted Muslim women half the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities, male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less. If they refuse to provide this support, women have the right to sue.

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

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

Women participated in public life and in most professions, including the armed forces, although UNFPA reported that violence and lawlessness in many regions reduced women’s access to the public sphere. Various sources observed that women constituted a minority of lawyers, university professors, and other professions.

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

Children

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

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

The conflict and widespread destruction continued to hamper the ability of children to attend school. In October UNICEF reported that 5.3 million children were in need of humanitarian assistance. UNICEF also reported that fighting destroyed or damaged or that combatants occupied one in every three schools. Approximately 1.75 million children were out of school (among more than 2.6 million Syrian children, including refugees and others in the diaspora); another 1.35 million were at risk for leaving school.

ISIS and the HTS reportedly imposed their interpretation of sharia on schools and discriminated against girls in the territories they controlled. The International Crisis Group reported in March that the HTS continued to segregate classrooms by gender, imposed their curriculum on teachers, and closed private schools and educational centers. Additionally, the STJ reported in March that the HTS Salvation Government banned any students who had previously been granted elementary and middle-school diplomas by the regime from pursuing their high school education in any schools controlled by the HTS.

Child Abuse: The law does not specifically prohibit child abuse, but it stipulates that parents may discipline their children in a form permitted by general custom. According to a 2017 UNFPA report, violence against children, especially girls, was pervasive and increasing due to the conflict and the lack of economic opportunity for men.

NGOs reported extensively on reports of regime and proregime forces, as well as the HTS and ISIS, sexually assaulting, torturing, detaining, killing, and otherwise abusing children (see sections 1.a., 1.b., 1.c., and 1.g.). The HTS and ISIS subjected children to extremely harsh punishment, including execution, in the territories they controlled.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal age for marriage is 18 for men and 17 for women. A boy as young as 15 or a girl as young as 13 may marry if a judge deems both parties willing and “physically mature” and if the fathers or grandfathers of both parties’ consent. Early and forced marriages were common. CARE reported in March that young women were increasingly vulnerable to forced marriage due to the extreme financial hardships placed upon families while the conflict progressed into its eighth year.

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

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

In previous years ISIS abducted and sexually exploited Yezidi girls in Iraq and transported them to Syria for rape and forced marriage; many of those Yezidi women and girls remained captive during the year (see section 1.g. and section 6, Women). Even after the territorial defeat of ISIS, the Free Yezidi Foundation reported that Yezidi women and children remained with ISIS-affiliated families in detention camps due to the intense trauma from their treatment under ISIS and out of fear. From 2014 onwards, ISIS began to forcibly marry Sunni (also a minority) girls and women living in territories under its control. Some of those forced to marry ISIS members were adults, including widows, but the vast majority of cases the COI documented revealed that girls between the ages of 12 and 16 were victims of forced marriage. Many women and girls reportedly were passed among multiple ISIS fighters, some as many as six or seven times within two years. The HTS also reportedly forced Druze and other minority women and girls into marriage as well as Sunni women and girls.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law stipulates penalties for those found guilty of certain forms of child abuse associated with trafficking crimes, including kidnapping and forced prostitution, both of which carry a penalty of up to three years in prison. The law considers child pornography a trafficking crime, but the punishment for child pornography was set at the local level with “appropriate penalties.” It was also unclear if there had been any prosecutions for child pornography or if authorities enforced the law.

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

Child Soldiers: Several sources documented the continued unlawful recruitment and use of children in combat (see section 1.g.).

Displaced Children: There was a large population of IDP children and some refugee children as well. These children reportedly experienced increased vulnerability to abuses, including by armed forces (see sections 1.c., 1.g., 2.e., and 2.f.).

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

Anti-Semitism

In 2016 NGOs estimated that fewer than 20—perhaps fewer than 10—Jews remained in the country. The national school curriculum did not include materials on tolerance education or the Holocaust. There is no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards, except for Jews. Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons. The regime-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency frequently reported on the “Zionist enemy” and accused the Syrian opposition of serving “the Zionist project.”

Trafficking in Persons

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

Persons with Disabilities

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for assisting persons with disabilities, working through dedicated charities and organizations to provide assistance. During an April briefing with the UN Security Council, Syrian activist Nujeen Mustafa explained that persons with disabilities remained among the most vulnerable and neglected of all displaced persons in the country, particularly in areas of active conflict.

The destruction of schools and hospitals, most often by regime and proregime forces, limited access to education and health services for persons with disabilities, but government and nongovernment social care institutes reportedly exist for blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, and physical and intellectual disabilities. The regime did not effectively work to provide access for persons with disabilities to information, communications, building, or transportation. In its November report, UNFPA detailed how both public and private spaces—including educational institutions, health-care services and religious or cultural buildings—were inaccessible to the elderly and persons with disabilities, leading to further ostracization and deprivation. UNFPA further stated that persons with disabilities were sometimes denied aid, as they could not access it, and some distribution centers required presence in person. UNFPA identified women and adolescent girls with disabilities as being at a dangerously high risk of various forms of violence and exploitation.

According to the COI, on May 13, two men and a child with intellectual disabilities were kidnapped by an armed group when travelling from Afrin to I'zaz. One of those abducted was reportedly found dead a few days later displaying signs of torture, while the kidnappers demanded a ransom of \$10,000 for the remaining abductees. The bodies of the second man and child were discovered more than a month later. There was no indication the regime effectively investigated or punished those responsible for violence and abuses against persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The regime actively restricted national and ethnic minorities from conducting traditional, religious, and cultural activities. The Kurdish population—citizens and noncitizens—faced official and societal discrimination and repression as well as regime-sponsored violence. Regime and proregime forces, as well as ISIS and armed opposition forces such as the Turkish-backed FSA, reportedly arrested, detained, tortured, killed, and otherwise abused numerous Kurdish activists and individuals as well as members of the SDF during the year (see section 1.g.).

The regime continued to limit the use and teaching of the Kurdish language. It also restricted publication in Kurdish of books and other materials, Kurdish cultural expression, and at times the celebration of Kurdish festivals.

The Alawite community, to which Bashar Assad belongs, enjoyed privileged status throughout the regime and dominated the state security apparatus and military leadership. Nevertheless, the regime reportedly also targeted Alawite opposition

activists for arbitrary arrest, torture, detention, and killing. Extremist opposition groups targeted Alawite communities on several occasions for their perceived proregime stance.

In March the COI reported that armed opposition groups detained hundreds of women and girls belonging to minority groups, particularly Alawites, and used them as bargaining chips for initiating prisoner swaps with regime and proregime forces.

The terrorist groups ISIS and the HTS violently oppressed and discriminated against all non-Sunni Arab ethnic minorities in the territories they controlled (see section 1.g.).

HRW documented multiple instances of Syrian opposition forces “discriminating on ethnic grounds.” HRW reported that TSOs participating in Turkey’s military offensive into northeast Syria “refused to allow the return of Kurdish families displaced by Turkish military operations and looted and unlawfully appropriated or occupied their property.” HRW reported opposition forces systematically blocked Kurdish IDP returns while permitting some Arab IDP returns.

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

The law criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct, defined as “carnal relations against the order of nature” and punishable by imprisonment up to three years. In previous years police used this charge to prosecute LGBTI individuals. There were no reports of prosecutions under the law during the year, but NGO reports indicated the regime arrested dozens of LGBTI persons since 2011 on charges such as abusing social values; selling, buying, or consuming illegal drugs; and organizing and promoting “obscene” parties. Local media and NGOs reported instances in which regime and proregime forces used accusations of homosexuality as a pretext to detain, arrest, torture, and kill civilians. The frequency of such instances was difficult to determine, since police rarely reported their rationale for arrests.

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

The terrorist HTS regularly detained, tortured, and killed LGBTI individuals in the territories they controlled (see section 1.g.). For example, in August *The Guardian* newspaper reported that a Syrian transgender woman was arrested by HTS officers barely 110 yards across the border into Idlib after being deported by Turkish authorities. According to a fellow refugee deported on the same bus, the HTS officers went through her cellular telephone, humiliating her about pictures they found. The woman has not been heard from since she was seen forced into the back of a taxi, a bag tied over her head.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS, but human rights activists believed such cases were underreported and the UN Development Program (UNDP) noted that stigma affected access to health care. The UNDP and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria assessed that the incapability of the health-care sector to identify newly infected persons or offer medical support in a hostile environment posed a major problem and added to the risk of further spread of the disease among the general population.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

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

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

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

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

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

The regime did not enforce applicable laws effectively or make any serious attempt to do so during the year. Penalties were not sufficient to deter violations.

The Baath Party dominated the GFTU, and Baath Party doctrine stipulates that its quasi-official constituent unions protect worker rights. The GFTU president was a senior member of the Baath Party, and he and his deputy could attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. In previous years the GFTU controlled most aspects of union activity, including which sectors or industries could have unions. It also had the power to disband union governing bodies. Union elections were generally free of direct GFTU interference, but successful campaigns usually required membership in the Baath Party.

Because of the GFTU’s close ties to the regime, the right to bargain collectively did not exist in practical terms. Although the law provides for collective bargaining in the private sector, past regime repression dissuaded most workers from exercising this right.

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

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

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

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

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

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

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

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

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

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

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Although the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Labor and nationality laws discriminate against women. While the constitution provides the “right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work,” the law does not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work. The Commission for Family Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor shared responsibility for attempting to accord equal legal rights to women. Governmental involvement in civil rights claims, including cases against sexual discrimination, was stagnant, and most claims went unanswered. Women participated in most professions, including the armed forces, although UNFPA reported that violence and lawlessness in many regions reduced women’s access to the public sphere. Various sources observed that women constituted a minority of lawyers, university professors, and other professions.

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

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, including their access to education, employment, health services, and other state services, but the regime did not enforce these provisions effectively. Discrimination occurred in hiring and access to worksites. The law seeks to integrate persons with disabilities into the workforce, reserving 4 percent of government jobs and 2 percent of private-sector jobs for them. Private-sector businesses are eligible for tax exemptions after hiring persons with disabilities.

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

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law divides the public-sector monthly minimum wage into five levels based on job type or level of education, almost all of which fell below the World Bank’s poverty indicator. Benefits included compensation for meals, uniforms, and transportation. Most public-sector employees relied on bribery to supplement their income. Private-sector companies usually paid much higher wages, with lower-end wage rates

semiofficially set by the regime and employer organizations. Many workers in the public and private sectors took additional manual jobs or relied on their extended families to support them.

The public-sector workweek was 35 hours, and the standard private-sector workweek was 40 hours, excluding meals and rest breaks. Hours of work could increase or decrease based on the industry and associated health hazards. The law provides for at least one meal or rest break totaling no less than one hour per day. Employers must schedule hours of work and rest such that workers do not work more than five consecutive hours or 10 hours per day in total. Employers must provide premium pay for overtime work.

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

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

There was little information on regime enforcement of labor law or working conditions during the year. There were no health and safety inspections reported, and even previous routine inspections of tourist facilities, such as hotels and major restaurants, no longer occurred. The enforcement of labor law was lax in both rural and urban areas, since many inspector positions were vacant due to the conflict and their number was insufficient to cover more than 10,000 workplaces. Penalties were not sufficient to deter violations.

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

Foreign workers, especially domestic workers, remained vulnerable to exploitative conditions. For example, the law does not legally entitle foreign female domestic workers to the same wages as Syrian domestic workers. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor oversees employment agencies responsible for providing safe working conditions for migrant domestic workers, but the scope of oversight was unknown. The

continued unrest resulted in the large-scale voluntary departure of foreign workers as demand for services significantly declined, but violence and lawlessness impeded some foreign workers from leaving the country.

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