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On International Women's Day

Growing Protests and Worsening Access to Basic Rights for Women in Syria

About **16,442** Women Killed Since 2011 and
21 Incidents of Violence Against Women Over
their Activism From March 2023 – March 2024



Friday 08 March 2024

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

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I. Introduction

Every year, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) releases two extensive reports on women. The first of these is released on [International Women's Day, March 8](#), while the second is released to mark [the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, on November 25](#). These reports support SNHR's broader goal of shedding light on the conditions for women in Syria, the challenges they face, and the gross violations perpetrated against them (extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and sexual violence), which we document in a range of reports, statements, and news articles. In these endeavors, SNHR also tries to give a sense of the vast magnitude of the suffering endured by women as a direct result of their subjected to these violations. We also release other reports that highlight the multiple essential, active, instrumental, and continuous roles played by women in Syria. For instance, on February 19, 2024, SNHR released a report entitled, '[Unshakable Voices: Syrian Women Who Overcame the Trauma of Detention and the Tribulations Following Their Release](#),' which shines a light on some of the success stories achieved by many Syrian women in the face of a multitude of daunting challenges of various types, whether of a security-related, social, political, legal or other nature. Through their tireless work, women have played a key role in the mission of establishing a culture of respect for long-suppressed human rights in Syria.

In this report, one of a number of major annual reports released by SNHR, we reiterate and emphasize the point that the worst aspect of the gross violations perpetrated against women in Syria is the fact that they have been occurring non-stop since March 2011 amid a climate of impunity. That is to say, these violations against women have been constant, assuming a violent and systematically brutal character, while varying in terms of their severity, prevalence, and current and future effects on women and wider society depending on the nature and particularity of each type of violation.

In addition to ensuring compliance with our customary [rigorous methodology](#) in documenting and recording violations, SNHR also includes additional special criteria in documenting violations involving women. Firstly, we always pay close attention to the gender-based context in all the types and patterns of violations committed against women. That is to say, females and males do not suffer the same degree of punishment for the same violations, with punishment depending on many interrelated factors that may increase or reduce individuals' exposure to various types of violations, including, inter alia, victims' involvement in activism, geographic location, economic and social status, age, and even ethnic and sectarian identities. One of these factors is female identity, or in other words, how females have been subjected to certain violations solely due to their sex. Therefore, in the process of monitoring and documenting violations against females in the context of the Syrian conflict, we always adopt a systematic gender-based approach to ascertaining the true aims and definitions of violations experienced by women, especially since the effects of many violations are not limited solely to the victims' but extend to their families and communities, as mentioned earlier.

The figures and statistics on violations cited in this report are taken from the period between March 2011 and March 8, 2024. However, we've tried, as much as possible, to focus particularly on the incidents documented between March 8, 2023, and March 8, 2024, in the period since our previous annual report on [International Women's Day 2023](#), emphasizing the continuing nature of these violations. Finally, when we cite an incident that took place before that period, March 8, 2023, to March 8, 2024, this means that we only have been able to verify the incident in question at a later date.

The report draws upon SNHR's database, which is the result of our daily monitoring and documentation activities conducted since March 2011, and which encompasses violations of extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and sexual violence involving women. All of the figures included in this report are authenticated in accordance with our methodology and substantiated with all the relevant information and details we have been able to find and verify. We strive to constantly update the information stored on our databases whenever new data emerges in order to ensure the highest level of authenticity and reliability.

This report focuses on the gross human rights violations committed against women during the aforementioned period, which, as we noted, have been perpetrated in a systematic way. The six primary violations in this category are: Extrajudicial killing, unlawful detention, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and sexual violence. While we strive through our investigations to ensure, wherever possible, that culpability is accurately ascribed in every case to the responsible party or parties involved in the conflict, there are cases where insufficient evidence can be found to conclusively determine the culprit. In such cases, we attribute responsibility to 'unidentified parties', and ensure that this is noted in our summarizing of incidents, cases, and data.

In addition to the aforementioned six primary gross violations, we also regularly observe other violations, which are equally important to document. These include displacement, lack of access to basic requirements, assaults, and intimidation, and defamation against female activists and women in the workplace in particular, which have only grown worse as the conflict has continued. Therefore, we have included a summary of the consequences of these violations against females and how they affect other rights, particularly given the multi-faceted nature of these violations, all of which has ultimately harmed the overall human rights situation for women in Syria.

In terms of the geographical distribution of the violations covered by this report, SNHR's database features a filter function that enables us to sort women victims, whether of extrajudicial killing, enforced disappearance, detention, or other violations, according to the governorate in which the violation took place, by the victim's governorate of origin, or by their usual place of residence - three relevant geographical criteria that we can document separately or in combination. In this report, we list the data on women victims, whether they were killed, detained and/or forcibly disappeared or any combination thereof, according to the place where the arrest or killing took place rather than the victim's governorate of origin, due to the nature of the violations with which this report is concerned. The only exception to this approach is the category of women who died

due to torture, who are classified according to their governorate of origin, since, in the majority of these female victims' cases, the location of death or the governorate where it took place is one of the main detention centers in Damascus governorate. It is also worth noting that in some cases we categorize victims according to their governorate of origin, in order to give a sense of the magnitude of the loss and violence suffered by a particular governorate in comparison to others. We ensure that this is mentioned whenever this is the case.

This report also draws upon accounts and interviews with a number of internally displaced women, and female activists/workers in various professions. These interviews, six in all, were conducted by SNHR either in-person or remotely using communication software. In some cases, we have used aliases in order to maintain the eyewitnesses' confidentiality, and more importantly to protect them from potential harassment or persecution. None of the interviewees received any financial compensation for any of the interviews, nor were they promised any such inducement. We informed all the individuals interviewed of the purpose of the report beforehand, and they gave us permission to use the information they provided in the service of the goals of the report and of our documentation efforts. Such procedures are conducted in accordance with our rigorous internal protocols, which we have maintained since the beginning. We strive constantly to improve our protocols in any way possible, so as to enable us to provide the highest quality psychological care for victims.

All of the attacks cited in this report, which were carried out by the various parties to the conflict in Syria, targeted civilian areas where we documented no presence of any military personnel or any weapons arsenals before or during the attack. Additionally, no warning was issued to civilians by the attacking forces prior to these attacks as required by international humanitarian law.

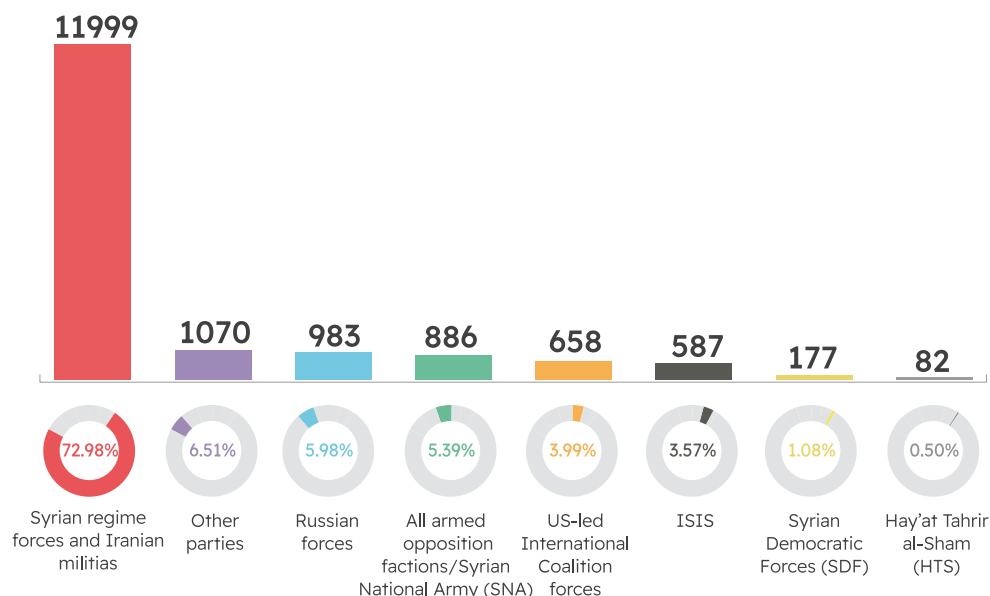
The details contained in this report only represent the bare minimum of the actual severity and magnitude of the violations that have occurred in Syria since 2011. Also, the report does not include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications of these events.



II. Toll of Most Prominent Violations Against Women as Documented on SNHR's Database

A. Extrajudicial killing

SNHR has documented the deaths of no fewer than **16,442** women at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since March 2011 up until March 2024. These are distributed as follows:



- Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, Shiite foreign militias):¹ 11,999 women.
- Russian forces: 983 women.
- ISIS: 587 women.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):² 82 women.
- All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army:³ 886 women.
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): 177 women.
- US-led International Coalition forces: 658 women.
- Other parties: 1,070 women.

As shown on the graph, the Syrian regime is responsible for about 73 percent of all cases of extrajudicial killing of women documented to date compared to other parties to the conflict. This further confirms that the Syrian regime has been deliberately targeting women in its killings.

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

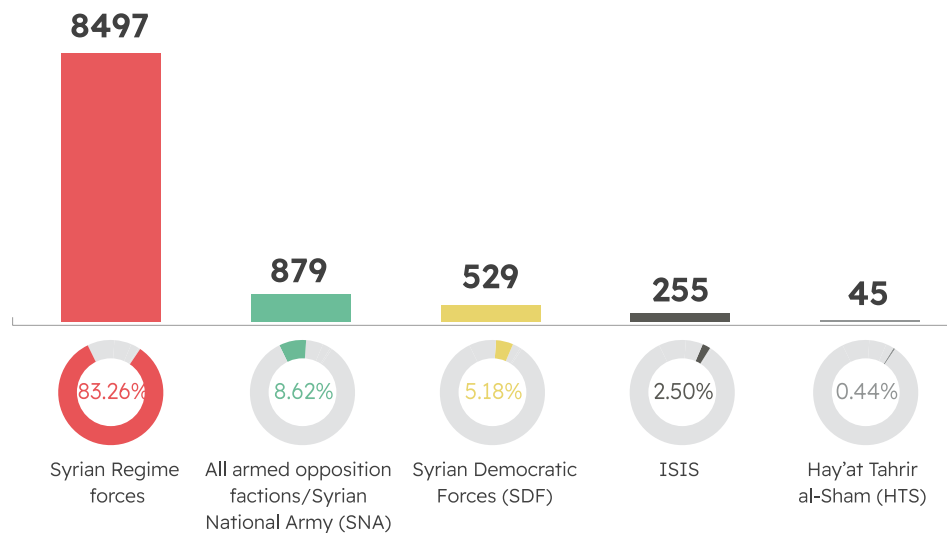
While we are aware that the United Nations and its agencies use the term 'the Syrian government', we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

2. Designated as a terror group by the UN.

3. All armed opposition factions founded since 2011 across Syria. Many of those formations are no longer active, and many was not structured around a central command. Towards the end of 2017, the Syrian National Army (SNA) was founded as an umbrella formulation that incorporated all active armed opposition factions to date.

B. Unlawful detention, arbitrary arrest, and enforced disappearance against women

As SNHR's database attests, no fewer than **10,205** of the women arrested/detained at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces since March 2011 up until March 2024 are still under arrest/forcibly disappeared. These are distributed as follows:

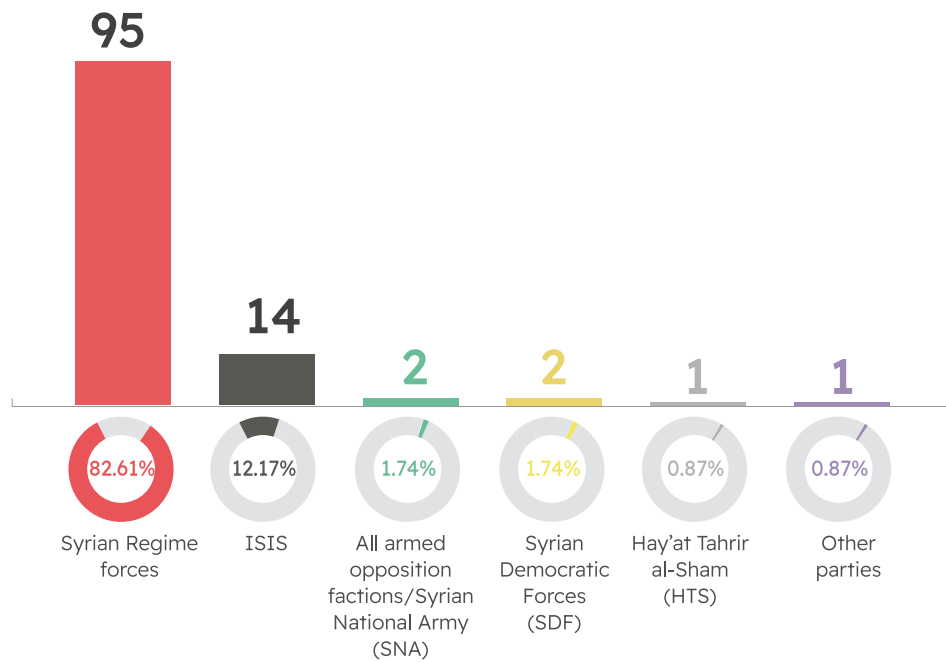


- Syrian regime forces: 8,497 women.
- ISIS: 255 women.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): 45 women.
- All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA): 879 women.
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): 529 women.

As shown on the graph, the Syrian regime has been responsible for more about 83 percent of all cases of arrest and enforced disappearances in comparison to the other parties to the conflict. This indicates that the Syrian regime has been hunting down, arresting/detaining, and disappearing women for various motives and in a calculated, deliberate manner.

C. Women's deaths due to torture

1. We have documented the deaths of 115 women due to torture at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since March 2011 up until March 2024. These are distributed as follows:



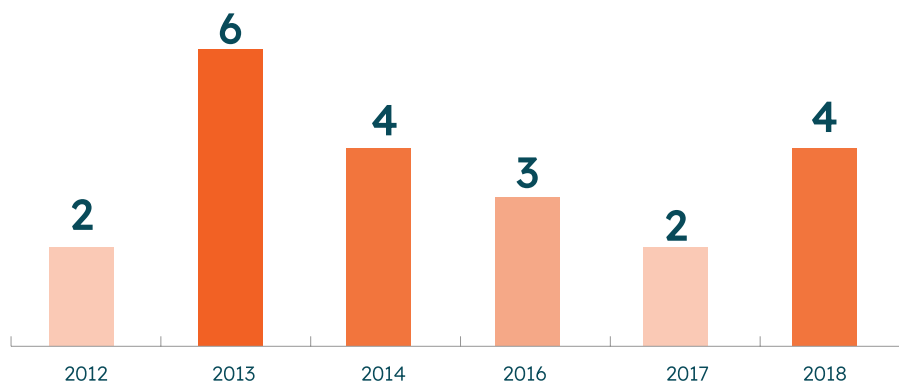
- Syrian regime forces: 95 women.
- ISIS: 14 women.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): One woman.
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): Two women.
- All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA): Two women.
- Other parties: One woman.

As shown on the graph, the Syrian regime has been responsible for about 83 percent of all the women's deaths due to torture documented in detention centers to date.

2. Forcibly disappeared women in regime detention centers who have been registered as dead in the civil registry records.

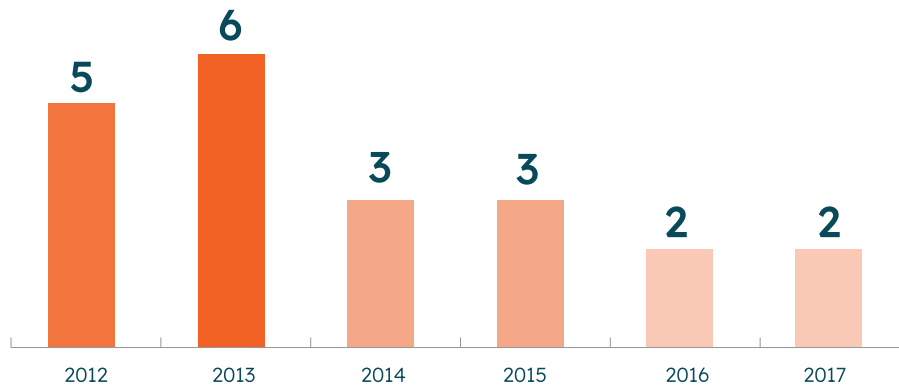
SNHR has documented the registration of the deaths of no fewer than 21 of the women forcibly disappeared in regime detention centers in the civil registry records since the beginning of 2018 up until March 2024.

These are distributed by the year of death shown on the death certificates issued by the Syrian regime as follows:



As shown on the graph, the largest proportion of the 21 cases were registered as having died in 2013 according to the death certificates issued by the civil registry, followed by 2014 and 2018.

These 21 women are also distributed by the year in which they were arrested by Syrian regime forces as follows

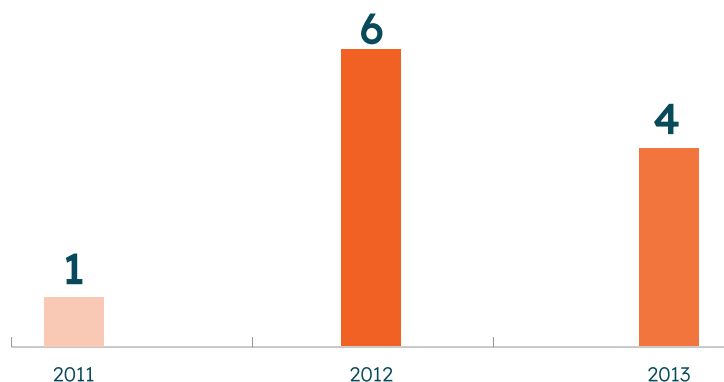


As shown on the graph, the largest proportion of the 21 women were arrested by Syrian regime forces in 2013, followed by 2012. This corresponds with the fact that those two years saw the largest waves of enforced disappearance in regime detention centers.

3. Women victims who have been identified from the Caesar Photos leaked from the regime military hospitals.

SNHR has documented that no fewer than 11 of the forcibly disappeared women imprisoned in regime detention centers have been identified among the photos of victims who died due to torture, known as the 'Caesar Photos' that were leaked after being taken in regime military hospitals, since the beginning of March 2015 and March 2024.

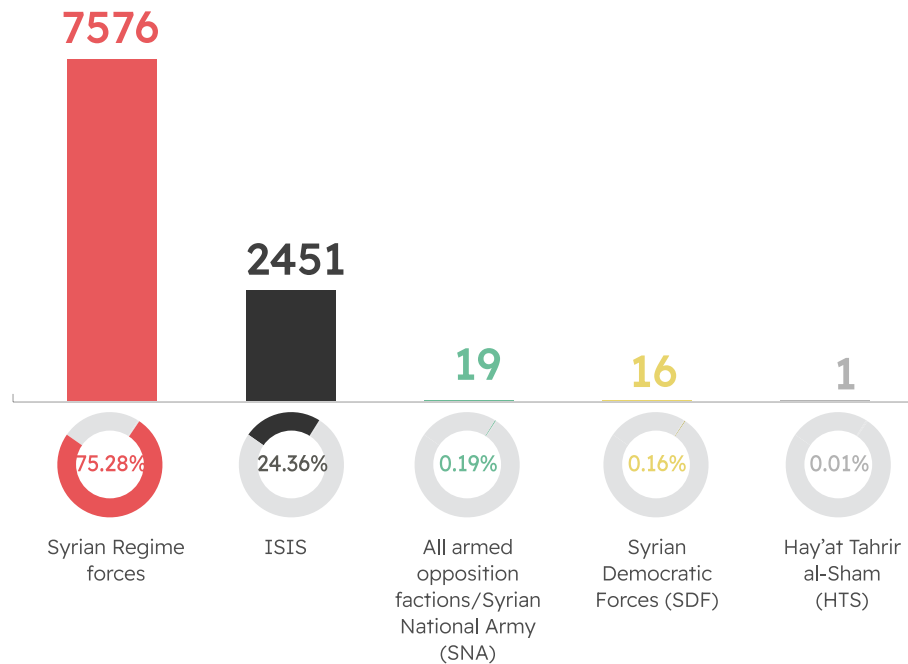
These 11 women are also distributed by the year in which they were arrested by Syrian regime forces as follows:



As shown on the graph, the largest proportion of the 11 cases were for women arrested by regime forces in 2012, which was one of the years that saw the largest wave of enforced disappearance in regime detention centers.

D. Sexual violence against women

SNHR has documented no fewer than 10,063 incidents of sexual violence against women at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since March 2011 up until March 2024. These incidents are distributed by the perpetrator party as follows:



- Syrian regime forces: 7,576 incidents.
- ISIS: 2,451 incidents.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: One incident.
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): 16 incidents.
- All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA): 19 incidents.

As shown on the graph, the Syrian regime has been responsible for no fewer than 75 percent of all cases of sexual violence recorded on our database, followed by ISIS. Both of these parties have used sexual violence as a strategic weapon of war and instrument of torture and retaliation against Syrian society. The regime and ISIS are followed by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and armed opposition factions/SNA, which have used sexual violence as a discriminatory instrument to extort victims and their families.

III. Military Attacks Carried out in Syria Between March 2023 and March 2024 Result in More Women's Deaths, as UN Agencies' Waning Support Further Worsens Their Situation

Humanitarian needs have been rising steadily since the beginning of 2023, not least because of the [February 6 Earthquakes](#) that devastated large areas of Syria, and whose effects have yet to be fully and properly addressed to this day. In addition to this crisis, there are the compounded and continuing effects of 13 years of military offensives which include vast numbers of civilian deaths, the displacement of millions of people, and more devastation to infrastructure and vital facilities. This suffering has all been dramatically exacerbated by the shocking decision by the World Food Programme (WFP) to largely reduce its humanitarian assistance across the country, while other international humanitarian organizations are also ending their projects, which are primarily supported by the UN agencies, and which target various sectors such as healthcare, education, water, and shelter. Tragically, we are already seeing the effects and implications of these continued reductions with respect to the humanitarian situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2024, particularly among women and children who are dramatically affected more by the worsening conditions, as their already greatly limited ability to address their basic needs is seriously compromised.

Besides this rapid humanitarian deterioration, many areas in Syria have seen military escalation in the last year (March 2023-March 2024). Northwestern Syria, in particular, including the areas affected by the February 6 earthquakes, has endured continued and relentless attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces. October 2023 was the most violent month last year, with large areas of Idlib city and its western, southern, eastern, and northern rural areas were all targeted, along with areas of western rural Aleppo and Sahl al-Ghab in western rural Hama (all these areas are outside the regime's control).

The bulk of these offensives were aerial attacks carried out by Syrian and Russian warplanes and ground attacks by Syrian regime forces using rocket launcher and artillery weapons. Many of these attacks deliberately targeted densely populated areas far from the dividing lines, as well as civilian facilities that are usually crowded and vital, in what were clearly attempts to devastate the service infrastructure serving the residents of those areas to the greatest possible extent.

As SNHR documented, the attacks carried out in October 2023 killed at least 68 civilians, including 24 children and 14 women (adult female), with those killed also including one medical worker and three humanitarian workers. Of the 68 civilians killed, 59, including 20 children and 10 women, were killed by Syrian regime forces, while the remaining nine, of whom four were children and four women, were killed by Russian forces. The October 2023 offensive also saw 73 attacks on vital civilian facilities by Syrian-Russian alliance forces in northwestern Syria, including 69 attacks by regime forces, with the remaining four carried out by Russian forces. These 73 attacks included 24 attacks on educational facilities, 11 attacks on medical facilities, and 12 attacks on places of worship. In total, at least 120,000 civilians, most of them women and children, were displaced in October 2023.⁴ Ground attacks have been constant in the area since March 2023, albeit at varying rates. These continuous attacks have caused multiple displacement waves, with families living in a grueling state of perpetual instability and displacement, forced to flee their villages for several days then return after the escalation and bombardment calm down.

4. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023, October 27). North-west Syria: Escalation of Hostilities - Flash Update No.4, 27 October 2023 [EN/AR]



↑ 👁 Families fleeing towns and villages in Shal al-Ghab area in western rural Hama - October 7, 2023. ©SNHR

In northeastern Syria, the areas of al-Sabha, al-Tayyana, al-Ruz, al-Shahil, and Theyban in eastern Deir Ez-Zour have seen constant displacement waves as a result of the raids and inspections by the SDF in the course of the clashes that broke out on August 27, 2023, between the SDF and Arab tribes in Deir Ez-Zour backed by Deir Ez-Zour Military Council. These clashes have led to the displacement of over 6,700 families. In September 2023, we also documented the displacement of dozens of families from villages and towns in eastern rural Aleppo, including al-Halwanji, Hamah, al-Sabounia, al-Sweida, al-Baldaq, al-Mahsanli, Ghanma, and al-Ghandoura in the Jarablos area, and the villages of al-Kreidiya and al-Ajami in the Baza'a area, and the al-Oulashli and the al-Bab area in eastern rural Aleppo. These families fled the heavy bombardment originating from the areas under the joint control of regime forces and the SDF. According to the UN Office for the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), these offensives led to the displacement of about 4,600 families.⁵



↑ 👁 Families fleeing in eastern rural Aleppo - September 4, 2023. ©SNHR

On January 27, 2024, the SDF [launched](#) a new security crackdown in al-Hawl Camp in rural Hasaka governorate with the stated goal of hunting down ISIS cells in the camp. The crackdown involved US-led International Coalition forces and the SDF's Internal Security forces. During the crackdown, all humanitarian activities were suspended, except for some life-saving operations, such as distributing bread, supplying water, treating solid waste, and health services. However, the retaliatory attacks by the camp's residents

5. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023, September 6). North-West Flash Update: Increasing hostilities in north-west Syria (as of 06 September 2023). <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-flash-update-increasing-hostilities-north-west-syria-06-september-2023>

led to the interruption of sanitation and of service provision at solid waste treatment facilities. According to the intelligence we have received, many of the services have been resumed since then, but in a delayed and extremely inconvenient manner, even though the SDF formally announced that the crackdown ended on February 7, 2024.

SNHR has documented the killing of no fewer than 132 women in the military attacks carried out in Syria since March 2023 up until March 2024.

Nayefa al-Saed, a 42-year-old married mother of five from al-Bara village in the Idlib countryside, has been forced to flee her house seven times since the beginning of 2023 by the relentless bombing of her home village by regime forces on her home village. She told SNHR:⁶

“The bombardment is almost daily in our area, but we cannot flee to border areas because that would be costly. When the bombardment intensifies, we flee to the remote agricultural lands where we set up camps for a few days until the bombardment stops. During those days, we have to take care of our needs on our own. As women, we face difficult challenges in all aspects of our lives, such as cooking, washing, and hygiene. We even sometimes have to sit on rough ground.”

On March 4, 2024, [SNHR issued a distress call](#) to end the suffering of about 2,000 IDP families in al-Shahba area in rural Aleppo who have been struggling for weeks with no access to drinking water. This happened after the UNICEF abruptly suspended its supplying of drinking water on Thursday, February 15, 2024, due to a lack of funds. The al-Shahba area and the IDP camps there are already struggling with a shortage of basic supplies and foodstuffs due to the restrictive practices and policies of the military personnel at checkpoints erected by Syrian regime forces in the vicinity. UNICEF had previously ceased supplying drinking water to many villages and towns in the area in 2020 and 2021, and limited such operations to IDP camps, until now. This reduction in desperately needed funds comes after a similar one by the WFP which announced on December 14, 2023, that its countrywide humanitarian assistance program would be reduced.



↑👁 Sardam IDPs Camp in al-Shahba area in Northern Aleppo on February 26, 2024. The Sardam Camp is one of a few camps to which UNICEF stopped supplying drinking water in February 2024. ©SNHR

6. Interviewed in person in her place of residence in Idlib on February 10, 2024.

SNHR spoke with Sahar,⁷ a woman originally from Afrin area in northern rural Aleppo governorate, who was displaced to the camps in al-Shahba area in northern Aleppo city. Sahar, like other camp residents, has been struggling with the lack of access to most essential requirements:

“At the beginning of 2018, our areas were attacked by the Syrian National Army [SNA], so we fled to other places outside the SNA’s control in the rural areas surrounding Tal Ref’at city in northern rural Aleppo governorate. We’ve been living in these camps for nearly seven years. We are surrounded by many landmines, which are remnants from the battles that took place here between the opposition and the Syrian regime. Those landmines go off from time to time. We are also suffering from a shortage of food supplies, which are provided occasionally by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the Self-Administration, as well as from scarce healthcare services. The five camps in the area all rely on one hospital [Afrin Hospital] with extremely limited resources. We also have no means of heating, especially in the winter, and we struggle to move from one area to another. We cannot go back to our areas in Afrin for fear of being arrested and extorted by the SNA. We also cannot go to regime-held areas in Aleppo city to receive treatment or education.” Sahar added that all these factors have led to a sharp decline in the various aspects of life for all in the camp, especially women, including services, healthcare, and education.

With new displacements being documented to this day, IDPs are still struggling to obtain adequate support from local humanitarian organizations and UN bodies, which further adversely affects their ability to meet their basic needs, especially in light of waning support. This is taking place in areas that are already suffering from rapidly falling levels of humanitarian support. Under such conditions, women are enduring unbearable conditions, facing double burdens to secure their basic needs and those of their families.

IV. No Fewer than 21 Incidents of Violence Against Women Over Their Activism Across Syria

As mentioned above, the challenges facing women have not been limited to the gross human rights violations outlined in this report. Rather, some of these challenges have come in the form of multi-faceted attacks on women’s rights, such as restrictions on basic freedoms and denial of employment opportunities. These attacks seem to have deliberately targeted women activists working in civil society and local service institutions, in addition to women who are active in sectors such as the media, politics, and human rights. As we have also documented previously, many of these women have faced restrictions, harassment, and intimidation over their activism, especially in regard to activities serving other women. These violations range from threats and assaults in public places, to attacks on their homes. Some women activists have also been summoned to security facilities for questioning, where they’ve faced various accusations, including scurrilous allegations related to their personal moral conduct, which can have a deeply harmful effect on one’s social standing. The aim of such accusations has been to blackmail these women and tarnish their image. Some extreme cases have even led to women activists being murdered.

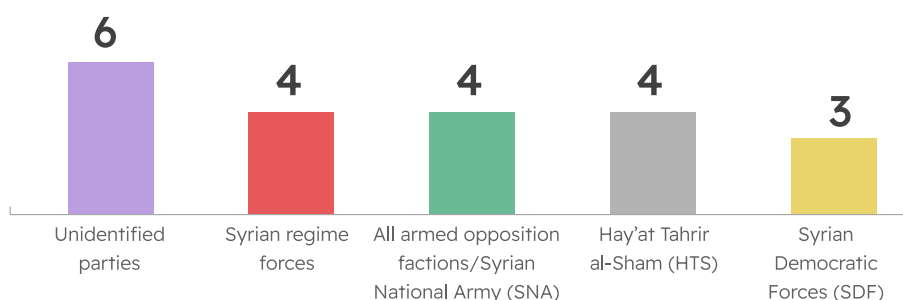
7. Via Phone on February 29, 2024.

Those practices have been perpetrated by various parties. While most of these practices were engaged in by parties that are not directly affiliated with the parties to the conflict and controlling forces, the deliberate targeting of women activists suggests that some of the parties to the conflict have been involved in such acts. These suspicions are strengthened by the failure of the parties to the conflict to take any measures to protect women and ensure that they can safely and effectively engage in activism. The parties to the conflict have also signally failed to hunt down the perpetrators of these acts or hold them accountable. On the contrary, indeed, these parties have themselves imposed discriminatory policies and hostile decisions against women activists. We have documented many instances of women seeking help from the judiciary or the police, but being treated in a disrespectful and dismissive manner, and, even worse, being blamed for abusive treatment they've suffered due to their active role in their communities. In many other cases, women have faced restrictions and defamation with the direct involvement of some of the parties to the conflict. Many of the women who've suffered such injustices told us that specific and certain parties with influence in their areas of residence were behind those acts.

Naturally, these discriminatory practices further marginalize women activists and adversely affect their role in the community, as well as further restricting their own and other women's access to services. These restrictions and additional challenges have driven many women to abandon activism and flee their areas. Some local organizations have also suspended women-focused programs either temporarily or permanently.

Additionally, many women have been subjected to assaults or violence while travelling between areas controlled by different parties, or when they tried to stop raids on their houses by the various parties to the conflict. In the course of these attacks, many women have sustained physical injuries, some of them serious.

SNHR has documented no fewer than 21 incidents of assault and intimidation targeting women mostly over their activism between March 2023 and March 2024.



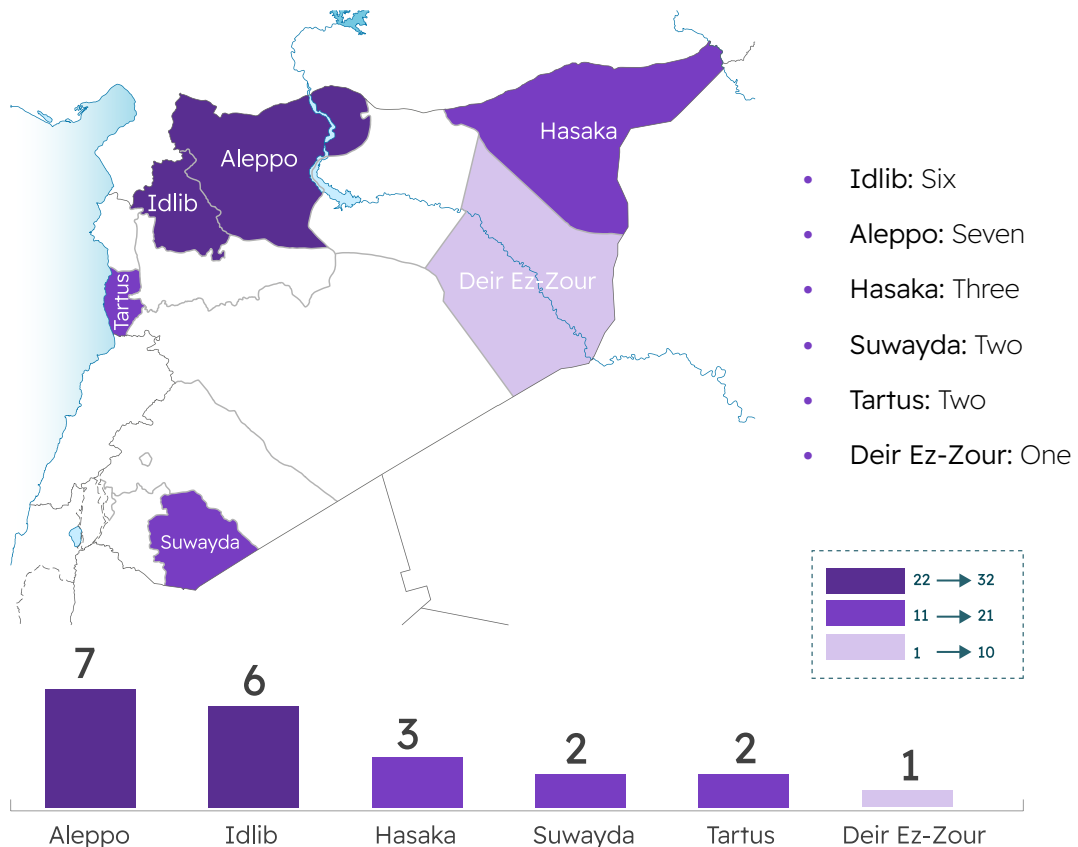
Those incidents are distributed by the perpetrator party as follows:

- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): Four incidents.
- Unidentified parties: Six incidents.
- All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA): Four incidents.
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): Three incidents.
- Syrian regime forces: Four incidents.

Those incidents were also distributed by type as follows:



Those incidents are distributed across governorates as follows:



Most notable incidents in regime-held areas

Wala al-Ahmad is a lawyer from Tartus city. Wala's services were retained by some detainees who were arrested by regime forces over accusations related to the Counter-Cybercrime Law, where she served as a defense lawyer, as well as representing her clients before the civil judiciary and the Counterterrorism Court. Due to the nature of her work, Alaa received threats on multiple occasions in 2023 and early-2014 from regime personnel or regime officials during visits to Tartus Central Prison in Tartus city, or when she filed documents to the court related to the records of interrogation sessions conducted with detainees at security branches. Wala told SNHR:⁸

"I face grave difficulties in my line of work, especially since most cases related to the Counter-Cybercrime Law are appended with personal claims filed by a regime official against the defendant in question, even though those claims are baseless. I have experienced many forms of harassment while in court or when visiting my clients in prison by individuals acting in lieu of officials. One time I put up a post on my Facebook page where I indirectly hinted that security forces are usually involved in such cases. After that, I received dozens of messages with prison threats, and broad accusations of treason. I then deleted my post and closed my phone." Walaa told us that these intimidation attempts have forced her to dismiss many cases brought to her by families of detainees with relation to the Counter-Cybercrime Law.

In early-August 2023, widespread anti-regime protests began in Suwayda governorate, which are still going on as of this writing. Women have been primary participants in these demonstrations. As such, we recorded that many women who were involved in those demonstrations have faced defamation campaigns and threats, and been subjected to security and social pressures, primarily aimed at putting an end to their involvement.

SNHR spoke with Seham al-Attam,⁹ an activist who helps with organizing demonstrations and works with different media outlets to report on the demonstrations and deliver the voice and demands of civilian protesters in Suwayda. Due to her activism, Seham has faced defamation campaigns and threats that even extended to her families:

"About two weeks into my involvement with the daily demonstrations and working with media outlets, and spreading news about the movement in Suwayda, I started receiving death threats and accusations of treason on my personal Facebook account. I dismissed those threats and continued doing what I was doing. Afterwards, I was attacked by many fake accounts on social media that have been publishing posts tarnishing my reputation and my family's. Things developed and I started receiving calls from people who threatened to call me, as did my father who received calls from people who I think work at the [regime] security branches who told him to force me to stop my activism, and threatened to kill him if he does not comply."

8. Alias. Interview was conducted via phone on February 8, 2024.

9. Alias. Interview was conducted via phone on October 6, 2023.



↑ 👁 Group of women heading for al-Karama Square (formerly al-Seir) in the center of Suwayda city to partake in an anti-regime demonstration – Friday, November 10, 2023

Most notable incidents in SNA-held areas

Afaf al-Mousa, a community activist who also serves as a supervisor of a multi-sector women's empowerment program with a women organization in SNA-held areas in northeastern Syria. At the end of 2023, the organization for which Afaf works was forced to suspend a number of its programs after receiving threats and facing persecution by influential local figures on the pretext of spreading Western ideals. Afaf told SNHR:¹⁰

“Our work as women have become so difficult and complicated. We are currently working on a very narrow scale that target a very narrow audience of women. Any women-focused activism in our areas is put under intensive scrutiny. If it happens that our work does not comply with the mindset of those in control, then they will level the readily-made accusation of promoting the West. Sadly, no one can protect us.”

Wafa Sedawa is a worker with a local civil society organization in the Afrin area in northwestern Aleppo governorate. In early-February 2024, the SNA's civilian police summoned her to a police station in Afrin for questioning. Wafa was released on the same day. Wafa told SNHR:¹¹

“At first, they asked general questions about work, then they started asking if I have links to the PKK, and then about the organization I work with. I could not figure out what their concerns were, and why it is that they specifically brought me in instead of one of my superiors. About two hours later, the interrogating officer told me that they were concerned I might be involved in suspicious activities and I have to be more careful in my work.” Wafa added that she felt afraid and worried that she was in danger after the events of that day, which prompted her to cut back on her activism and movement in the area.

Heba Suhaib Haj Aref, a 32-year-old woman from Bza'a city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate, was an educational supervisor at the Fraternity Center for Public Education, which is affiliated with the 'New Step Educational Association for Culture and Solidarity' [Yeni Adım Eğitim Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği], as well as being a member of the Women's Protection Network, the Women's Support and Empowerment Unit, and the Syrian Political Feminist Movement. She had also previously served as a member of Bza'a city's municipal council. Heba was married and had two sons. At around dawn on Tuesday, February 27,

10. Via phone on February 14, 2024.

11. Via phone on February 18, 2024.

2024, Heba's family found her body in her house in Bza'a city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate; she had been hanged. According to intelligence SNHR received from other female activists close to Hiba, she had received threats from different groups over her role as an activist working to empower women and support women's rights, and her former membership of the Bza'a municipal council in May 2023. During that period, Heba was the victim of several campaigns of defamation and harassment by different armed factions affiliated with the SNA, as well as by local civilians, which eventually forced her to tender her resignation. [We released a statement](#) stressing that, based on the earlier threats Heba received and the suspicious circumstances surrounding her death, we believe she did not commit suicide, but was murdered. Corroborating this belief are accounts from some of her many friends who we spoke with, who told us that she was not suffering from any psychological conditions. On the contrary, they said, she was as dedicated as ever and carrying out her duties as usual until the day before her death. On March 4, 2024, the Media Office in al-Bab city [issued a statement](#) stating that security and forensic examinations had determined that the victim died by suicide through hanging herself.

Most notable incidents in HTS-held areas

Since the beginning of 2023, Idlib governorate and some areas in Aleppo governorate under the control of the group, have seen anti-HTS protests. Most of these protests called for the release of detainees, especially after the group launched a crackdown on the anti-HTS Tahrir Party and its members. These demonstrations, which continue as of this writing, have seen the involvement of many women, primarily relatives of the detainees. Some other women have also participated due to being relatives of civilian detainees. As a result of these women's participation in the protests, we recorded that many have been assaulted and threatened, mainly to pressure them to end their involvement.

On Monday, June 5, 2023, personnel from the HTS's General Security apparatus stopped a woman on the road between al-Sahhara and Babka town in western rural Aleppo governorate and verbally abused her. The woman was on her way to an anti-HTS demonstration in Babka village demanding the release of detainees.

Most notable incidents in SDF-held areas

On Wednesday, July 5, 2023, personnel from the Military Police affiliated with the SDF's Military Council severely beat a woman after she tried to stop them from arresting her son Eissa al-Qaddour at her house in al-Asadiya neighborhood in southern Manbij city in eastern rural Aleppo governorate. Subsequently, the residents gathered in support of the women and kicked out the SDF personnel, stopping them from taking her son.

Another woman, Aisha al-Mohammad al-Hamid, was attacked and beaten by SDF personnel during a raid on her husband's family's home in al-Sa'wa town in western Deir Ez-Zour governorate on November 10, 2023, while they were trying to arrest her brother-in-law. Aisha, who was seven months pregnant at the time, lost her unborn baby as a result of the ferocious beating. She was initially taken to a hospital in Raqqa city, and then transferred to a hospital in Damascus city due to her worsening condition. The beating was so severe that Aisha's kidney was damaged and she sustained fractures all over her body.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

Legal conclusions

- The parties to the conflict have failed to treat women in a way that takes their gender nature into consideration. Rule 134 of customary international humanitarian law states, "The specific protection, health and assistance needs of women affected by armed conflict must be respected."¹²
- The parties to the conflict, particularly the Syrian regime which is responsible for by far the largest proportion of the violations documented in the Syrian conflict, have violated many articles concerning women, such as those included in the Protocol II Additional to the Geneva Conventions, including the prohibition on "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture... outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment,"¹³ and "rape, enforced prostitution and any form of indecent assault..."¹⁴
- This report proves conclusively that there has been discrimination against women manifested in a number of practices, which contravene the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), that details the rules states must adhere to, in order to protect women against the negative effects of discrimination. Those practices also constitute a violation of UN Security Council resolution 1325.¹⁶
- The violations summarized in this report, which were committed by the Syrian regime in a widespread and systematic manner that constitute crimes against humanity include murder, torture, rape, and forced displacement.
- The violations outlined in this report, which were committed by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict that constitute war crimes include sexual violence, violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity.

12. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [Rule 134](#) of the customary international humanitarian law.

13. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), First Geneva Convention, [Article 3\(1\)](#).
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Additional Protocol (II) to the Geneva Conventions, [Article 4](#).

14. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Additional Protocol (II) to the Geneva Conventions, [Article 4\(2-h\)](#)

15. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#).

16. United Nations Security Council (UNSC), [resolution 1325](#) (October 31, 2000).

Recommendations

All parties to the conflict

- The Syrian regime must respect its obligations to the CEDAW agreement,¹⁷ implement the general recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, including General Recommendation No. 30,¹⁸ respect the two International Covenants on Human Rights¹⁹ as well as the Geneva Convention, and as such cease the commission of crimes against humanity and war crimes.
- All parties to the conflict must immediately release all arbitrarily detained women, particularly those detained in relation to the armed conflict. The parties to the conflict must also respect international laws on detaining underage girls, including separating them from men, inspection, and designating women guards, as well as respecting the protocols on inspecting prisoners when entering detention to internally report incidents of sexual violence.
- Comply with UN Security Council resolutions related on the Syrian conflict and Security Council resolutions related to the role of conflict parties in protecting women from sexual violence, particularly resolutions 1325²⁰ and 2122.²¹
- Launch comprehensive investigations into all violations and hold those responsible for crimes accountable, while also beginning to compensate victims and enacting reparations for the damages that have occurred.
- Ensure that women have protection and security in their work and movement, and provide support for women, and end all forms of restrictions and limitation of freedoms.
- Support women's efforts to resist the violence perpetrated against them, and work to alleviate the economic and social ramifications on their lives resulting from the conflict.
- Spare women the ravages of war, and take the necessary steps to ensure an end to all forms of violations against women.
- Increase women's active involvement in all political, media, and relief formations, as well as in the path of the peace process.

International community and UN Security Council

- Apply pressure on all parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria to release arbitrary detained and forcibly disappeared women.
- Ensure protection and assistance for forcibly displaced women, including women IDPs and refugees, and pay attention to their special needs, particularly with relation to protection.

17. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#).

18. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation [No. 30](#) on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations.

19. Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), International Covenant on [Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)
Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), International Covenant on Economic, [Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#).

20. United Nations Security Council (UNSC), [resolution 1325](#) (October 31, 2000).

21. United Nations Security Council (UNSC), [resolution 2122](#) (November 18, 2013).

- All the states ratifying the CEDAW must respect their obligations with respect to holding the Syrian regime to account and exposing its criminal practices against women in Syria. The world states must also spare no effort to fight and end those practices.
- Expose the states supporting the Syrian regime, which are trying to rehabilitate or sponsor perpetrators of crimes against humanity and war crimes against Syria's women.
- Take all measures possible, legally, politically, and financially, against the Syrian regime and its allies, and all perpetrators of violations in the Syrian conflict, in order to apply pressure on them to respect women's rights.
- Fulfill the financial pledges made:
 - » Help the neighboring countries and support them as much as possible to raise the levels of education and healthcare in those states that are housing the largest proportion of women refugees.
- At the very least, pressure must be applied on the Syrian regime to allow international observers, including the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), to women's detention centers with no restrictions or conditions.
- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), or establish a tribunal for trying crimes against humanity and war crimes as soon as possible, in order to put an end to the perpetrated immunity that have been going on for over a decade in Syria.

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

- In light of the wide scale of violations committed by the Syrian regime against women, some of which amount to crimes against humanity, the Committee must highlight its efforts in Syria, as we cannot perceive any efforts being made in Syria right now. The committee must double its efforts to address individual and collective cases in Syria. We also call on women survivors to individually contact the Committee and submit complaints. In turn, the Committee must expand its scope of work.

UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls

- The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences must redouble their efforts in Syria, considering the severity of the violence suffered by Syrian women, particularly at the hands of the Syrian government itself, compared to women in other countries. Special attention must be paid to women in the detention centers of the Syrian regime and its security arms.

European States and the European Union

- Increase the severity of economic sanctions on individuals and companies supporting the Syrian regime, Iran, and Russia.
- Provide every possible bit of support for the civil society organizations active in Syria working to rehabilitate and reintegrate female victims into society.
- Support the efforts aimed at providing psychological support and reintegration for female survivors in areas of displacement and countries of refuge.
- Syria is one of the world's worst countries in terms of many types of violations against women. As such, Syria needs far greater levels of humanitarian assistance, especially since violations continue to this day.
- Support the path of judicial accountability, and the course of prosecution under the universal jurisdiction principle, in order to assist with investigating and legally prosecuting the individuals responsible for the most serious crimes, according to the classifications of international law, that have taken place in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, and in accordance with resolution 248/71²², and also support litigations on the basis of universal jurisdiction.

UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR)

- Issue a special report on the violations inflicted on Syria's women in particular.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)

- Launch an investigation into the incidents included in this report, and consider its findings for its next report.

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

- Coordinate humanitarian relief operations by focusing on the worst affected areas, and resist the Syrian regime's pressure and exploitation which attempts to solicit aid in the regime's own favor.
- Dedicate sufficient resources to rehabilitate female survivors, especially those who have experienced sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and forced marriage, and on the basis of the areas worst affected.
- Expand the services offered to female victims of violence, particularly victims of sexual violence. This includes services such as shelter, treatment, rehabilitation, consultation, and ensuring the provision of women's and girls' special needs, with priority given to pregnant women, new mothers, and breastfeeding women.
- Establish institutions to protect and care for female victims who have suffered exclusion from their families and communities.

22. United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), [resolution 71/248](#) (January 11, 2017).

Feminist groups around the world

- Provide greater support and advocacy for the causes of Syria's women, highlight the horrible violations Syrian women have suffered, expand on events and projects to rehabilitate female survivors who have experienced arrest, torture, and forced displacement, and shed more light on the suffering of Syria's women in IDP camps, refugee countries, and detention centers.

Neighboring countries

- Ensure Syrian refugees', particularly female refugees', ability to seek asylum, respect their rights, including non-refoulement, and accelerate the family reunion process. EU countries and other states should try and ease the burden of Syria's neighboring countries by taking in more Syrian refugees. Meanwhile, donor states should increase their support for the UNHCR and local community organizations in asylum countries.

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- Create a stable and safe environment for Syrian women refugees and put more effort into reintegrating them into their communities through long-term psychological support.
- Support investment in education, healthcare, and psychological rehabilitation.

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No justice without accountability

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