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SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bashar Assad has ruled the Syrian Arab Republic as president since 2000. The constitution mandates the primacy of Baath Party leaders in state institutions and society, and Assad and Baath Party leaders dominated all three branches of government as an authoritarian regime. An uprising against the regime that began in 2011 continued throughout the year. The 2021 presidential election resulted in Assad's re-election, and the Baath Party-led National Progressive Front won 177 of the 250 seats in the People's Council 2020 parliamentary elections. These elections, considered by the international community to be illegitimate, took place in an environment of widespread regime coercion and without the participation of a majority of Syrians residing in opposition-held territory, due to the lack of a safe and neutral environment for voter participation. Nongovernmental organization observers additionally raised concerns about electoral fraud and did not consider the elections free or fair. Local council elections took place across all provinces September 18 and were described by nongovernmental organizations as neither impartial nor independent.

The regime's multiple security branches operated autonomously with wide-ranging and overlapping areas of jurisdiction. Regime-affiliated militias, such as the National Defense Forces, integrated and performed similar roles without defined jurisdiction. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over uniformed military, police, and state security forces, and used the security forces to carry out abuses. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed numerous abuses, some of which the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria considered to be war crimes. Civilian authorities possessed limited influence over foreign military or paramilitary organizations operating in the country, including proregime forces such as the Russian armed forces, Iran-affiliated Hizballah, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, members of which also committed numerous abuses.

During the year, regime and proregime forces continued aerial and ground offensives initiated in 2019 to recapture Idlib Governate and other areas in the

northwestern region of the country, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing thousands. Escalations in the north, frequently involving the use of heavy weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Air strikes by regime and Russian forces repeatedly struck sites where civilians were present, including hospitals, markets, schools, settlements for internally displaced persons, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists. In Dara'a, fighting between regime forces and the opposition, and a regime siege that lasted 75 days, temporarily displaced more than 38,000 individuals. As of September, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported there were 6.9 million internally displaced persons and 5.7 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria found reasonable grounds to believe that government forces may have “committed the war crime of directing attacks against civilians” and found evidence indicating “continuing patterns of crimes against humanity and war crimes related to torture and ill-treatment in detention.”

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings; forced disappearance; torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the regime and other actors, including torture involving sexual violence, harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including denial of medical care; arbitrary detention; political prisoners and detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious abuses in a conflict, including unlawful and widespread civilian deaths and harm, enforced disappearances and abductions, torture, physical abuses and punishment, unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers by the regime and other armed actors; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media, including violence and threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests and prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and the enforcement of and the threat to enforce criminal libel laws and blasphemy laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations;

restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on and harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, workplace violence, child, early, and forced marriage, femicide, and other forms of such violence crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of ethnic groups and indigenous peoples including Kurdish and Yezidi residents; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence, threats of violence, and severe discrimination targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons; existence and enforcement of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; and severe restrictions on workers' freedom of association and other rights.

The regime took no steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, or punish officials who committed human rights violations or abuses or who engaged in corruption.

Regime-linked paramilitary groups reportedly engaged in frequent abuses, including massacres; indiscriminate killings; kidnapping of civilians; physical abuse, including sexual violence; and unlawful detentions. Regime-aligned militias reportedly launched numerous attacks that killed and injured civilians.

Russian and Iranian forces, as well as affiliated paramilitaries, such as Wagner Group and Hizballah, were implicated in the deaths of civilians and destruction of civilian infrastructure and property.

The unstable security situation in areas under the control of armed opposition groups continued to foster an environment in which numerous human rights abuses were committed, including killings, physical abuse, abductions, unjust detention, and recruitment and use of child soldiers.

Armed terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham committed a wide range of abuses, including unlawful killings and kidnappings, unjust detention, physical abuse, deaths of civilians, and recruitment of child soldiers. ISIS carried out

unlawful killings, attacks, and kidnappings. There were no reports of investigation into these abuses or prosecution for such actions.

Armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey (Türkiye) in the northern region of the country committed abuses, reportedly targeting Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other civilians, including: extrajudicial killings; the unlawful detention and disappearance of civilians; physical abuse; sexual violence; forced evacuations from homes; looting and seizure of private property; transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey; recruitment and use of child soldiers; and the looting and desecration of religious sites. The “Ministry of Defense” of the Syrian Interim Government, a governing entity formed by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, investigated some claims of abuses committed by the armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey that make up the Syrian National Army. There was no information available on prosecution of individual personnel.

Elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minority groups that included members of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, reportedly engaged in abuses, including attacks striking residential areas, physical abuse, unlawful detention, recruitment and use of child soldiers, restrictions on freedoms of expression and assembly, and arbitrary destruction and demolition of homes. The Syrian Democratic Forces investigated most allegations against its forces. Some members of the Syrian Democratic Forces have been prosecuted for abuses, but statistics were unavailable.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

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.). No internal governmental bodies meaningfully investigated whether security force killings were justifiable or pursued prosecutions.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), at least 229,112

civilians were killed in the conflict from 2011 to September. The regime committed extrajudicial killings and caused the death of large numbers of civilians throughout regime-controlled territories.

The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria (COI) and numerous human rights groups reported the regime killed persons in detention facilities, both by execution and torture. According to the SNHR, more than 15,265 individuals died due to torture between March 2011 and December, including 196 children and 113 women; the SNHR attributed approximately 89 percent of all cases to regime forces during the year (see section 1.c.).

Human rights groups and other international organizations reported that in March the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Army executed two young men and a father when they attempted to cross the border into Lebanon.

On April 28, *The Guardian* published a report and videos that appeared to show a 2013 incident in which an Assad regime official of Branch 227, identified as Amjad Yousef, shot point-blank 41 blindfolded, unarmed civilians who then fell into a mass grave reportedly in Tadamon. The shooting reportedly occurred during a 2013 massacre that killed approximately 300 civilians. On October 28, *The Guardian* published a follow-up report, claiming that in an unpublished video it had reviewed, Yousef shot as many as six women across a pit as his counterparts looked on and occasionally took part. The pit was subsequently set afire, and a bulldozer filled it with ash and debris, in what appeared to be an attempt to eliminate evidence of the war crime, according to *The Guardian*. In May the SNHR reported that the regime arrested Amjad Yousef, who confessed to executing and raping detainees in Tadamon in interviews with researchers who later published video footage of the 2013 massacre. On October 28, however, *The Guardian* reported that Amjad Yousef was still working on a military base outside Damascus and had been accused by his colleagues of directing up to a dozen more mass killings during the conflict.

The Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP) estimated in October that as many as 500 prisoners were executed between 2018 and 2021. According to the ADMSP, detainees were not notified about their execution decisions in advance, and instead were transferred to execution

chambers in the evening for a sentence to be carried out on the same day or the following day. The SNHR reported that most of the individuals detained by regime authorities during the year were denied access to fair public trial (see section 1.e.).

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

b. Disappearance

There were numerous reports of forced disappearances by or on behalf of regime authorities, and the vast majority of those disappeared since the start of the conflict remained missing. Human rights groups' estimates of the number of disappearances since 2011 varied widely, but all estimates pointed to disappearances as a common practice. The SNHR documented at least 155,368 individuals remained detained or disappeared at the hands of the parties to the conflict in Syria from March 2011 through December. The SNHR documented that the Assad regime was responsible for 87 percent of detentions and disappearances (135,706), including 3,691 children and 8,484 women. The regime targeted medical personnel, critics, perceived dissidents, journalists, and protesters, as well as their families and associates. Most disappearances reported by domestic and international human rights documentation groups appeared to be politically motivated, and a number of prominent political prisoners detained in previous years remained missing (see section 1.e.).

In its March report, the COI determined that “many civilians were held incommunicado for long periods, and some remain missing,” while in some cases, “relatives learned that their loved one had recently died in detention, while others learned the whereabouts of missing persons, including through social media, and managed to secure their release after paying bribes.” The COI reported in 2021 that “widespread enforced disappearance was deliberately perpetuated by security forces throughout the decade on a massive scale, to spread fear, stifle dissent and as punishment.” The ADMSP alleged that regime and nonstate actors used enforced disappearance and arrests as a tactic to both punish dissidents and accumulate wealth. The regime had issued 21 amnesty decrees since 2011, including an April 30 decree whose implementation human rights organizations

described as chaotic and inhumane. These decrees excluded the vast majority of detainees who were never formally convicted of a crime in any court of law and were classified by human rights groups as unacknowledged detainees or forcibly disappeared.

During its February session, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) requested information from the regime on 24 newly reported cases of enforced disappearance but received no response on these or other outstanding cases. The June report issued by the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict verified the abduction of eight children in 2021. The SNHR reported that as of December, at least 5,217 children were still detained or forcibly disappeared by parties to the conflict since March 2011. At least 148 children were recorded as detained or disappeared during the year, according to the SNHR.

Throughout the year the regime continued publishing notifications of detainees' deaths in regime detention facilities. According to nongovernmental organization (NGO) and UN reporting, many families were unaware of the status of their detained or disappeared family members and learned that relatives they believed to be alive had died months or even years earlier. In some instances, families learned the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones by identifying images of victims in published videos of killings and massacres, including the April release of footage from the 2013 Tadamon massacre. In many cases the regime denied the presence of these individuals in its detention centers until it released death notifications.

A report issued by the SNHR in April found that the regime "avoided providing any definitive clarification of the fate of the forcibly disappeared" and that "families are often not informed about the timing or manner of death of those who are disappeared." According to its August report, the SNHR claimed that the families of 88 percent of those killed since the 2011 conflict have not yet been able to obtain death certificates of their loved ones. In this report, the SNHR reported instances of the regime withholding death certificates until victims' families sign false statements exonerating the regime by stating that other armed actors killed their loved ones. The regime did not announce publication of notifications on updated state registers, return bodies to families, or disclose locations of remains. The SNHR recorded that at least 547 forcibly disappeared persons in regime

detention centers were registered as deceased in the civil registry department's records during the year. The SNHR alleged that all of these deaths were due to torture as the victims' bodies were not returned to the families by the regime and the deaths were not announced at the time of their occurrence. For example, the SNHR reported November 28 that Khaled Sheikhmous Qassem, whom the regime forcibly disappeared in 2017, died as a result of torture and medical negligence in a regime prison in Damascus on November 25. The SNHR confirmed that regime forces did not return Qassem's body to his family.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) noted that families of the disappeared often feared reprisals, extortion, and requests for bribes when reporting cases. For example, local media outlets reported in May that Mohammad Shilash was detained without charge and tortured in regime detention facilities until his family paid millions of Syrian pounds for his release, despite his qualifying for release under the April 30 amnesty. In September, the COI reported that women who inquired about the fate of their detained spouse or attempted to obtain a death certificate with relevant authorities were harassed and verbally abused. During the year, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted the "black market of forged and fake reports of detention and interrogation, further exacerbating families' suffering."

Some terrorist groups and armed opposition 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 effort to prevent, investigate, or punish such actions and did not comply with measures, such as search commissions, to ensure accountability for the disappearances.

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

The law prohibits torture and other cruel 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 systematic torture, abuse, and mistreatment to punish

perceived opponents.

On March 30, the regime adopted a law criminalizing torture; according to the COI; however, it does not address immunity granted to military and security agents. Amnesty International issued a statement on March 31 saying the new antitorture law “effectively whitewashes decades of state-sanctioned human rights violations,” “fails to offer redress to past victims of torture, include any protection measures for witnesses or survivors of torture,” and “fails to mention any measures that could be taken to prevent torture from occurring in detention centers and prisons in the future.” Human rights organizations dismissed the move as a superficial attempt to show compliance with the Convention against Torture in light of the attempt by Canada and The Netherlands to hold Syria responsible for violating this convention. Amnesty International assessed “the widespread and systematic use of enforced disappearance, torture and other ill-treatment, which has led to deaths in detention, and extrajudicial executions following sham trials, amounts to crimes against humanity.”

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

NGOs and the COI continued to report that the regime employed torture, including forcing objects into the victim’s rectum or vagina, administering electric shocks, suspension by one or two limbs for prolonged periods, folding persons into car tires, whipping exposed body parts, burning body parts, and extracting nails and teeth. In March, the ADMSP reported that 98 percent of the 801 former detainees the organization interviewed said they had been subjected to torture during their detention. The SNHR documented the deaths of at least 133 individuals due to torture during the year, including one child. According to the SNHR, from the start of the conflict through June, at least 14,685 persons died from torture, with 98 percent of the deaths attributed to regime forces.

The COI and Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported regular use of torture against

perceived regime opponents at regime facilities. Human rights groups identified numerous detention facilities where regime officials reportedly tortured prisoners, including the Mezzeh Airport detention facility; Military Security Branches 215, 227, 235, 248, and 291; Adra Prison; Sednaya Prison; the Harasta Air Force Intelligence Branch; Harasta Military Hospital; Mezzeh Military Hospital 601; and the Tishreen Military Hospital. The COI reported that security forces subjected detainees to mistreatment in military hospitals, often obstructing medical care or exacerbating existing injuries as a technique of abuse and interrogation.

In June Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights (LDHR) reported on the regime's policy and systemic practice of sexual violence, including rape, torture, and ill treatment against women, children, and men. In its June report, LDHR documented the cases of three survivors detained by the regime who were subjected to treatment that could amount to sexual slavery, as well as six eyewitness accounts of treatment in regime detention facilities that could amount to sexual slavery.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) assessed that the regime perpetrated violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including the detention and torture of medical workers.

In January the Higher Regional Court in Frankfurt initiated the trial of Alaa Mousa, a Syrian doctor accused of 18 counts of torture and one count of murder in military hospitals in Homs and Damascus. He was arrested in Germany in 2020 and charged with murder and attempted severe and dangerous bodily harm at military hospitals 608 and 601, where he allegedly tortured protesters transported to the hospitals in 2011 and 2012. The indictment outlined his torture of detainees injured in anti-Assad demonstrations and noted the deaths of at least two victims.

There were a significant number of reports of abuse of children by the regime. Officials reportedly targeted and tortured children because of their familial relationships, real or assumed, with political dissidents, members of the armed opposition, and activist groups. According to witnesses, authorities detained children to compel parents and other relatives associated with opposition fighters to surrender to authorities.

According to SNHR, the regime assaulted and arrested Saleh Ahmad, age 14, Saleh in Aleppo on August 13. SNHR reported the arrest was carried out without a warrant, noting that the regime failed to notify his family of the arrest or provide the child with legal representation. The next day, the al-Aziziya Police Station claimed Saleh had committed suicide. The SNHR, which obtained photos and videos of Saleh's body, reported it showed signs of "lethally brutal torture."

In January the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany convicted and sentenced Anwar Raslan, a former colonel in the Syrian intelligence services, to life in prison for crimes against humanity. Raslan was found guilty of 27 counts of murder, 25 counts of dangerous bodily harm, one count of aggravated rape, two counts of sexual coercion, 14 counts of unlawful imprisonment, two counts of hostage-taking, and three counts of sexual abuse of prisoners. The court also found that "as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against the civilian population of Syria," Raslan deprived 4,000 persons of their liberty, subjecting them to torture during their time in custody.

Impunity was pervasive for regime security and intelligence forces. The COI noted that the March 30 law criminalizing torture does not address immunity granted to military and security agents. Numerous human rights organizations concluded that regime forces continued to inflict systematic, officially sanctioned torture on civilians in detention with impunity. Human rights groups reported the vast majority of abuses committed since 2011 went uninvestigated. There were no known prosecutions or convictions in the country of regime security force personnel for abuses and no reported regime actions to increase respect for human rights by the security forces.

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.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Prison facilities were grossly overcrowded. Authorities commonly held juveniles, adults, pretrial detainees, and convicted prisoners together in inadequate spaces. Access to and quality of food, potable

water, sanitation, heating, proper ventilation, lighting, and medical care were poor and life threatening. Authorities kept prisoners confined in cells for long periods without an opportunity for movement, exercise, or use of showers and sanitary facilities.

The regime maintained a vast network of detention centers where detainees were subjected to human rights violations. Reports from human rights groups and former detainees suggested that there continued to be 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 housed detainees 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.

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. In its September report, the COI said that former detainees described “overcrowded cells, widespread illnesses and diseases, including COVID-19, denial of medical care, food, water, and sanitary facilities.” Remedial action was not taken by regime authorities. Prisoners received inadequate or no medical care, leading to death from preventable conditions in unhygienic cells. Local NGOs and medical professionals reported authorities denied medical care to prisoners with pre-existing health needs, such as diabetes, asthma, and cancer, and often denied pregnant women any medical care. Released prisoners commonly reported sickness and injury resulting from such conditions. Media, NGO, and social media reporting noted that some of the detainees released under the April 30 amnesty exhibited signs of memory loss, trauma, mental illness, malnourishment, and physical injuries. According to NGO reporting, survivor detainees collectively reported hundreds of detainee deaths in custody of government security branches, from both torture and inhuman treatment. In its October 3 report, the ADMSP estimated that 30,000-35,000 detainees at Sednaya Prison were either executed or died from systemic torture, lack of medical care, or starvation, between 2011 and

2018.

The ADMSP found that bodies of detainees who died as a result of torture, lack of medical care, or starvation in Sednaya Prison were transferred to the “salt chamber,” a room whose floors were covered with salt to preserve the bodies until they could be ultimately transported to mass grave sites.

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

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minority groups including members of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, oversaw more than 20 detention centers in the northeast holding approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters detained during coalition operations. The largest of these was the Provincial Internal Security Forces detention center in Hasakah, estimated to hold the bulk of ISIS detainees in the country. Detainees were provided with sufficient food and water, but medical care was lacking, reflecting the overall lack of medical supplies throughout the northeast region.

According to the COI, conditions in detention centers run by nonstate actors, including terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), violated international law (see section 1.g.).

Administration: There were no credible mechanisms or avenues for prisoners in regime facilities 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 most families waiting years to see relatives and, in many cases, never being able to visit them at all unless they bribed regime officials. In February, the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity (SACD) reported that 71 percent of survey respondents living in regime-held territory could not visit their detained relative. In many instances the regime never informed families of their relatives’ detention or of deaths in detention.

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 oversaw facility administration. Former police forces or members

of armed opposition groups operated facilities in areas under the control of opposition forces. Nonstate actors often lacked training to run facilities.

Independent Monitoring: The regime prohibited independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions, and diplomatic and consular officials had minimal access. The regime similarly ignored UN and international community calls for unhindered access for independent, impartial, international humanitarian and medical organizations to all regime detention centers. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited some central prisons and offered services aimed at restoring family links to relatives in detention.

The ICRC attempted to gain access to detention centers across the country through negotiation with all parties but were unable to access to regime-controlled intelligence and military detention facilities and Syrian armed opposition groups' detention facilities during the year. The SDF provided the ICRC and UN-supported NGOs access to SDF detention facilities, though access was interrupted following an ISIS attack against the Hasakah detention facility in January (see section 1.g.) and was intermittent thereafter. The ICRC continued to negotiate with all parties to try to gain access to other detention centers across the country.

Reportedly, the regime often 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.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but a 2011 decree permits the regime to detain suspects for up to 60 days without charge if suspected of “terrorism” or related offenses. According to the COI, local news sources, and various human rights organizations, regime security forces made arbitrary arrests and held individuals in prolonged or indefinite detention. In its September report, the COI noted that the risk of being detained, and subsequently ill-treated and tortured, “remained pervasive for many Syrians.” 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.

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 is permitted under the law. Under the constitution and code of criminal procedure, defendants must be informed of the reasons for their arrest, are entitled to legal aid, and are presumed innocent until convicted by a court in a fair trial; however, the regime did not observe these requirements. 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. In its September report, the COI said detainees were held incommunicado from a few weeks to several months without access to their families or a lawyer. It also reported that families of detainees paid bribes to regime officials, including judges, to identify the location of detainees or obtain their release, during both pretrial and trial phases.

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 CTC, military field courts, and military courts are exempted from the code of criminal procedure applied by ordinary courts, and deny basic rights guaranteed to defendants.

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. However, the regime did not observe this requirement as few, if any, detainees had the ability to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court or obtain prompt release and compensation for unlawful detention.

Arbitrary 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. Because the regime continued to withhold information on detainees, estimates varied widely, but the COI stated regime forces and affiliated militias continued to hold tens of thousands of persons arbitrarily or unlawfully in detention facilities. As of December, the SNHR reported that at least 155,368 persons, including 5,217 children and 10,190 women, remained arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared; it attributed 87 percent of these cases to the regime, including the Syrian Arab Army, General Intelligence Directorate, Air Force Intelligence Directorate, General Administration Division, and Political Security Directorate. From January through December, the SNHR documented at least 2,221 cases of arbitrary arrest, including 148 children and 457 women, at the hands of the parties to the conflict. According to a March study conducted by the ADMSP, only 17 percent of the former detainees surveyed reported that the arresting party identified themselves at the time of arrest; less than 1 percent were shown an arrest warrant issued by a legally authorized authority; and only 2 percent were informed of the reason for the arrest.

Human rights organizations reported that those arrested were typically not told why they were arrested. Those informed of the charges rarely had access to evidence supporting the charges. The COI reported that more than 30 detainees released between mid-2013 and July 2021 confirmed violations of “due process and fair trial rights, including by military field and counterterrorism courts.” According to COI and NGO reporting, detainees were routinely tortured to extract confessions or compelled to sign declarations they had not been allowed to read. The COI noted that arbitrary actions by the regime’s security apparatus, coupled with unfair proceedings by the counterterrorism and field military courts, exposed Syrians to further violations and crimes.

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. According to the COI’s September report, Military Intelligence Branch 227 in Tadamon conducted house raids, during which individuals were beaten for several hours and then held incommunicado for months in Kafr Sousa. In most cases authorities reportedly did not identify themselves or inform detainees

of charges against them until their arraignment, often months or years after their arrest. Individuals detained without charge did not qualify for release under regime-issued amnesty decrees.

PHR and the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) reported that regime forces continued to specifically target health-care workers because of their status as medical professionals 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-care workers and their activities. Additionally, human rights activists said the regime arrested health-care providers who spoke to international media outlets regarding the COVID-19 crisis or contradicted the tightly controlled narrative on the impact of the pandemic on the country. According to the SNHR, at least 3,407 health care workers remained detained or forcibly disappeared as of December, of which the regime was responsible for 3,358 cases.

In April, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported the regime carried out large-scale raids that resulted in the arrest of eight medical personnel for “serving during faction control of eastern Ghouta.” Local media outlets also reported in August that the regime’s Military Security Branch in Dara’a warned medical workers at Tafas hospital against providing medical treatment to regime opponents once the regime initiated its military operation in Tafas. According to reports, the regime threatened to arrest the relatives, including children, of medical workers who disobeyed the order, as well as circulate their names to military checkpoints in Dara’a.

The SNHR reported that authorities continued to arbitrarily arrest men and boys at checkpoints, often citing no reason for their arrest. According to the COI, nine men were detained and suffered torture and ill-treatment for having failed to comply with, or having defected from, compulsory military service, including one boy who was 17 at the time of his arrest. The cases included defectors returning following the issuance of an amnesty, only to be arrested. During the year, the SNHR documented at least 407 cases of arbitrary detention involving individuals who had agreed to reconciliation agreements with the regime; some were detained from several days to several months and many were forcibly disappeared.

The SNHR documented 228 regime arrests targeting returnees, including 151 refugees returning from abroad, mostly from Lebanon, and 77 IDPs, seeking to return to regime-controlled areas after displacement. The arrests were primarily concentrated at Damascus International Airport, in Damascus city, and at border crossings with Lebanon.

In its September report, the COI documented three cases of individuals arrested by regime forces after they had left Rukban camp, two of whom died in regime detention and a third who remained disappeared. In November, local media reported regime authorities arrested one refugee, who returned to regime-controlled areas from Lebanon, while visiting a “settlement center” in Fleita village to complete the security settlement process upon his return; members of the political security division issued a warrant for his arrest and transferred him to the security branch headquarters in Damascus.

There also were instances of nonstate armed groups reportedly engaging in unlawful detention (see section 1.g.). According to the SNHR, through December, at least 4,022 individuals, including 365 children and 882 women, remained detained or disappeared by factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of Syrian armed opposition groups receiving support from the government of Turkey. In September the COI reported that individuals arrested by the SNA were held incommunicado for periods ranging from one month to three years; that family members were denied information about the whereabouts of detainees, including detainees transferred from Syria to Turkey; that family members seeking information on the fate or whereabouts of a loved one were also threatened or arrested; that detainees were not informed of the reasons for their arrest and not permitted access to legal representation; and that detainees were allowed to have contact with their relatives only after their relatives paid bribes or exerted pressure on SNA members, whereupon detainees were transferred to central prisons to appear before a court, including the military court in Afrin. NGOs continued to report that factions of the SNA detained residents at times based on their affiliation or perceived affiliation with the SDF, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), or the Self Administration for North and East Syria (SANES).

According to the SNHR through the end of the year at least 2,795 individuals,

including 172 children and 107 women, remained arrested or disappeared by the SDF. In its March report, the COI reported that there were reasonable grounds to believe the SDF “continued to unlawfully deprive opposition members, civil society activists and media workers of their liberty.” On March 30, local media reported the SDF stormed 13 homes in the villages of Suweida and Jaabar and arrested seven men involved in organizing protests against the SDF and SANES. NGOs also reported cases of unlawful detention at the hands of the SDF, including in the context of anti-ISIS operations. Local media reported the SDF arrested 16 activists and journalists in a security campaign in Raqqa on July 31.

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. There were numerous reported instances in which the length of detention equaled or exceeded the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. According to a March study conducted by the ADMSP, 37 percent of former detainees surveyed remained in detention for longer than the period of their sentence. Official statistics on detainee population held in pretrial detention were not available.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the government did not respect judicial independence and impartiality. Authorities regularly subjected courts to political influence and prosecutors and defense attorneys to intimidation and abuse. The Global Organized Crime Index reported that judicial officials, who were required to be members of the ruling Ba’ath party, and law enforcement entities lacked political independence.

Outcomes of cases where defendants were affiliated with the opposition appeared predetermined, although defendants could sometimes bribe judicial officials and prosecutors. NGOs reported that the regime at times shared with proregime media outlets lists of in-absentia sentences targeting armed opposition groups before the court issued the sentences. The SNHR reported that most of the individuals

detained by regime authorities this year were denied access to a fair public trial.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial. The judiciary generally did not enforce this right, and the regime did not respect judicial independence. The constitution does not provide for a public trial. However, according to the Code of Criminal Procedure, a public trial is required for the verdict to be valid except in cases of public morality or national security. Requirements for public trials do not apply to special courts such as military courts. In January, HRW noted the judicial system was known for summary decisions, corruption, and a lack of due process. Human rights organizations assessed that Syrian security services interfered with the judiciary's independence by intimidating judges and lawyers.

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, but authorities did not enforce this right, and a number of detainees and their families reported they were unaware of the charges against them. In its March report, the COI confirmed violations of due process and fair trial rights, including by counterterrorism and military field courts. Defendants were sentenced without being present at hearings. Some defendants reportedly learned their verdict months after their trial. The law entitles most defendants representation of their choice, but it does not permit legal representation for defendants accused of spying. The law provides for a court appointed lawyer in all stages of a trial, with the exception of the preliminary investigations which can be conducted without the presence of a lawyer. Courts generally did not uphold these provisions. NGOs reported that court-appointed attorneys did not mount effective defenses for the clients. Special courts, such as military courts, are exempted from these provisions and do not appoint attorneys for defendants.

In September the COI reported that the regime continued to deny detainees access to a lawyer and subjected detainees to incommunicado detention. The SNHR reported detainees on trial in military courts were often transferred to unknown locations without notification to their attorneys or families. The Truth and Justice

Charter groups reported families of individuals detained by the regime continued to be unable to access information on the status of their relatives.

Human rights groups reported that in some cases the regime provided prosecution case files to defense lawyers that did not include any evidence, if they provided anything at all. By law 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 NGOs routinely reported defendants were tortured and intimidated to acquire information and force confessions, as described in a July SNHR report.

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 regardless of the religion of those involved.

Numerous human rights organizations asserted that trials before the CTC, military field courts, and military courts were unfair and summary in nature, sometimes resulting in death sentences. Death sentences issued by extraordinary courts, are not subjected to review by the Ministry of Justice's Special Pardon Committee, whose mandate is to review final death sentences referred to it by criminal courts. The president has the power to appoint and dismiss members of the Special Pardon Committee. In April, Assad issued a decree ordering the reconstitution of the Special Pardon Committee which the NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) characterized as an example of how the president's broad powers over the committee makes it "inevitably dependent on the president in all its functions."

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 the cases reached trial, with violent and nonviolent offenders receiving similar punishments. The regime did not permit defendants before the CTC to have effective legal representation. NGOs estimated that since the start of the conflict in 2011, more than 10,000 individuals have been tried in the CTC.

Non-state actors often did not respect fair trial guarantees. In opposition-controlled areas, legal accountability procedures varied by locale and the non-state armed group in control where local governing structures assumed these responsibilities. NGOs 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 discriminated against women, not allowing them to serve as judges or lawyers or to visit detainees.

In the areas under its influence, SANES authorities implemented a legal code based on the draft “Social Contract.” Reports described the Social Contract 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 of arbitrary detention, the right to judicial review, and the right to appoint a lawyer. The justice system within SANES’ areas consisted of “courts,” legal committees, and investigative bodies. The SDF, as a nonstate actor, runs a limited justice system that purports to try and sentence Syrian detainees in the northeast, and many Syrian detainees remained in detention awaiting such trials. Non-Syrian detainees remained in these detention centers until they could be repatriated to their home countries. The SDF managed a program to release nonviolent Syrian detainees who had been tried through the SDF justice system and served at least part of their sentences back to their home communities under a tribal sponsorship program.

Human rights groups and media organizations continued to report that HTS denied those it had detained the opportunity to challenge the legal basis or unlawful nature of their detention in its sharia courts. HTS reportedly permitted confessions obtained through torture and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families. According to the COI, HTS established a communication line for families to inquire about detained relatives, though families reported they were not told where their relatives were being held.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were numerous reports of political prisoners and detainees. Amnesty International and other human rights organizations reported the regime continued to detain civilians on a massive scale, particularly 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 arrests and detentions.

Authorities refused to release 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.

Prison conditions for political or national security prisoners, especially accused opposition members, reportedly continued to be much worse than those for ordinary 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 widespread torture. Political prisoners also reported they often slept on the ground due to lack of beds and faced frequent searches. According to reports from families, including the Families for Freedom network, authorities refused many political prisoners access to family and counsel. Some former detainees and human rights observers reported the regime also denied political prisoners access to reading materials 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 at year's end. 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 reported 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.

Amnesty: The regime has issued 21 amnesty decrees since 2011 generally releasing limited numbers of ordinary criminals rather than those whose detention was politically motivated.

On January 25 and December 21, respectively, the regime issued Legislative Decree Nos. 3 and 24, granting general amnesties to military deserters. According to SNHR, most of those covered by the amnesty were then forced back into military service.

On April 30, the regime issued Legislative Decree No. 7, granting amnesty to citizens accused to date of committing acts of terrorism that did not lead to death. The SNHR reported the regime released 586 individuals, including 63 women and 17 persons who were children at the time of arrest, in the eight months after the announcement. At least one person was re-arrested after release and at least 162 agreed to security settlements prior to their arrest. Media, NGO, and social media reported some of those amnestied exhibited signs of memory loss, trauma, mental illness, malnourishment, and physical injuries.

Limited detainee releases occurred as part of localized settlement agreements with the regime. During the year regime forces violated prior amnesty agreements by conducting raids and arrest campaigns against civilians and former members of armed opposition factions in areas with signed settlement agreements.

On April 2, the HTS-affiliated “Syrian Salvation Government” in Idlib Governorate issued a decree purporting to grant “amnesty” for sentences the authority issued on the grounds of the public right and “commuting” half the sentence of detainees who received a ruling or similar sentence. According to the SNHR, the amnesty did not include detainees who were detained for criticizing HTS.

Transnational Repression

The government engaged in transnational repression directly and through others to intimidate and exact reprisal against individuals outside of its sovereign borders, including members of diaspora populations such as political opponents, civil society activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. The regime used its embassies as outposts, activists' in-country relatives as proxies, and digital technologies as tools of surveillance and harassment, according to a 2020 report conducted by Dutch NGO HIVOS.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence: The regime is credibly alleged to have used violence or threats of violence against individuals in other countries, including to force their return to the country, for purposes of politically motivated reprisal.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: Regime and regime-affiliated groups threatened and harassed witnesses in trials against regime officials in national courts in Europe, as well as their families in Syria. In January, Amnesty International noted an increase in witness intimidation for Syrians abroad following the February 2021 conviction of former regime official Eyad al-Gharib in Koblenz, Germany for aiding and abetting torture and forced imprisonment as crimes against humanity (see section 1.c.). Amnesty International, advocates, and lawyers alleged that throughout the investigations and trials for regime officials, many Syrians witnesses feared retribution, especially by regime intelligence forces.

NGOs have reported that the regime, through its staff in its missions abroad and regime-affiliated groups, maintained a global surveillance apparatus to track systematically dissidents' activities both inside and outside of the country. Its security agencies used consular services, such as passport renewal, as an opportunity to gather information on dissidents and perceived dissidents abroad.

NGOs have reported that the regime threatened the in-country family members of diaspora activists to exert additional pressure on them and their work abroad. The regime also continued to engage in a range of digital attacks against members of civil society to surveil and harass them, both inside and outside of its borders, including through account and device hacking. Syrians in the diaspora have been

targeted with phishing attempts.

Misuse of International Law Enforcement Tools: The country was reintegrated into INTERPOL in 2021 after facing “corrective measures” that had restricted its use of INTERPOL databases and communication systems in 2012. Following the decision media outlets and human rights organizations reported concern by human rights organizations that the Syrian government may use Red Notices to pursue political opponents.

Efforts to Control Mobility: There were credible reports that the regime attempted to control mobility to exact reprisal against citizens abroad by revoking their identity documents, denying them consular services, or otherwise engaging in actions aimed at jeopardizing their legal status, restricting their movement, or provoking their detention in the country where they are located.

Bilateral Pressure: There were credible reports that for politically motivated purposes, the regime attempted to exert bilateral pressure on other countries aimed at having them take adverse action against specific Syrian activists.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

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

In the areas of the northeast under the influence of SANES, civilian peace and reconciliation committees reportedly resolved civil disputes before elevating them to a more formal justice system.

Property Seizure and Restitution

Regime security forces evicted persons from their places of residence and routinely seized detainees’ property and personal items without due process or adequate restitution. The law 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. Persons 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 intelligence forces summarily seized homes and businesses of some former opposition members. The regime seized land, houses, and capital of perceived opponents living abroad and redistributed them to its supporters.

In April the ADMSP reported the regime had seized over \$1.5 billion worth of personal property from Syrian detainees accused of joining antiregime protests since the start of the uprising in 2011, though it noted the true figure was likely higher due to the unofficial nature of most seizures. Some fixed and moveable assets were confiscated through court rulings, but approximately 66 percent of the seizures were made without a court ruling. Detainees described how after years of abuse in detention they were released only to discover that their homes and businesses had been confiscated, leaving them facing a future of poverty and homelessness. The ADMSP documented in its April report the case of Osama al-Sheikh Hamed, a former military officer, whose home, land, and belongings were seized while he was detained for refusing orders to open fire on civilians, and an activist whose family's property and assets were seized following his arrest for documenting the regime's human rights violations.

The military conscription law allows the Ministry of Finance to confiscate the assets of "[military] service evaders" and their families who failed to pay the military exemption fee without requiring authorities to provide notice or the opportunity to challenge the decision, a move that human rights group have described as an attempt to extort Syrian citizens living abroad and to dissuade refugees and IDPs from returning. According to the Ministry of Defense, military exemption fees range from approximately 17,500,000 SYP to 25,000,000 SYP (\$7,000 to \$10,000).

In March the COI reported that investigations continued into the usurpation, including through public auction, of the land and property rights of more than 1,440 displaced owners, whose land totaled approximately 13 square miles, in areas retaken by regime forces between July and December 2021. The SNHR

reported that the regime announced approximately 262 square miles of confiscated land for sale through public auctions between June and September.

According to media reports and activists, regime forces also seized property left by refugees and IDPs and used confiscations to target regime opponents. The CTC can try cases in the absence of the defendant, thus providing legal cover for the confiscation of property left by refugees and IDPs. In its March report, the COI found the confiscation of properties of displaced persons may amount to pillage, an act prohibited under international humanitarian law and a possible war crime. The COI also reported in September that regime seizures of property without due process or compensation in areas where hostilities have ceased may amount to violations of housing, land, and property rights.

The regime continued to use Decree 66 (2012) to “redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas” and replace them with “modern” real estate projects. In March, *The Guardian* reported that former opposition-held areas, such as the Qaboun neighborhood in Damascus, were being demolished under the guise of mine-clearing operations to make room for new development projects. A former resident described the demolition as a “kind of revenge on the people of Qaboun and to make sure there is nothing to return to.”

Armed groups also reportedly evicted persons from their places of residence and seized residents’ properties. In March, the COI reported that SNA factions continued to occupy properties, including homes, schools, shops, and factories, in Afrin city, particularly affecting displaced owners. It reported that patterns of looting, pillage, occupation, and confiscation of property, including through “taxes,” continued during the year, particularly during olive harvest season. NGOs continued to report that SNA fighters in Afrin and Ra’s al-Ayn used threats of extortion, abduction, and torture to force residents, primarily of Kurdish origin, to flee their homes so fighters could occupy them. STJ issued a report in June that described implicit and coercive demographic engineering efforts across the country, specifically in Afrin, and mentioned that allocation of new housing units favored SNA fighters and their families over civilians, which STJ assessed as discriminatory dispersal of aid obstructing civilians from meeting their basic needs.

The September COI report stated factions of the SNA often carried out arrests and

detentions in conjunction with property appropriation, forcing many to leave the area and preventing their return. Although some persons reported instances of property restitution, the vast majority remained unable to reclaim their homes and lands. Due to threats of arrest made during the year and potential reprisal from SNA brigades involved in both the complaint and the restitution process, many refrained from submitting, or withdrew, complaints to informal local grievance committees about extortion, property appropriation, and the imposition of levies. The COI reported on retaliatory acts, including verbal threats, beatings, abduction, and killings by SNA members against property owners who had lodged complaints for property restitution or compensation. The COI also reported that due to pre-existing gender inequalities, women faced additional challenges and were reluctant to seek redress for property-related violations from such all-male committees. The COI stated the confiscation of private property by parties to the conflict may amount to pillage, which is a war crime, and is in any case prohibited when carried out based on discriminatory grounds. NGOs continued to assess these and other abuses by armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey were part of a systematic effort to enforce demographic change targeting Kurdish Syrians.

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 arbitrarily and unlawfully, including email. It also utilized surveillance technologies and practices including internet and social media controls, blocking or filtering of websites and social media platforms, sensors, spyware, data analytics, recording devices, and noncooperative location tracking (see section 2.a.).

Numerous reports confirmed the regime punished large numbers of family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives, such as by arbitrarily placing them on a list of alleged terrorists, freezing their assets, lodging threats against them, detaining them, torturing them, and even killing them. In September the COI reported that families were exposed to security risks and extortion when seeking to uncover the fate and whereabouts of their missing loved ones. The regime also threatened to arrest or arrested children to punish dissent of their parents or for other political purposes.

g. Conflict-related Abuses

The regime, proregime militias such as the National Defense Forces, armed opposition groups supported by Turkey, the SDF, violent extremist groups such as HTS and ISIS, foreign terrorist groups such as Hizballah, and the governments of Russia, Turkey, and Iran were all involved in armed conflict throughout the country during the year.

The regime systemically disregarded the safety and well-being of its population, used violence against civilians and civilian institutions, and refused to protect most individuals from state and nonstate violence.

Numerous human rights organizations reported the regime continued to arbitrarily and unlawfully kill, disappear, torture, and detain persons.

Attacks impacting and destroying 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. According to COI, the regime's arbitrary requirement that citizens obtain its clearance ("security clearance") to move, construct a house, open a shop, or apply for a job restricted freedoms and housing-related rights and led to extortion, property seizures, and the loss of livelihoods and basic services.

As of September, there were more than 5.7 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and 6.9 million IDPs. According to the World Food Program, approximately 12 million Syrians, nearly 60 percent of the population, were food insecure.

Killings: The regime reportedly committed the majority of killings throughout the year (see section 1.a.). The SNHR attributed 91 percent of civilian deaths to regime and proregime forces.

Media sources and human rights groups varied in their estimates of how many persons had been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. In June, OHCHR estimated that 306,887 civilians were killed between March 2011 and March 2021 due to the conflict. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted this figure did not include the many civilians who died due to loss of access to healthcare, food, clean water, and other essential human rights. Other groups attributed more than 550,000 killings to the conflict. This discrepancy was largely due to the number of missing and disappeared Syrians.

The SNHR reported parties to the conflict killed 1,057 civilians, including at least 251 children and 158 women, between January and December. According to the SNHR, during the year the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies killed 213 civilians, including 38 children and 22 women. The Syria Civil Defense (known as the White Helmets) recorded nine massacres, which they defined as any incident in which five or more noncombatants were killed, in northwestern Syria by the regime, Russian forces, and aligned militias during the year, resulting in the deaths of 74 persons, including 29 children, and the wounding of 174 persons.

The Report of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, issued in July, noted that the United Nations verified 2,271 grave violations against 2,202 children in 2021, including the killing and maiming of more than 898 children, the plurality of which were attributed to regime and proregime forces.

Regime and proregime forces reportedly attacked civilians in hospitals, residential areas, schools, and IDP settlements throughout the year. These forces reportedly used as military tactics the deliberate killing of civilians, as well as their forced displacement, rape, and starvation, and protracted siege-like conditions that occasionally forced local surrenders. Between March 2011 and December, the SNHR documented at least 1,609 attacks on schools, attributing 88 percent of the attacks to regime and Russian forces.

These attacks reportedly included bombardment with barrel and cluster bombs. According to the SNHR, the regime dropped at least 81,916 barrel bombs between July 2012 and December. According to the SNHR, the regime and Russian forces' use of cluster munitions resulted in the deaths of at least 1,042 civilians, including 389 children and 217 women, as well as injuries to approximately 4,360 civilians.

In its July report, the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) documented 58 “double-tap” attacks – a practice of striking a location, then striking the same location again soon after to kill and maim rescuers trying to help the injured – by regime and Russian forces on civilian and humanitarian targets between 2013 and 2021. According to SJAC, among those killed included civil defense workers responding to victims of other bombardments. The SJAC found these attacks were “part of a larger strategy to punish and regain control of opposition-held areas.” In July, the SNHR concluded that Russian forces carried out a “double-tap” airstrike near al-Jadida village in western Idlib on July 22 resulting in the deaths of seven civilians, including four children, and injuries to 13 civilians.

In September the COI determined there were reasonable grounds to believe proregime forces “did not direct certain attacks at a specific military objective, which may amount to the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians” and may also “amount to the war crime of murder.” It also noted an incident in which four children were killed on their way to school by a missile that originated from a town known to be controlled by regime forces, finding that there are reasonable grounds to believe “that the victims were directly targeted by government forces, which may thus have committed the war crime of directing attacks against civilians.” The COI also documented shelling of residential areas, including a home in April and a market in February, that killed at least six civilians, and provided reasonable grounds to believe “that pro-government forces have committed the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, resulting in loss of life or injury to civilians.”

Despite a 2020 cease-fire agreement, the regime used helicopters and airplanes to conduct aerial bombardment and shelling of civilian areas in Idlib. The SNHR documented the killing of 238 civilians in the Idlib region, including 81 children and 23 women, during the year. The SNHR determined that Russian aerial bombardments killed and injured 13 civilians in western Idlib on January 1. On

November 2, a cluster bomb attack, including 30 surface to surface missiles, struck IDP camps west of Idlib city and killed nine civilians, including three children and a woman, and injured about 70 others, according to Syria Civil Defense and other local and international media outlets. On November 7, the Assad regime announced its responsibility for the attack, claiming that, with the cooperation of Russian forces, it targeted the headquarters of terrorist organizations and killed and injured dozens.

Aerial and ground offensives throughout the demilitarized zone destroyed or ruined civilian infrastructure, including “deconflicted” hospitals, schools, marketplaces, and farmlands. According to the COI, January 2 airstrikes partially destroyed the Arashani water station, injuring one person and cutting off the water supplies for at least 225,000 residents for approximately 20 days. The COI noted there was no known military target near the easily identifiable facility. According to the COI, flight spotters and overflight data reported at least one Russian aircraft was observed in the area at the approximate time of the attack. The COI concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe that proregime forces “intentionally targeted objects indispensable to the survival of the population.”

In its September report, the COI documented an April 4 attack launched by proregime forces that killed four boys on their way to school in a residential area of Ma'arat al-Na'asan in Idlib. According to the COI, topographic data “would have allowed the government forces to view the potential target before firing at it.” No apparent military objective was observed near the affected location. The COI determined there were reasonable grounds to believe regime forces directly targeted the children, a possible war crime.

The COI also determined it had “reasonable grounds” to believe that proregime forces’ use of rocket munitions in densely populated areas “may amount to the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians, or damage to civilian objects, including medical facilities.”

Both progovernment and nonstate armed groups targeted medical professionals throughout the year. The COI’s March report noted that proregime forces’ precision attacks that appeared to directly target first responders and a medical facility may constitute “war crimes of intentionally attacking medical personnel

and of directing an attack against a medical facility.” From March 2011 through February, PHR documented the killing of 942 medical personnel; of these, 55 percent were believed to have resulted from bombings and shelling, 13 percent were suspected to have been tortured before being killed, and 7 percent were executed. According to PHR, regime and Russian forces were responsible for 90 percent of attacks striking medical facilities, and the regime was primarily responsible for the torture and executions.

The COI noted that over 100 individuals were killed in Dara’a during the first half of the year, “continuing a pattern of the targeting of members of former opposition and pro-government forces by unidentified perpetrators.” The Dara’a Martyrs’ Documentation Office reported a sharp rise in targeted killings in Dara’a, including 90 attempts in April that resulted in the death of 51 persons, 31 of them civilians and former opposition fighters who signed reconciliation agreements with the regime. The Dara’a Martyr’s Documentation Office was not able to identify the perpetrators in all cases. Monitoring groups noted that former opposition members who signed reconciliation agreements with the regime were among the most vulnerable to being killed.

In August the regime threatened to launch a military operation in Dara’a if wanted persons in the city were not handed over to the regime within 48 hours. Fighting broke out after negotiations failed. The regime’s targeting of Tafas with heavy machinery caused casualties and an exodus from the city. Though the regime withdrew from Tafas following a ceasefire agreement, it continued to escalate militarily against former opposition communities in western Dara’a, blockading the town of Jasim.

In Idlib and western Aleppo, regime and proregime forces continued shelling throughout the year. In July, the Syria Civil Defense reported Russian war planes attacked civilian homes and a farm inhabited by IDPs in Idlib, killing seven civilians, including four children, and injuring 12 others. The Syria Civil Defense reported on December 28 that it responded to more than 800 attacks launched in northwest Syria by the Assad regime, Russian forces, and aligned militias during the year, documenting the killings of 165 persons, including 55 children and 14 women, in air strikes, and artillery and missile attacks on over 200 public facilities, including civilian homes, agricultural fields, public buildings, markets, schools,

and a hospital.

Although no confirmed use of chemical weapons was reported during the year, foreign observers assessed that the regime retained sufficient chemical weapons – specifically sarin and chlorine – and expertise to use sarin, to produce and deploy chlorine munitions, and to develop new chemical weapons. The regime failed to complete any of the measures required by an April 2021 decision by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Conference of the States Parties, and its OPCW rights and privileges remained suspended.

Additionally, PHR, the SNHR, and other NGOs reported that the regime and Russia targeted humanitarian workers such as the Syria Civil Defense as they attempted to save victims in affected communities. The SNHR recorded at least 472 incidents of attacks on Syria Civil Defense facilities between March 2013, the date the Syria Civil Defense was established, and December; it attributed 320 attacks to the regime and 126 attacks to Russian forces.

There were numerous reports of deaths in regime 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 (see section 1.a. and 1.c.). In most cases authorities reportedly did not return the bodies of deceased detainees to their families.

On November 20, as part of Operation “Claw Sword,” the Turkish government began launching airstrikes into both Iraq and Syria that resulted in civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Turkish fighter jets executed more than 50 airstrikes targeting vehicles, posts, different positions, and civilian infrastructure in Aleppo, Hasakah and Raqqa in five days. On November 29, the organization documented the death of 10 civilians in areas under SANES influence.

Violent extremist groups were also responsible for killings during the year. The SNHR attributed 11 civilian deaths, including two children, to HTS and nine to ISIS, during the year.

ISIS claimed responsibility for the killing of more than 200 prison staff during its

January 20 attack on the al-Sina'a detention facility in northeast Syria that holds suspected ISIS fighters and other individuals affiliated with the group. The COI concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe that ISIS committed the war crime of murder in willfully killing prison staff, to include beheadings and the mutilation of bodies, as well as civilians in residential areas. There were reports that suspected ISIS fighters who escaped the facility killed civilians in the neighborhoods adjacent to the prison during the clashes following attempts to resecure the facility. From January to November, OHCHR verified the killing of at least 42 persons in al-Hol camp, including four children.

During the year armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey allegedly carried out extrajudicial killings. The SNHR documented the SNA killed 24 civilians, including six women and seven children, during the year. On February 24, SNA faction Faylaq al-Sham beat a member of an Arab tribe to death and then issued a statement acknowledging responsibility for his death. The COI in March reported there were multiple accounts of deaths occurring in SNA detention, primarily in detention centers in Rai and Zira, Bab District. Relatives reported traces of ill-treatment on at least one body. The COI reported there is no indication that the SNA initiated any investigation into such deaths.

On June 1, according to the COI, two civilians, including a girl, age 10, with physical disabilities, died in Babesqa camp from an explosion of an ammunition depot controlled by the Faylaq al-Sham brigade of the SNA and located near displacement camps. The COI alleged that the presence of ammunition depots in close proximity to an IDP camp may amount to a violation of the principle of distinction by the SNA.

On October 10, the SNA shared a recording of two members of the SNA faction, the Hamza Division, confessing to the October 7 killing of activist Muhammad Abu Ghanoum and his pregnant wife in al-Bab. Violent clashes between HTS, the Hamza Division and the Third Legion in al-Bab and Afrin followed the killings, according to news reporting.

Since 2016 the Syrian Interim Government and the armed groups in the SNA had detained at least 2,390 soldiers on offenses ranging from vehicle theft to murder, but the Syrian Interim Government's commission to investigate serious allegations

of abuses did not announce any new investigations during the year. According to the Syrian Interim Government, military courts prosecuted at least 169 cases through 2021 for crimes including petty theft, property confiscation, deprivation of liberty, human trafficking, physical violence, and murder among other offenses but no information on prosecutions from this year was made available. The individuals belonged to various armed opposition groups, and many were prosecuted in absentia. Human rights activists reported the Syrian Interim Government's reforms lacked credibility and did not hold perpetrators accountable.

The COI, the SNHR, and other human rights groups reported dozens of civilian deaths from multiple car bombings, other attacks involving improvised explosive devices, and fighting between armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey in the north.

The SNHR documented the SDF killed 76 civilians, including eight women and 11 children, during the year. On June 1, local media reported the SDF shelled residential neighborhoods and a hospital in Tal Abyad, which killed four and injured six. On June 9, SDF killed Amjad Muhammad Fateh Abeid al-Okla, age 17, when they opened fire on several students in Theyban town in eastern Deir Ez-Zour Governorate, according to the SNHR. Also on June 9, SDF shot and killed Hamed al-Nasser, an imam of a mosque in al-Attala village in southern Hasakah Governorate, during a raid on his home, according to the SNHR. The COI alleged that strikes by "the Syrian Democratic Forces on populated areas may amount to the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury to civilians."

Abductions: Regime and proregime forces reportedly were responsible for most 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. According to the COI and human rights organizations, HTS detained political opponents, journalists, activists, and civilians perceived as critical of HTS. The SNHR documented 202 unlawful detentions, including 13 children and three women, by HTS from January to December. For example, the SNHR reported that in June HTS detained five civilians in Idlib, alleging they had been involved in

reconciling and communicating with the regime. According to SNHR, from the start of the conflict through December, HTS forces detained or forcibly disappeared at least 2,469 individuals, among them 50 children and 44 women.

Although ISIS no longer controlled territory, the fate of 8,648 individuals forcibly disappeared by ISIS since 2014 remained unknown, according to the SNHR. Over 2,700 women and children, mainly Yezidis, remained unaccounted for after ISIS reportedly transferred them and others from Iraq to Syria and sold them into sex trafficking, forced them into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave them as “gifts” to ISIS commanders.

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

The COI reported the SDF continued to unjustly detain civilians, including women and children, and hold them in detention without charge. The SNHR documented 633 SDF unlawful detentions during the year, including 93 children and 10 women. The SNHR and STJ reported instances of SDF fighters detaining civilians, including journalists, human rights activists, opposition party members, and persons affiliated with the SNA. In some instances, the detainees’ locations remained unknown. For example, the SNHR reported the SDF detained Mohammad al-Hussein, a doctor who works in al-Kindi hospital in Deir Ez-Zour, and his brother Osama al-Hussein on November 13 while they were in al-Kindi hospital. They were taken to an undisclosed location. The SNHR reported that from 2012 until December, the SDF unjustly detained or disappeared at least 4,487 Syrians, including 792 children and 525 women. Of those, 2,837 persons remained unjustly detained or disappeared, including 179 children and 109 women. SANES maintained telephone lines for persons in Hasakah and Raqqa to inquire if their relatives had been detained during the year.

The SDF allowed the ICRC access to detention facilities to monitor and report on conditions. The SDF investigated most allegations against its forces. Some members of the SDF were prosecuted for abuses, but statistics were unavailable.

The UN General Assembly's annual *Children and Armed Conflict Report of the Secretary-General*, published in June, reported the abduction of eight children by the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement, the youth organization of the Ba'ath Party in Syria, between January and December 2021.

The COI, Amnesty International, and SNHR reported multiple firsthand accounts of kidnapping and unlawful detention by armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey. The SNHR reported through the end of December 4,022 individuals remained unjustly detained or disappeared by SNA factions, including 365 children and 882 women. The SNHR documented 369 unlawful detentions, including four children and 28 women, by SNA factions from January to December. The HRW and the COI reported that SNA forces detained and unlawfully transferred Syrian nationals to Turkey. According to COI reporting in September, persons arrested by factions and individual members of the SNA were held incommunicado for periods ranging from one month to three years, not informed of the reasons for their arrest, and not permitted access to legal representation. Family members were denied information about detainee whereabouts, including those transferred to Turkey, and some family members seeking information on the fate or whereabouts of loved one were threatened or arrested. In some instances, relatives were only allowed contact with detainees after they paid bribes or exerted pressure on SNA members.

In early January near Bab, SNA faction Hamza Division detained a former member of the Kurdish People's Protection Units who had been forcibly conscripted. The family was only able to locate the victim three months after his arrest, by paying bribes to secure his transfer to Maratah prison in Afrin, controlled by SNA military police, according to the September COI report. In May, members of the SNA faction, Sultan Murad Division, lured a woman and her daughter from Damascus city on the pretext of smuggling them into Turkey but instead kidnapped them, demanding that their relatives pay a ransom, according to NGO reporting.

According to the COI, abductions and extortions continued in regions where armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey operated. Victims were often of Kurdish or Yezidi origin or were activists openly critical of armed groups supported by Turkey. The Missing Afrin Women Project reported that hundreds of women had been abducted in areas under Turkish control since 2018. There were

at least 33 reported kidnappings of women and girls in Afrin during the year through October; 11 were reportedly released. The whereabouts of the others remained unknown, although at least one allegedly was transferred to Turkey, according to the Missing Afrin Women Project. The organization reported that armed groups involved in abductions during the year included the Syrian Interim Government's "Civil Police", the SNA "Military Police," Liwa Sultan Muhammed Al-Fateh, Sultan Murad Division, Sultan Suleiman Shah, Hamza Division, Faylaq al-Sham, and Malak Shah Brigade. The organization assessed that SNA factions used kidnapping to generate revenue and targeted individuals based on Kurdish ethnicity and perceived political affiliation.

For example, a Syrian opposition group supported by Turkey abducted Asya Ahmed Haidar in February, her third time being abducted. She was reportedly accused of collaborating with SANES, according to the Missing Afrin Women Project. Turkish authorities were reportedly involved in at least one of the instances in which she was targeted, and she reportedly was tortured in custody on at least one occasion.

Turkish authorities were allegedly involved in at least five of the 33 reported kidnappings this year, including two incidents in which allegations of torture were recorded, according to the Missing Afrin Women Project. For example, Turkish authorities and the Civil Police kidnapped Asia Ali Damerji and Amina Hanan Damerji, along with other members of their family, in March in Sheikh al-Hadid in Afrin, according to the Missing Afrin Women Project.

The COI gathered several reports of abductions, among other retaliatory acts like threats and beatings, by SNA members against owners who lodged complaints for property compensation or restitution.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to the COI and NGOs, 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.). Numerous organizations and former detainees reported that nearly all detainees in regime detention experienced physical abuse and torture at some point during their detention. The SNHR attributed 115 deaths during the year due to torture, including one child and one woman, to regime forces. In March, the

SNHR reported the death of Tamer al Saeed, a child detained alongside three civilians by the regime's Air Force Security Division in February. His body was returned to the family bearing marks of torture and more than 10 gunshot wounds.

The COI reported during the first half of the year, regime forces arrested nearly 150 persons in Dara'a, including several who had previously reconciled with the regime; many remained accounted for at year's end. The COI noted that torture and ill-treatment were documented during the arrests.

As of December, the SNHR estimated parties of the conflict committed at least 11,526 incidents of sexual violence against women and girls since March 2011. Regime forces and affiliated militias were reported to be responsible for the vast majority of these offenses – more than 8,000 incidents in total – including more than 880 incidents inside detention centers and more than 440 against girls younger than 18. The SNHR also reported almost 3,490 incidents of sexual violence by ISIS, 13 incidents by the SDF, and 12 incidents by armed opposition groups. 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.

There were also reports of armed opposition groups engaging in physical abuse, punishment, and treatment equivalent to torture, primarily targeting suspected regime agents and collaborators, proregime militias, and rival armed groups.

Although the SDF claimed it implemented protocols to ensure torture was not used as an interrogation technique, the SNHR attributed 14 deaths from torture to the SDF during the year and a total of 87 such deaths since 2014. In June the SNHR documented the cases of several men arrested by SDF-affiliated forces who were later released bearing physical signs of torture. There was no update available on the results of the pending investigation at year's end.

During the year, the SNHR attributed three deaths due to torture to armed opposition groups. The COI, OHCHR, and human rights groups reported that since 2018, armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey had allegedly participated in the torture and killings of civilians in Afrin and, since 2019, in the areas entered during Turkish Operation Peace Spring. In March, the COI reported that "unlawful deprivation of liberty by Syrian National Army factions continued,

with detainees being tortured and ill-treated.” The COI reported in March that it had reasonable grounds to believe that members of armed groups under the umbrella of the SNA committed “torture, cruel treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity, including through forms of sexual violence, which constitute war crimes.” The COI reported in September that family members who eventually succeeded in visiting their relatives in the SNA-operated Maratah prison saw marks of severe beatings on their bodies. The COI gathered credible accounts during the year of beatings and other forms of torture by members of the SNA, including rape and other forms of sexual violence in makeshift detention facilities between 2018-2021 (see section 6, Women). One woman, a former detainee, described how she was subjected to “rape and other forms of sexual violence in 2018 during interrogations by individuals wearing Turkish uniforms and speaking in Turkish.”

An STJ report submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women in June stated that members of SNA faction Hamza Division sexually abused a detainee (see section 6, Women). In April a member of Hamza Division known by his initials as “H.M.,” tortured a child, age 14, that he abducted in Aleppo and sent a video of it to the child’s relatives, threatening to kill the child if they filed a complaint against him, according to NGO reporting.

The COI and other human rights organizations reported on the frequent presence of Turkish officials in SNA detention facilities, including in interrogation sessions where torture was used. The justice system and detention network used by SNA forces reportedly featured “judges” appointed by Turkey and paid in Turkish lira, suggesting the SNA detention operations acted under the effective command of Turkish forces. STJ reported in June that the Sultan Murad group in Afrin detained a woman with the initials “Z.M.” and transferred her first to the Turkish governor’s building and then to a Turkish military intelligence facility in Kilis city inside Turkey. She identified a Turkish speaker supervising and instructing two Arabic-speaking investigators who tortured and ill-treated her and two other female detainees during detention. The Turkish government denied responsibility for conduct by Syrian opposition or armed Syrian opposition groups it supported and claimed the SNA had mechanisms in place for investigation and discipline.

In September the COI reported that several SNA military courts allegedly

sentenced members or investigated members on charges including torture, murder, rape, and property appropriation between 2018 and this year.

During the year, the SNHR attributed one death due to torture to HTS. In its September report, the COI noted reports of mistreatment and torture of detainees in HTS detention facilities. In June, the SNHR documented HTS' use of 22 torture methods, including physical and psychological methods. According to the COI and human rights organizations, HTS continued to torture and abuse perceived political opponents, activists, and journalists. Human rights groups reported that HTS, which officially denounces secularism, routinely detained and physically abused journalists, activists, and other civilians in territory it controlled who were deemed to have violated the group's stringent interpretation of sharia. HTS reportedly permitted confessions obtained through torture in its sharia "courts," denied detainees the opportunity to challenge the legal basis or unlawful nature of their detention, and executed or disappeared perceived opponents and their families.

Child Soldiers: Several sources documented the continued unlawful recruitment and use of children in combat.

The UN General Assembly's annual *Children and Armed Conflict Report of the Secretary-General*, published in June, reported the recruitment and use of 1,296 children (1,258 boys and 38 girls) in the conflict between January and December 2021. According to the report, 1,285 of the children served in combat roles. The report attributed 569 verified cases to the SNA, 380 to HTS, 220 to the YPG and YPG-affiliated Women's Protection units, and 46 to proregime forces and militias, amongst other actors.

According to the *Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic Report of the Secretary-General* from June, the SDF continued progress in the implementation of the 2019 action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, resulting in the disengagement of a further 182 children from SDF ranks. However, the report noted increased number of verified cases of recruitment and use of child soldiers by the SDF. 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 the northeast, and ending salary payments. The SDF took disciplinary measures against SDF personnel who violate the commitments under the action plan. During the year the SDF used age assessment procedures to identify 568 minors seeking to join its ranks and continued to develop and refine the age screening mechanism in coordination with the United Nations. According to local media in November, the SDF closed its Office of Child Protection in Armed Conflicts in Hasakah, coinciding with an increase in cases of child recruitment by the Revolutionary Youth Organization. Prior to its closing, the office addressed 313 complaints between January 1 and August 31, according to the SDF.

Reports and evidence from human rights groups and international bodies indicated the Turkish government provided operational, material, and financial support to an armed opposition group in Syria that recruited child soldiers. The COI reported in February that increases in recruitment by and use of children by SNA factions were reported during the second half of 2021.

The U.S. Government has determined that Syria had or used child soldiers from March 2021 to March 2022. Please see the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: The crisis inside the country continued to meet the UN criteria for a level three response, the classification for response to the most severe, large-scale humanitarian crises. In cities where the regime regained control, the COI reported the regime imposed blockades and restricted residents' movement and access to health care and food. Human rights groups reported the regime and its allies frequently imposed these and other collective measures to punish communities, including by restricting humanitarian access; looting and pillaging; expropriating property; extorting funds; engaging in arbitrary detentions and widespread conscription; detaining, disappearing, or forcibly displacing individuals; engaging in repressive measures aimed at silencing media activists; and destroying evidence of potential war crimes.

The SNHR reported dozens of civilians, including children and women, were

killed by remnants of war and unexploded ordnance during the year. On June 11, a landmine explosion in Dara'a killed 10, including four children and four women, and injured 32 persons, according to the SNHR. According to the COI, 12,350 explosive ordnance and landmine incidents were reported across Syria between 2019 and April. Between March 2011 and December, the SNHR documented the deaths of 3,644 civilians, including 963 children, as a result of remnants of war and unexploded ordnance.

The United Nations estimated approximately 12 million Syrians were food insecure. Various human rights and various media organizations found that the regime implemented a policy and legal framework to manipulate humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funding to benefit itself, reward those loyal to it, and punish perceived opponents. 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 regime, at the cost of preventing aid from reaching the population unimpeded. Organizations continued to report that entities such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent faced difficulties accessing areas retaken by the regime.

The regime routinely disrupted the supply of humanitarian aid, including medical supplies and assistance, to areas under siege as well as to some recaptured areas. In areas under its control, the regime insisted that independent humanitarian groups implement most assistance through regime-linked organizations. It reportedly pressured Syrian employees of humanitarian groups to submit to regime demands that violated humanitarian principles. The regime refused to provide unfettered access, in areas under its control, for needs assessments, aid distributions, and post-distribution monitoring. UN agencies and NGOs continued to seek to deliver humanitarian assistance to opposition-held areas subject to regime offensives, but the regime continued to restrict crossline operations originating from Damascus. In July, Russia, with support from the regime, vetoed a draft UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution to authorize a 12-month extension of UN cross-border mechanism to deliver humanitarian aid through the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey. Further Russian veto threats forced UNSC members to ultimately approve UNSC Resolution 2642, reauthorizing the limited use of one crossing, Bab al-

Hawa, until January 2023.

Turkey placed restrictions on the provision of humanitarian and stabilization aid to areas of the northeast from Turkey.

In June the COI reported that progovernment forces “directed attacks at humanitarian aid convoys, school facilities and civilians, displaced persons in camps, [and] civilians in their neighborhoods, and spread terror amongst besieged civilian populations through shelling and airstrikes.”

In June the UN verified 45 attacks on schools between January and December 2021. Human rights organizations reported that repeated attacks on schools, growing poverty rates amidst economic crisis, recruitment of child soldiers, and violent treatment of children in detention centers continued to hamper the ability of children to receive an education.

NGOs and media outlets documented repeated and continuing attacks striking health facilities and other infrastructure in northwest Syria perpetrated by regime and Russian forces. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), more than half of all health facilities in the country were closed or partially functioning. From March 2011 through December, the SNHR documented at least 874 attacks on medical facilities, whereas PHR corroborated 601 attacks on 400 separate facilities, reporting the regime and Russian forces were responsible for 90 percent of attacks. The SNHR documented one attack on a medical facility by the regime this year. In May, SAMS published a report noting that 92 percent of the recorded attacks on SAMS and other healthcare facilities between 2015 and 2021 were attributed to regime or Russian forces. In Idlib medical professionals continued to be injured and killed throughout the year. The COI in its March report stated that through precision attacks that appear to have directly targeted first responders and a medical clinic, proregime forces “may have committed the war crimes of intentionally attacking medical personnel and of directing an attack against a medical facility.”

Human rights organizations detailed the practice in which, after hostilities ceased and local truces were implemented, regime and proregime forces required certain individuals to undergo a reconciliation process as a condition to remain in their

homes. Various sources continued to report cases during the year in which the regime targeted persons who agreed to reconciliation agreements (see sections 1.b., 1.d., and 1.e.). Out of the 586 persons released under the April 30 amnesty, at least 162 had reconciled with the regime prior to their arrest, according to the SNHR. The SNHR documented the arrest of at least 3,969 individuals, including 73 children and 39 women, by regime forces in areas undergoing reconciliation agreements between 2015 and the end of the year. 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, as the COI assessed in 2017, 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.

Regime forces and armed groups also reportedly pillaged and destroyed property, including homes, farms, and businesses of their perceived opponents.

NGOs such as the SNHR alleged that, taken together with steps such as the law allowing for the confiscation of unregistered properties, the forcible displacements 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.). In September, the COI reported on the involvement of the regime’s Fourth Division in the widespread looting of private property in areas retaken by the regime in May 2021.

While the government pushed forward to recapture areas around Idlib, armed groups such as HTS reportedly launched counterattacks against government positions. These attacks, although much fewer and smaller in scale than those by the regime and proregime forces, reportedly caused some civilian casualties and destruction of infrastructure. In October, HTS forces moved into northern Aleppo to aid the Hamza Division in a dispute against a rival armed faction of the Third Legion of the SNA. HTS forces seized parts of Afrin and reached the outskirts of the city of Azaz, before signing a truce that led to the reported withdrawal of its forces. Civil society organizations expressed concern that HTS forces remained in the area.

The COI and NGOs continued to report that armed Syrian opposition groups

supported by Turkey engaged in the systematic and repeated looting and seizure of civilian homes and property, particularly those of Kurds, resulting in civilian displacement. The COI and NGOs reported that SNA militias continued to profit from their control over real estate and agricultural exports seized from the local population. STJ reported in June that the construction of settlements with foreign investment in these areas hindered the return of the original inhabitants, by favoring SNA fighters and their families, and contributed to the processes of implicit and coercive demographic change, especially in Afrin.

The COI reported in March it had reasonable grounds to believe that SNA factions, including the Sultan Murad Division and the Hamza Division, had unlawfully deprived persons of their liberty, including within the context of reprisals for personal or property disputes. Properties, including homes, schools, shops, and factories, in Afrin city continued to be occupied by SNA factions, particularly affecting displaced owners. Patterns of looting, pillage, occupation, and confiscation of property, including through “taxes,” continued, according to the COI. According to COI reporting in March, between July and November 2021, in Ma’batli and Bulbul, Aleppo Governorate, SNA factions the Levant Front and the Sultan Murad Division, respectively, sold the rights to harvest olive crops to third parties, despite the objections of the absent owners. There were also reports of retaliatory acts by SNA members against owners who lodged complaints for property restitution or compensation, including verbal threats, beatings, and abduction; in one case, a farmer was killed after recovering his property from armed factions in Afrin subdistrict.

Armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey reportedly continued to interfere with and disrupt water access to parts of the northeast. According to the COI, already limited access to water further diminished due to the widespread, and “at times deliberate,” destruction of water facilities.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

While the constitution provides for limited freedom of expression, including for

members of the press and other media, the regime severely restricted this right, often terrorizing, abusing, arresting, 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 media law includes several categories for material banned from publication, including content that affects national unity and national security, harms religions and beliefs, incites sectarian strife, or that harms state symbols. The law imposes a one- to three-year sentence on anyone who criticizes or insults the president. A change from previous law which punished only Syrians residing abroad in absentia, a new law signed March 28 imposes a minimum six-month jail sentence for citizens residing in the country accused of spreading disinformation that undermines the state’s reputation or improves the reputation of unnamed enemy states. It also provides for a prison sentence of at least one year for anyone who, in writing or in speech, calls for the relinquishing of Syrian territory. 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 broadly invoking provisions of law prohibiting acts or speech inciting sectarianism. The regime monitored political meetings and relied on informer networks.

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 and criminalizes the publication on social media of false news that causes fear and panic, with prison sentences up to 15 years with hard labor. Individuals found responsible for broadcasting false or

exaggerated news abroad or within Syrian territory that undermines the prestige of the state, or its financial standing, are subject to a minimum prison sentence of six months in addition to a fine. The law similarly criminalizes the broadcasting of false news or claims that undermine confidence in the “state currency.”

The regime exercised 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.

The SNHR reported that only print publications whose reporting promoted and defended the regime remained in circulation. 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 foreign Arabic-language networks.

Violence and Harassment: Regime forces reportedly detained, arrested, harassed, and killed journalists and other writers for works deemed critical of the state as well as journalists associated with networks favorable to the regime (see section 1.c.). Harassment included intimidation, banning individuals from the country, dismissing journalists from their positions, and ignoring requests for continued accreditation. YouTubers and other citizen journalists were routinely detained, intimidated, and tortured, both by the regime and violent extremist groups.

The regime and, to a lesser extent, HTS, ISIS, and other armed groups routinely targeted and killed both local and foreign journalists, according to the COI, Freedom House, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported three journalists were killed in Syria this year. Photographer Ahmed El-Nasser was killed while covering fighting between the SDF and ISIS in Hasakah on January 21. Journalist Atef al-Saidi was killed by a sniper during clashes between local proregime forces and ISIS in Dara’a on November 5. RSF reported al-Saidi often received death threats in connection with his journalism and had survived a murder attempt allegedly orchestrated by two ISIS gunmen four days prior to his killing. Reporter Isam Ebdella was killed,

alongside nine other civilian residents he was interviewing, by a Turkish airstrike in a Kurdish city in Hasakah that had been struck by an initial airstrike a few hours prior on November 20. The CPJ estimated that at least 155 journalists were killed since 2011. The SNHR documented at least 714 journalists and media workers killed between March 2011 and December and attributed 553 of the deaths in that period to regime forces and 24 to Russian forces.

RSF reported the risk of arrest, abduction, torture, or murder caused journalists to flee the country. According to NGO reports, the regime routinely arrested journalists who were either associated with, or writing in favor of, the opposition. It also instigated attacks against foreign press outlets throughout the country. The SNHR recorded at least 1,304 cases of arrests and abductions of journalists and media workers by parties to the conflict since March 2011. According to the SNHR, at least 479 of these individuals, including nine women and 17 foreign journalists, remained under arrest or forcibly disappeared. The SNHR attributed 386 of the arrests and abductions to the regime, 48 to ISIS, 17 to the SDF, 16 to armed opposition groups, and 12 to HTS.

RSF reported that regime authorities in February detained journalist Kenan Wakkaf after he criticized a lavish reception at the presidential palace while individuals faced shortages. Wakkaf, arrested after months of harassment, had worked for the proregime newspaper *al-Wehda* before being fired. He was arrested in 2020 and 2021 for publishing stories about regime corruption. According to RSF, regime intelligence services had kept Wakkaf under surveillance and threatened media outlets that offered him work. Wakkaf remained in detention at year's end.

On September 19, the People's Tribunal on the Murder of Journalists in The Hague held the Assad regime responsible for violations committed against journalist Nabil Sharbaji, who died under torture in Sednaya prison in 2015. The judge said the regime violated Sharbaji's right not to be subjected to torture, the right to life, his right to freedom of expression, freedom from discrimination based on political opinion, and his right to a fair trial.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: According to Freedom House, the regime

enforced censorship of news sites and social media content more stringently in regime-controlled areas. The regime continued to block circumvention tools used to access censored content, internet security software that can prevent state surveillance, and other applications that enable anonymous communications. The Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE) and private internet service providers (ISPs) implemented censorship using various commercially available software programs. Decisions surrounding online censorship lacked transparency, and ISPs did not publicize the details of how blocking was implemented or which websites were banned. The STE was known to implement blocking decisions; it was unclear which state agency typically made the decisions, although security and intelligence bodies were believed to play an important role. Websites covering politics, minorities, human rights, foreign affairs, and other sensitive topics were censored or blocked outright.

The regime continued to strictly control the dissemination of information, including on developments regarding fighting between the regime and the armed opposition, the spread of the COVID-19 virus and cholera, human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime, and trials of regime officials in third-country courts. Prohibited topics included criticism of the regime, sectarian tensions, and problems facing religious and ethnic minority communities. 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 to be 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, Alawite religious groups, and the spread of COVID-19 due to fear of reprisal, including arrest, torture, and death.

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 freedom of expression, including for members of the press; to arrest and punish critics of the government; and to deter 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. Human rights organizations reported that violent extremist opposition groups detained, tortured, and harassed journalists (see section 1.g.) and posed a serious threat to press and media freedoms. As of May, SNHR reported 48 journalists and media workers, including one woman and eight foreign journalists, were still disappeared by ISIS following their arrests throughout the conflict.

In March, the COI reported that HTS continued to curtail fundamental freedoms and detain individuals perceived to be affiliated with opposing parties, critics of ruling authorities, and journalists and media activists “as part of an ongoing systematic effort to stifle political dissent.” Media outlets, human rights organizations, and the COI reported that HTS members also detained civilians who spoke out against the group in what the COI described as a “systematic effort to stifle political dissent.” According to the COI, HTS pressured organizations to coordinate their activities with them; some local organizations continued their work on the condition they would refrain from criticizing the group. The COI found that organizations dealing with gender issues or gender-based violence were disproportionately affected. The COI’s September report noted that HTS restricted the freedom of expression, notably of activists and journalists, including through arbitrary detention without due process and in inadequate conditions. In detention, individuals were prevented from contacting their families or lawyers, as well denied access to medical care. Through May, the SNHR reported that 12 journalists and media workers were still detained or disappeared by HTS. It documented the death of eight journalists at the hands of HTS since the start of the conflict.

In April, *Al-Monitor* reported that dozens of journalists fled northwest Syria following threats from SNA factions and HTS for their coverage of human rights violations.

The COI reported in February that SNA factions continued to detain civilians, including journalists, for “security-related” offenses and alleged criticism of the authorities in place. On August 1, members of the civil police in al-Bab city, controlled by the SNA, attacked and beat several media professionals and activists to prevent them from filming and reporting on protests by medical staff over low salaries, according to local media reports. Through May the SNHR reported that SNA factions continued to detain or had disappeared 16 journalists and media workers, including five foreign journalists.

The COI reported there were reasonable grounds to believe that the SDF unduly restricted the freedom of expression of journalists, including by revoking licenses leading to the closure of a media outlet, and other measures affecting independent journalism. On June 29, RSF condemned the “increase in restrictions” the SDF imposed on journalists in northeast Syria, and said journalists found it harder to work as they were forced to join a government union, charged more money to register, and denied accreditation. RSF claimed the “sole aim of these unjustified measures is to limit journalists’ autonomy and media pluralism by means of prior control over work permits.” On July 30, the SDF arrested 16 activists and journalists and accused them of espionage during a security campaign in Raqqa, actions condemned by the SNHR and other human rights organizations.

According to the SNHR, the arrests were arbitrary, conducted without warrant, and detainees were denied opportunities to contact families or hire legal counsel. The SNHR also confirmed several persons were beaten and threatened during their arrest. Through May, the SNHR reported the SDF detained or had disappeared 17 journalists and media workers.

Internet Freedom

In areas controlled by the regime, the STE served as both an ISP and a telecommunications regulator, providing the government with tight control over the internet infrastructure. Independent satellite-based connections were prohibited but heavily employed across the country, given the damage that information and communication technology infrastructure sustained in the conflict. ISPs and cybercafes operating in regime-controlled areas required a permit from the STE and another security permit from the Interior Ministry, and cybercafe owners were required to monitor customers and record their activities. The regime controlled

and restricted access to the internet and monitored email and social media accounts.

Freedom House reported that self-censorship was widespread online and continued as users contended with threats and violent reprisals for critical content. Sensitive topics included President Assad, former president Hafez Assad, the military, the ruling Baath Party, and influential government officials. Other sensitive subjects, including religious and ethnic tensions, COVID-19, and corruption allegations related to the president's family, were also off limits. Individuals and groups reportedly could not express views via the internet, including by email, without prospect of reprisal. The regime applied the law to regulate internet use and prosecuted users. In April, the regime issued a new decree broadening the scope of what constitutes a cybercrime by criminalizing online statements perceived to "undermine the prestige of the state," including government policies. The law established stricter penalties that increased sentencing from one month to 15 years' imprisonment and increased fines from 200,000 SYP to 15 million SYP (\$80 to \$5,970). Human rights organizations argued that the new law consolidated the regime's practice of restricting freedom of expression under false accusations meant to legitimize its oppression of perceived opponents. During the year, the SNHR documented the arrest of 124 individuals under the cybercrimes law. Citizen journalists and other civilians were frequently targeted based on their digital activism. Hackers linked to Iran and Russia 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 security branches were largely responsible for restricting internet freedom and access, and the regime did not prosecute or otherwise restrict their activities. The COI reported that early in the year the regime summoned approximately 200 subscribers of an instant messaging group relaying local news in Dara'a and required them to pledge they would not protest the regime.

The regime also restricted or prohibited internet access in areas under attack.

Regime officials obstructed connectivity through their control of key infrastructure, at times shutting down the internet and mobile telephone networks entirely or areas of unrest. Authorities limited the amount of data citizens were able to use through an “internet rationing” scheme. 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 manipulate online content, including false content aiming to undermine the credibility of human rights and humanitarian groups. 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 spyware and other malware in cellphone applications 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.

Restrictions on Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The regime restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Authorities generally did not permit employees of academic institutions to express ideas contrary to regime policy. The Ministry of Culture restricted and banned the presentation of certain films.

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 regime generally restricted freedom of peaceful assembly whether through these broad powers or unlawful measures.

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. Throughout the year, the regime suppressed peaceful protests, including in Dara'a, Suweida, and Deir Ezzour, at times shelling these locations, opening fire, and arresting perceived and real protestors.

Local media reported that the Assad regime's security forces raided several cafes, restaurants, and public squares in Damascus, where individuals had gathered to watch the 2022 Men's World Cup matches, and detained dozens of young men for forced conscription. According to the Voice of the Capital, regime security forces arrested 35 young men who had gathered to watch the Argentina and Saudi Arabia soccer match on November 22. In response to these developments, a member of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces said the arrests were an example of how the regime views any gathering, without its approval, as a source of concern and a potential threat to its grip on power.

Local media reported on regime crackdown of antiregime protests in Suweida in December as demonstrators protested against the poor living conditions and government neglect. Activists on social media circulated a video showing regime forces allegedly firing live bullets at the protesters. A source at As-Suweida Governmental Hospital confirmed the death of at least one protestor, while local media reported the regime killed two protestors and injured four. A Druze leader in the city characterized the protests as a "peaceful, spontaneous movement" of "a steadfast people driven by hunger and need, tormented by cruelty and a lack of response to their just demands."

According to allegations by human rights activists and press, at times the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), using the civilian police force, the Asayish,

suppressed freedom of peaceful assembly in areas under their control. On September 28, PYD-affiliated Revolutionary Youth Movement members attacked a journalist and a group of protestors during a sit-in protesting the school curriculum in Qamishli city, according to STJ. Asayish forces reportedly hit several protestors, including students and their parents, after receiving orders from an unidentified individual. They reportedly confiscated several cell phones and arrested a group of students, who were all subsequently released. STJ reported that forces banned journalists from filming and encircled the venue of the protest and blocked major roads leading to the assembly location.

According to human rights activists and press, factions of the SNA at times suppressed freedom of peaceful assembly in areas under its control. Protests erupted on August 11 in parts of northwest Syria following media reports of rumored reconciliation efforts between the government of Turkey and the Assad regime. Thousands demanded the withdrawal of Turkish troops, and some burned Turkish flags. Factions of the SNA reportedly attacked demonstrators in Jerablus on August 12 and arrested at least three individuals, according to media reporting. Numerous protests took place in November and December demanding accountability for the killings of activist Abu Ghanoum and his pregnant wife at the hands of an SNA-affiliated group. SNA factions threatened activists and protesters, brandished weapons, and dispersed crowds using pepper spray, according to local media.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for the freedom of association, but the law grants the regime latitude to restrict this freedom. The regime generally restricted freedom of association whether through broad powers or unlawful measures. The regime required prior registration and approval for private associations and restricted the activities of associations and their members. Executive boards of professional associations were not independent of the regime.

None of the local human rights organizations operated with a license, due to the regime's practice of denying requests for registration or failing to act on them, reportedly on political grounds, but some functioned under organizations that had requisite government registration. The regime continued to block the multiyear

effort by journalists to register a countrywide media association, but journalists in exile continued efforts to improve press freedom and freedom of expression through the Syrian Journalist Association, an independent democratic professional association established in 2012 by Syrians in exile.

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 individuals linked to local human rights groups, prodemocracy student groups, and other organizations perceived to be supporting the opposition, including humanitarian groups.

HTS and other armed groups also restricted freedom of association, including civil society activity, in areas under their influence or control. The SDF continued to unjustly detain individuals belonging to, or perceived to be affiliated with, political parties opposing the PYD or SANES. Detainees included opposition members, civil society activists, and media workers, according to the COI. Armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey reportedly detained residents based on their affiliation with SANES (see section 1.d.).

c. Freedom of Religion

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

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

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, HTS, and other armed groups restricted internal movement and travel and instituted security checkpoints to monitor such travel throughout the regions under their respective control. The regime impeded some activists and journalists from traveling abroad, while others who received clearance to travel were

interrogated upon return. Regime attacks on Idlib Governorate and parts of southern Syria restricted freedom of movement and resulted in documented cases of death, starvation, and severe malnutrition, while fear of death and regime retribution resulted in mass civilian displacement and additional breakdowns in service provision and humanitarian assistance (see section 1.g.).

In-country Movement: In areas outside of regime control, 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. In February, UNOCHA reported that restrictions on movement were reported in 51 percent of assessed communities.

Regime security forces, as well as local and foreign militias, controlled checkpoints to monitor and limit movement. The COI reported regime security officials extorted residents at checkpoints, and in some cases prevented civilians from fleeing besieged towns. The COI assessed in March that siege tactics used by proregime forces in Dara'a al-Balad in 2021 violated freedom of movement and may amount to collective punishment. The regime also barred foreign diplomats, including UN and OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) delegations, 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.

The regime's requirement for individuals to obtain a security clearance to enter and leave regime-held areas, or move freely within such areas, hampered freedom of movement and created obstacles for refugees and IDPs seeking to return to their home areas, according to COI September reporting. Regime authorities often withheld security clearances from perceived critics of the regime and their relatives; former opposition members; and former residents of areas considered strongholds of the opposition.

In areas they influenced or controlled, armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as HTS also restricted movement, including with checkpoints (see section 1.g.). NGOs continue to report that HTS imposed restrictions on women

and girls' freedom of movement and attempted to control and interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

While the Syrian Democratic Council and the SDF generally supported IDP communities in the northeast, approximately 53,000 individuals, one-third of whom were Syrian nationals, remained at al-Hol and al-Roj displaced persons camps in northeast Syria without freedom of movement (see section 1.g.).

The overcrowded al-Hol camp is managed by an international NGO and local authorities, with security assistance provided by the SDF and Asayish, the internal security forces of SANES. Many of the residents were from former ISIS-held areas, and half were children younger than age 12. According to the COI's September report, young boys in the camp risk being transferred to military detention centers alongside adult alleged former ISIS fighters once they enter puberty, "doomed to indefinite detention without legal recourse." It also reported scores of boys ages 10 and 12 in al-Hol camp have been separated from their mothers with some placed in military detention, where adult men were also detained. Living conditions remained difficult, where security incidents persisted, and camp residents were not able to freely move or leave the camp. In September the COI reported that al-Hol camp had no regular water supply; insufficient sanitation; lack of adequate nutrition, health care and housing; and tents in the camps needed repair after years of exposure to the elements. The COI reported that children at al-Hol camp lacked sufficient health care and access to education and many were traumatized by the violence within the camp. The COI assessed in its September report that conditions in the camp may amount to cruel or inhuman treatment, further compounded by the deteriorating security situation inside the camp. Since the start of the year through November, OHCHR verified the killing of no fewer than 42 persons at the al-Hol camp, including 10 Iraqi men, six Syrian men, four Iraqi women, 18 Syrian women, one Iraqi boy, one Iraqi girl and the two Egyptian girls. One nurse from the Kurdish Red Crescent was shot to death and an ICRC doctor was stabbed but survived. The bodies of the two Egyptian girls under 15 were found dead with stab wounds in a sewage ditch at al-Hol camp on 15 November. According to reports received by OHCHR, the girls had been raped a few days earlier, and were then reportedly harassed, along with their mother, due to stigma associated with being a victim of sexual violence. Diplomatic observers

assessed the violence was likely due to a combination of ISIS-related or criminal-related activity in the camp. While humanitarian organizations continued providing basic, life-saving assistance, services were at times reduced due to security incidents and operations as well as lockdowns. According to the COI's September report, clashes between internal security forces, camp residents, and members of ISIS on February 7 and March 28 left three civilians dead and at least 13 injured, including five children.

According to the COI's September report, 8,548 Syrians had been transferred out of al-Hol camp under tribal sponsorship agreements since mid-2019, while another 322 children and 56 women from 13 different countries were repatriated between September 2020 and June.

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, or perceived association with or support for opposition groups, or ties to geographic areas where the opposition dominated. Additionally, the regime often banned travel by journalists and human rights or civil society activists, their families, and affiliates. 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 and arbitrary detention at airports and border crossings. 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. Syrian passports are issued for only three years' validity and cost between 2 million SYP and approximately 5 million SYP (\$800 to \$2,000), which many found prohibitive. Many citizens reportedly learned of the ban against their travel only when authorities stopped them at points of departure. The regime reportedly applied travel bans without explanation or explicit duration, including in cases when individuals sought to travel for health reasons.

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. 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, were reluctant to enter consulates, fearing the regime could direct reprisals against family members still in the country.

Citizenship: Syrians born abroad to parents who fled the conflict and remained in refugee camps generally did not have access to Syrian citizenship documents. (See section 1.g. for reporting on forcible transfer of Syrians to Turkey by Turkish-supported groups.)

e. Protection of Refugees

The regime inconsistently cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to noncitizens seeking refugee and asylum status in the country. The regime provided some cooperation to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which assisted Palestinian refugees in the country.

Before the start of the conflict, there were approximately 560,000 Palestinian refugees residing in Syria, according to UNRWA. Large numbers of Palestinian refugees arrived in Syria in two main waves in 1948 and 1967, with many settling across the 12 camps in the country. As of July, the UN reported that out of the 575,234 Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Syria, approximately 438,000 remained in Syria, more than half of them internally displaced at least once and 95 percent requiring humanitarian aid to meet basic needs. The remainder have fled to Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries.

In addition to Palestinian refugees, according to UNHCHR, there were approximately 22,800 refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities registered with UNHCR in the country through the end of September.

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 spaces 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.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees: 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. The UN estimated that at least 280,000 Palestinian refugees had been displaced inside Syria, with an additional 120,000 displaced to neighboring countries since 2011. In October, the Action Group of Palestinians of Syria reported that regime forces tortured 638 Palestinians, including children, between March 2011 and October this year. According to the organization, 77 of the victims were identified through the leaked Caesar photographs.

Freedom of Movement: Regime and opposition forces reportedly restricted the freedom of movement of Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps.

Refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities in the country also faced 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.

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, and 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 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.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

The UN estimated more than 6.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were in the country and 5.7 million Syrians left the country because of the conflict since 2011. The regime forcibly displaced populations from besieged areas and

restricted movement of IDPs. The regime generally did not provide sustainable access to services, assistance, and protection for IDPs or returning Syrian refugees (see section 1.g.).

Violence and instability continued to be the primary cause for displacement, most often citizens fleeing regime and Russian aerial attacks. Syria Civil Defense reported the November 6 regime cluster bomb attack against IDP camps west of Idlib city killed nine civilians.

The SNHR reported that military operations by parties to the conflict displaced approximately 75,000 civilians, 11,000 of whom were displaced due to military operations conducted by the regime and Russian forces. Up to 45,000 persons were displaced in January as a result of hostilities in northeast Syria, and more than 10,000 were displaced in Aleppo and Idlib in August. Years of fighting repeatedly displaced persons, with each displacement further depleting family assets.

Since 2016, UNHCR verified or monitored the return to Syria of 341,500 individual refugees. UNOCHA reported on over 111,000 spontaneous IDP return movements between January and November of this year. The majority of these returns were recorded within the Rural Damascus and Idlib Governorates.

The regime did not promote the safe, voluntary, and dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs, and in some cases authorities refused to allow IDPs to return home. UN humanitarian officials reported most IDPs sought shelter with host communities or in collective centers, abandoned buildings, or informal camps. IDPs were routinely denied return to their places of origin due to regime restrictions, while others feared arrest in retaken or formerly besieged areas, including Rural Damascus, Dara'a, Quneitra, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. Between 2014 and August, the SNHR recorded the arrest of at least 914 IDPs, including 22 children, after returning to regime-controlled areas, and the re-arrest and forced military conscription of some of those released. During the year the SNHR recorded 77 arbitrary arrests of IDPs returning to regime-held territory following forced displacement.

NGOs reported that the regime's confiscation of property from citizens it perceived as threats impeded the return of IDPs and of Syrians from abroad (see section 1.e.,

Property Restitution). According to the COI, security clearances were a precondition for access to basic property and housing rights, a challenge for some IDPs. Former detainees who could not obtain a security clearance were denied lease agreements in their former areas of residence. Those residing outside regime-held areas needed a security clearance to obtain a power-of-attorney, which is needed to be represented by a lawyer in property matters.

Humanitarian actors noted that access remained a key obstacle to assisting vulnerable persons in areas controlled by both the regime and nonregime actors (see section 1.g.). The regime and the Russian government routinely refused to approve UN requests for assistance delivery to the Rukban camp for Syrian IDPs, and Jordan placed restrictions on the provision of humanitarian aid from its side of the border. The last humanitarian mission to Rukban took place in 2019.

In August the COI documented three cases of individuals detained by regime forces after they had departed Rukban camp and re-entered regime areas, of whom two died in regime detention facilities and one remained disappeared as of August.

Armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as HTS also impeded humanitarian assistance to IDPs. The COI and humanitarian actors reported HTS, and the HTS-affiliated Syrian Salvation Government, attempted to regulate, benefit from, or interfere with the delivery of aid and services in areas of the northwest. This included attempts to impose “taxes” and fees on humanitarian organizations, impose licensing and registration protocols, and interfere with beneficiary selection and aid distribution.

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

UNHCR continued to assess the conditions in Syria were not yet in place for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees on a large scale. According to UNHCR, approximately 38,400 refugees opted to return to Syria during the first nine months of the year. The COI and various NGOs, including Amnesty International and HRW, reported cases of the regime subjecting citizens returning from abroad to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture, at times accusing them of treason and support for terrorism, even in cases where

reconciliation agreements were in place (see section 2.d.). Between the start of 2014 and December, the SNHR documented at least 3,269 cases of arbitrary arrest by regime forces of refugees returning to Syria, including 244 children and 207 women. In other cases, the regime prevented some citizens from returning home. According to the SNHR, at least 1,217 persons detained in this manner since the start of the conflict remained in custody with 903 classified as forcibly disappeared. During the year, the SNHR documented 151 regime arrests targeting refugees returning from abroad, mostly from Lebanon seeking to return to regime-controlled areas after displacement. In February the Middle East Institute published survey results that found that 27 percent of returnees reported they or someone close to them faced persecution due to their place of origin, for having left Syria illegally, or for filing an asylum claim abroad. Human rights organizations reported an additional obstacle for Syrians considering returning to the country was the military conscription law, which allows for the seizure of assets of men who evaded military conscription and failed to pay military exemption fees (see section 1.e., Efforts to Control Mobility).

In July Lebanon's Minister of the Displaced alleged his government planned to begin returning 15,000 Syria refugees to Syria a month. This year Lebanon's Directorate of General Security (DGS) announced the resumption of the process of registering Syrian individuals in Lebanon who wish to return voluntarily to Syria, which was conducted from 2018 through February 2020 and halted in 2020 following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. DGS reportedly agreed to provide UNHCR advance notice and access to the lists of those who were scheduled for return prior to and during return to provide counseling and other services. DGS facilitated two group return movements from Lebanon to Syria on October 26 and November 5 respectively. Based on the final lists shared by DGS with UNHCR, a total of 701 individuals returned as part of the two group return movements. UNHCR verified 9,814 returns to Syria in total for the year. In October, Amnesty International urged a halt to the "so-called voluntary returns of Syrian refugees" from Lebanon and claimed that by enthusiastically facilitating these returns, Lebanese authorities knowingly put Syrian refugees at risk of abuse and upon their return to Syria.

Throughout the year, the regime, the Russian government, and Turkey maintained

a campaign to encourage the return of refugees to the country. The Russian government reportedly sought to use the return of Syrian refugees to secure international donations for reconstruction efforts. In October Human Rights Watch reported that in Turkey, Turkish officials arrested Syrians in their homes, workplaces, and on the street; detained them in poor conditions; physically abused them; forced them to sign voluntary return forms; drove them to border crossing points with northern Syria; and forced them to cross into Syria at gunpoint.

g. Stateless Persons

The regime contributes to statelessness, including through arbitrary or discriminatory denationalization and discrimination against women in nationality laws.

Following the 1962 census, approximately 150,000 Kurds lost their citizenship. A legislative decree ordained a single-day census in 1962, and the government executed it unannounced to the inhabitants of al-Hasakah Governorate. Persons not registered for any reason or without all required paperwork lost their Syrian citizenship 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 al-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 lack identity cards and cannot access government services, including health care and education. They also face 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 al-Hasakah who were registered as “foreigners” could apply for citizenship. It is unclear how many Kurds benefited from the decree. UNHCR reported in 2015 that approximately 40,000 of these Kurds remained unable to obtain citizenship. Likewise, the decree did not extend to the updated estimate of approximately 160,000 “unregistered” stateless Kurds.

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 also 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.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Presidential elections in May 2021 were assessed by media and NGOs as "neither free nor fair" and resulted in the reelection to a fourth term of President Bashar Assad with an alleged 95 percent of the vote amid voter intimidation and obstacles to voting. Official turnout figures of 78 percent far exceeded estimates by the Atlantic Council and others of closer to 33 percent. Legislative elections in 2020 were marred by reports of corruption and political interference and featured low voter turnout and similar shortcomings as 2021 presidential elections.

Voting was restricted to regime-controlled areas and parts of the diaspora; millions of Syrians living in Idlib Governorate and the northeast, and in many countries abroad, were excluded. The law allows diaspora voting only for presidential, not legislative, elections. Syrian refugees seeking to vote were required to present a valid passport with an exit stamp at Syrian embassies abroad, thereby excluding the large number of citizens who fled the country or did not have a valid Syrian passport. The fear of surveillance also dissuaded Syrian refugees from going to vote at the only designated locations in Syrian embassies.

The regime claimed there were no reported violations or infringements, but *The Washington Post* reported that government intimidation and coercion forced

individuals to vote under the threat of being fired, dismissed from school, or having their businesses closed. There were also reports of intimidation at diaspora voting locations, such as in Lebanon, where voters reported threats of reprisals and property seizures. Residents of regime-held areas reported the regime made voting a condition for the distribution of bread subsidies in Homs and World Food Program aid baskets in Damascus and Aleppo.

Local council elections took place across all provinces September 18 and were described by NGOs as neither impartial nor independent.

In 2017, Kurdish authorities held elections for leaders of local “communes” in an effort to establish new governing institutions to augment claims of regional autonomy. The regime does not recognize the Kurdish enclave or the elections.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution states the Baath Party is the ruling party and assures 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 held 183 of 250 parliament seats following the 2020 election. The law 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. Freedom House reported that political access was primarily a function of proximity and loyalty to the regime, noting that those Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other religious minorities who were considered to be outside of the regime’s inner circle were “politically disenfranchised along with the rest of the population.”

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 other illegal political parties were unavailable.

The law prohibits individuals convicted of a felony or misdemeanor that “shakes public trust” from voting for 10 years after their conviction. The Ministry of Justice determines which felonies or misdemeanors fall under this category as the law does not specifically delineate the list of relevant crimes. As a result, large numbers of citizens, including those arrested on political charges, were unable to vote, according to NGOs.

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

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups 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, except for within SANES, which enforced a minimum of 40 percent female representation in all civilian entities. The Syrian Democratic Council was led by a woman, Ilham Ahmad. Media reported that the government formed after the 2021 presidential election remained largely unchanged and included three women in the cabinet. Women accounted for 13 percent of the members of parliament elected in 2020. There were Christian, Druze, and Armenian members of parliament but no Kurdish representatives. 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.

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. 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. There were no reports that the regime sought to combat the widespread corruption it helped perpetuate.

Corruption: Corruption was a serious problem. 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.

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. The UN Secretary-General's report on missing persons in Syria, published in August, noted that families of arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared persons must deal with an "extensive exploitative network profiting from the chaos," including requests for bribes for information on the whereabouts and fate of their loved ones or to secure their release; assaults and blackmail by individuals claiming to have information or be able to influence the fate of the missing person; and a "rampant black market" in fraudulent documentation. In February, the SACD reported that 72 percent of survey respondents with detained relatives were asked to pay or had paid a bribe to find out the location of their detained family member, while 60 percent of the individuals interviewed were asked to pay or paid bribes to secure the release of the detainee.

In September, STJ reported that lawyers confirmed that getting a judge to sign the release of a detainee cost between three to eight million Syrian pounds (\$1,194 to \$3,184), depending on the charge, though even after paying the bribe, there was no guarantee the detainee would be released.

Despite a food crisis, the regime often refused to allow private bakers to operate in areas previously under opposition control. According to HRW, since the beginning of the conflict, regime and proregime forces systematically destroyed bakeries and ovens, thereby limiting the ability to produce and distribute bread in contested areas. HRW reported that the regime security services took bread from bakeries and sold it on the black market. HRW interviewed aid workers who said the government directed the rehabilitation of bakeries according to the political affiliation, rather than the need, of a particular neighborhood. Interviewees also reported the discriminatory distribution of food, noting that government-supported bakeries had separate queues for residents, IDPs, and military and intelligence services, and that those affiliated with the regime were prioritized.

In October, the Syrian Legal Development Program issued a report alleging that UN agencies in Syria had procurement contracts in 2019 and 2020 with entities at high risk of being human rights abusers. The report alleged the regime intimidated UN staff and attempted to influence UN agencies employment and procurement practices.

In February, the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) reported citizens had to pay bribes between 100,000 and 800,000 Syrian pounds (\$40 to \$318) to brokers to secure passport appointments through the new portal for passport applications and appointments, which came online in November 2021. The network was accessible only twice a day and required a fast internet connection. COAR reported that regime officials allegedly demanded bribes of up to one million Syria pounds (\$398) to issue passports in Suweida, the site of continued protests.

The regime sought to control the production and distribution of narcotics, while selectively enforcing relevant laws, to enrich regime officials. Entities with known or suspected links to Assad regime officials and the terrorist organization Hizballah reportedly produced and trafficked illicit narcotics in the country, particularly the stimulant known widely as Captagon. Media outlets and NGOs reported that the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army, a unit headed by President Assad's brother Maher al-Assad, oversaw much of the production and distribution of Captagon. France24 reported in November Maher al-Assad was one of the main beneficiaries of the Captagon trade as he received his own share from the profit,

which also was a main source to pay the salaries of an armed group affiliated with the Fourth Armored Division. Despite reports the regime oversaw production and distribution of Captagon, on January 31, regime affiliated media outlet SANA reported the regime thwarted an attempt to smuggle 561,000 Captagon pills into Jordan from Dara'a Governorate. In the first eight months of the year, authorities in Europe and the Middle East seized 250 million Captagon pills originating from regime-controlled areas of Syria, according to Al Jazeera. According to a report published by the New Lines Institute in April, the total potential value of the Captagon trade in 2021 was estimated at \$5.7 billion, which *The Economist* claimed was the regime's main source of foreign currency.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards 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 and hostile to human rights NGOs and did not allow international human rights groups 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. The regime denied organizations access to locations where security force abuses reportedly took place or allegedly held prisoners detained on political grounds.

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).

Terrorist groups, including HTS, 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 detaining them.

Retribution against Human Rights Defenders (HRDs): The regime engaged in direct and indirect repression to intimidate and exact reprisal against HRDs or civil society activists. Tactics included monitoring and surveillance, harassment of and threats against HRDs and their family, censorship, seizing property and assets, arbitrary arrest, detention, enforced disappearance, torture, and death. Officials reportedly targeted and tortured children because of their familial relationships, real or assumed, with HRDs and activists. Many prominent HRDs and civilian activists detained or forcibly disappeared following the 2011 protests reportedly remained in detention.

NGOs continued to report the regime used the counterterrorism law to arrest and convict HRDs 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. Armed groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly engaged in retribution against HRDs and civil society activists. There continued to be reports of reprisals against HRDs residing outside the country (see section 1.e., Transnational Repression).

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. The regime did not cooperate fully with numerous UN and other multilateral bodies resulting in restrictions on access for humanitarian organizations, especially to opposition-controlled areas. In addition, the regime did not allow the OPCW IIT to access the sites under investigation in Douma, despite the requirement under UN Security Council Resolution 2118 for the regime to cooperate fully with the OPCW.

The UNWGEID continued to request information on reported cases of enforced disappearances, but it failed to respond. The regime also did not respond to

UNWGEID requests for an invitation to visit the country, dating back to 2011.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

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. Rape of men 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 survivor'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.). The SNHR recorded at least 11,526 incidents of sexual violence against women at the hands of the parties to the conflict between March 2011 and December. The UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict reported in March that women and girls continued to be at risk of sexual violence, including at checkpoints, schools, workplaces, and markets. Despite the demands of survivors, safe spaces remained limited.

Regime officials in the intelligence and security services perpetrated sexual and gender-based violence with impunity, according to NGOs and Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights. Amnesty International reported that regime forces subjected refugees who returned to Syria, particularly women and children, to sexual violence, including rape.

Victims often feared reporting rape and sexual abuse, according to OHCHR, due to the stigma associated with their victimization and threat of retaliation. Security forces consistently treated violence against women as a social rather than a criminal matter. The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence; it

stipulates that men may discipline their female relatives in a form permitted by general custom. 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 November, STJ in cooperation with two NGOs, Musawa and Sara, recorded more than 20 victims who were killed as a result of domestic violence in Syria from 2019 to November, in addition to more than 560 other domestic violence incidents that included beatings and physical abuse during the same time period.

Women and girls subjected to sexual violence lacked access to immediate health care, particularly in regime detention facilities where reports of sexual violence continued to be prevalent, and authorities often denied medical care to prisoners (see section 1.c. and g.).

The UNFPA reported in May that more than a decade of instability and displacement sharply increased women and girls' risks and vulnerabilities to multiple forms of physical and sexual violence, contributing to increased reliance on negative coping mechanisms such as early and forced marriage and sexual exploitation and abuse. Violence and abuse have become so widespread and unchecked as to be normalized and an accepted reality of daily life for many women and girls, according to the report.

There were instances of armed opposition groups reportedly raping women and children. In September, the COI reported that the SNA may have committed torture, cruel treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity, including through forms of sexual violence, which constitute war crimes. The COI specified that Kurdish women activists were particularly affected by violence and threats of violence by SNA members. According to COI reporting in September, new credible accounts were gathered from both male and female survivors, including from minors, of beatings and other forms of torture by members of the SNA, including rape and other forms of sexual violence that took place in makeshift detention facilities between 2018 and 2021. One woman described to the COI how she was raped and subjected to other forms of sexual violence in 2018 during interrogations by individuals wearing Turkish uniforms and speaking in Turkish. An STJ report submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women in June stated that members of SNA faction Hamza Division sexually

abused and photographed a woman while in her underwear. They then forced her to sign a false confession about her collaboration with SANES.

According to the COI, in addition to the social stigma for survivors of sexual violence, there were no shelters in areas under SNA control to accommodate survivors, who also were reluctant to seek redress before all-male grievances committees due to their ineffectiveness.

The SNHR attributed at least 3,487 incidents of sexual violence against women and girls to ISIS from March 2011 to December. Human rights organizations also reported that former detainees described sexual violence, including rape, in HTS facilities. The SNHR attributed 13 incidents of sexual violence against women and girls to the SDF during the same period.

There were no known government-run services for women outside Damascus. According to human rights organizations, local coordination committees and other opposition-related groups offered programs specifically for protection of women. These programs were not available throughout the country, and none reported reliable funding.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence: 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. On January 10 in Suweida, Y. Masoud reportedly shot to death his two daughters, Wiam, age 18, and Mariam, age 16, both of whom he had married off at age 15, according to a March STJ report. STJ reported that authorities did not take any action to investigate the incident. On February 12 in Dara’a, a relative shot and killed a woman, age 26, under the pretext of defending “honor” after she was accused of standing with a young man in the town, according to a November STJ report. No action was reportedly taken by authorities to investigate the incident or seek accountability. The November STJ report, written in cooperation with Musawa and Sara, recorded 185 cases of “honor killings” in the country from 2019 to November.

The SNHR reported families ostracized thousands of survivors of violence, sexual

exploitation, and forced marriage because of their abuse. OHCHR noted one reason sexual violence remained severely underreported was the threat of honor killings of the survivors by family members.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment was pervasive and uncontrolled. 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. The UNFPA reported in May about the environment in which Syrian women and girls were told not to leave houses for fear of harassment.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of the regime practicing involuntary sterilization.

In May, UNFPA reported that 7.3 million women and girls in Syria need critical sexual and reproductive health services, as well as support for gender-based violence, as vulnerabilities to forms of physical and sexual violence, and child marriage continued to increase. The regime did not provide access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence, and emergency contraception was not available as part of clinical management of rape. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) stated that women reportedly were increasingly choosing caesarean deliveries to reduce the amount time spent in hospitals, known to be targets of attacks.

Violence throughout the country made accessing medical care and reproductive services both costly and dangerous. Syrian activists reported that the regime and armed extremists sometimes denied pregnant women passage through checkpoints, forcing them to give birth in unsterile and often dangerous conditions, without pain medication or adequate medical treatment. PHR assessed that attacks on humanitarian actors by the regime, Russia, and, to a lesser degree, armed groups caused medical providers to operate in secret or in some cases to leave the country (see section 1.g.). The NGO International Rescue Committee reported pregnant women did not receive care during pregnancy, such as monitoring the fetus or essential vitamins. UNFPA reported in May that the conflict put a significant strain on the delivery of sexual and reproductive health services, including maternal health care, as the number of women dying during pregnancy and childbirth continued to increase in the country.

Activists reported that regime detention centers did not provide medical care to women during pregnancy or birth.

Many pregnant women living in IDP camps in Idlib Governorate and camps such as al-Hol and Rukban lacked access to hospitals, doctors, or skilled birth assistants.

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 questions 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. Discriminatory inheritance practices meant that property documents were often registered in the name of male family members, thereby posing challenges to women attempting to access inheritance rights. Women whose spouses have been detained or forcibly disappeared had difficulty accessing family properties. In February, UNOCHA reported that lack of access to

government-issued civil documentation remained a significant problem for the population in northern Aleppo, Raqqa, Hasakah, Deir Ezzour, and Idlib, thereby limiting access to assistance, basic services, and freedom of movement. UNOCHA noted this posed specific challenges for widowed or divorced women, limiting their ability to register and obtain custody of children, inherit property, and legally remarry.

The Commission for Family Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor share 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.

HTS reportedly placed discriminatory restrictions on women and girls in the territories it held. According to the STJ, HTS routinely detained, abused, and killed women under pretexts including “insulting deity,” “adultery,” and “espionage.” Women cannot initiate divorce or exercise their right to vote under HTS. HTS imposed a dress code on women and girls, banned women and girls from wearing makeup, forbade women from living alone, and required that women be accompanied by a *mahram* – a male member of their immediate family – in public.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The regime actively restricted members of national and ethnic minorities from conducting traditional, religious, and cultural activities. The regime continued to limit the use of the Kurdish language, restricting publication in Kurdish of books and other materials and Kurdish cultural expression. The Kurdish population faced official and societal discrimination and repression (see section 2.g.), as well as regime-sponsored violence. Regime and proregime forces, as well as ISIS and armed opposition forces such as the Turkish-backed SNA, reportedly arrested, detained, tortured, killed, or otherwise abused numerous Kurdish activists and individuals, as well as members of the SDF during the year (see section 1.g.). NGO reporting suggested SNA members continued arresting, beating, and kidnapping Kurdish women in Afrin and Ra’s al-Ayn. According to the September COI report, women’s rights activists avoided speaking publicly about their work or withdrew from local organizations that advocate for gender equality due to targeted

violence by the SNA and religious figures. Kurdish women activists were particularly affected, with some ceasing all engagement in public life as they feared arrest and detention by the SNA. In September, the COI reported that many Kurdish civilians in areas controlled by SANES until 2018, and now controlled by the SNA, were doubly victimized, having first been forcibly conscripted by the YPG, including as children, or associated with SANES without a choice, and second when being arrested and detained by the SNA for such associations.

The minority Alawite community to which President 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 extrajudicial killing. Violent extremist opposition groups targeted Alawite communities on several occasions for their perceived proregime stance.

ISIS members targeted members of ethnic and religious minorities in attacks. The February 2021 COI report stated that ISIS subjected Yezidi women and girls to human trafficking, torture, inhuman treatment, murder, and rape (see sections 1.g. and section 6, Children). In February 2021, *The Jerusalem Post* reported Yezidis in Syria denounced a new regime ruling that required them to follow Islamic personal status laws. Some Yezidis had previously requested to have their own court oversee personal status matters.

HTS violently oppressed and discriminated against members of all non-Sunni Arab ethnic minorities in the territories it held (see section 1.g.).

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship solely from their father. In large areas of the country where civil registries were not functioning, authorities often 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: Approximately three million children were out of school, of whom 2.6 million were internally displaced.

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 regime continued to limit the teaching of the Kurdish language.

The education system remained fractured and under resourced, thereby limiting the ability of children to access education services regularly, according to UNOCHA. In May, UNICEF reported 6.5 million children needed humanitarian assistance, negatively impacting their ability to remain in school.

Combatants on all sides of the conflict attacked or commandeered schools. Repeated attacks impacting schools, economic factors, including children working to support the household, recruitment of boys for military roles, and the detention of children continued to hamper the ability of children to receive an education. In February, UNOCHA reported that attacks on schools have killed and injured children and adults, damaged buildings, and interrupted education services. According to UNOCHA, in Idlib, the site of continued clashes, there was one functioning classroom for every 178 school-age children. 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.

HTS reportedly imposed its interpretation of sharia on schools and discriminated against girls in the territories it held (see section 1.g.). In September, *Al-Monitor* reported that principals in schools in Idlib said that the Education Directorate of the Salvation Government instructed them to ban married female students from attending public schools and universities. HTS imposed dress codes on female teachers and pupils where it allowed girls to remain in school, while preventing large numbers of girls from attending school at all, according to the COI.

The SDF reportedly imposed penalties on school administration staff members

who did not use their curriculum.

Child Abuse: The law does not specifically prohibit child abuse, but it stipulates parents may discipline their children in a form permitted by general custom. In September 2021, the COI reported children, especially girls, were acutely vulnerable to violence and were victims of a broad array of abuses. The regime did not take steps to combat child abuse.

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

Child, 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. 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. Deteriorating economic conditions and the death or disappearance of male heads of household, at the hands of the regime and other armed groups, negatively affected children, for example, increasing rates of child labor and child marriage, and limiting access to education. According to the COI, parents were forced to take children out of school “in order to marry off their girls and send their boys to work.” The UNFPA reported in May child marriage continued to increase in the country.

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

NGOs reported that early and forced marriages were prevalent in areas under the control of armed groups, and citizens often failed to register their marriages officially due to fear of detention or conscription at regime checkpoints.

In previous years ISIS abducted and sexually exploited Yezidi girls in Iraq and transported them to Syria for rape and forced marriage (see section 1.g.). The Free Yezidi Foundation reported that Yezidi women and children remained with ISIS-

affiliated families in detention camps due to fear and the intense trauma from their treatment under ISIS.

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.” There were no known prosecutions for child pornography.

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.

Displaced Children: The population of IDP children continued to increase due to the conflict, and a limited number of non-Syrian refugee children continued to live in the country. According to UNOCHA, there were 2.4 million IDP children in Syria as of February, with an estimated 1 million living in settlements and camps and another 1.4 million living outside of camps. Half of the approximately 54,000 residents in al-Hol camp were children younger than the age of 12. The COI reported that children at al-Hol camp lacked sufficient health care and access to education and many were traumatized by violence within the camp. IDP children reportedly experienced increased vulnerability to abuses, including by armed forces (see sections 1.c., 1.g., 2.e., and 2.f.).

Antisemitism

In 2020, NGOs and media reported there were no known Jews still living in the country, as the small Jewish populations from Aleppo and Damascus left the country before the start of the conflict. 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 antisemitic 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/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: The law criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, defined as “carnal relations against the order of nature,” and stipulates imprisonment of up to three years. In previous years, police used this charge to prosecute lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons (LGBTQI+) individuals. There were no reports of prosecutions under the law during the year, but COAR reported the lack of protections in the legal framework created an environment of impunity for rampant, targeted threats and violence against LGBTQI+ persons and those perceived to be LGBTQI+ persons. NGO reports indicated the regime arrested dozens of LGBTQI+ persons since 2011 on charges such as abusing social values, selling, buying, or consuming illegal drugs, and organizing and promoting “obscene” parties.

Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons: The regime incited, perpetrated, condoned, and tolerated violence against LGBTQI+ individuals or those reporting such abuse. According to human rights organizations, state and nonstate actors subjected members of the LGBTQI+ community to physical, psychological, and sexual violence, resulting in severe physical and mental health consequences. NGOs continue to report that the regime and other armed groups subjected perceived members of the LGBTQI+ community to humiliation, torture, and abuse in detention centers, including rape, forced nudity, and anal or vaginal “examinations.” There was no reporting to suggest the regime or armed nonstate actors took any official action to investigate, prosecute, and punish those complicit in violence and abuses against LGBTQI+ persons.

HTS and other armed groups used unauthorized “courts” to impose draconian

social restrictions, particularly against women and LGBTQI+ individuals (see section 1.g.).

Discrimination: The law does not protect against discrimination by state or nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, nor does it actively protect the rights of LGBTQI+ persons. The law does not recognize LGBTQI+ couples and their families. Human rights activists reported there was overt societal discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in all aspects of society and in all territories, regardless of the governing authority. In a June article published by the Atlantic Council, human rights activists reported that openly identifying as LGBTQI+ in Syria was likely to result in social exclusion or forms of torture.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: There was no process for legal gender recognition by the regime or other nonstate actors. There was little to no societal recognition of transgender individuals or matters related to gender identity and expression of transgender individuals.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals: The law does not provide for protections against involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices specifically targeting LGBTQI+ persons. For example, so-called conversion therapy is not banned, but there was limited reporting on the use of such practices.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: There was no reporting this year to suggest that Syrians publicly expressed themselves, peacefully demonstrated, or publicly associated themselves with the LGBTQI+ community or issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, likely due to fear of reprisal by the regime or other nonstate actors. Although there were no known domestic NGOs focused on LGBTQI+ matters, there were several online networking communities, including an online magazine. In March Syrian activists and members of the LGBTQI+ community officially registered the Guardians of Equality Movement, a Geneva-based Syrian LGBTQI+ NGO “working toward the protection and advocacy of human rights at social and diplomatic levels for all vulnerable Syrian LGBTQI+ regardless of political affiliations, religion, or ethnic background.”

Persons with Disabilities

While the law provides some protections for persons with disabilities, the regime did not make serious attempts to enforce applicable laws effectively during the year. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for assisting persons with disabilities, working through dedicated charities and organizations to provide assistance.

The destruction of schools and hospitals, most often by regime and proregime forces, further limited access to education and health services for persons with disabilities. Government and nongovernment social care institutes reportedly existed 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, buildings, or transportation. UN reporting noted the difficulties experienced by children with disabilities caused by the conflict. A September HRW report revealed that children with physical disabilities faced barriers fleeing attacks, given the lack of availability of assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, prostheses, or hearing aids. HRW also found that children with disabilities faced increased barriers to accessing educational services because of inaccessible roads or school facilities, as well as the lack of assistive devices. The September HRW report revealed mental health and psychosocial support services were either lacking, generally not inclusive of, or inaccessible to, children with disabilities which compounded the conflict's devastating impact on the mental health of children with disabilities who, unlike other children, worry that their situation may put family members at risk, or they will be abandoned during attacks.

According to September reporting from the COI, on June 1, a girl, age 10, with physical disabilities was killed in Babesqa camp in a fire that followed an explosion of an SNA ammunition depot (see 1.g., Killings). Witnesses said her body was completely burned, as she was not able to escape the tent she was living in.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Yezidis, Druze, Christians, Shia, and members of other religious minorities were

subject to violence and discrimination by ISIS, HTS, the SNA, and other groups (see section 1.g.). There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons with HIV or AIDS, but human rights activists believed such cases were underreported, and COAR noted that stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS was enormous. The UN Development Program assessed COVID-19 presented barriers to HIV testing and treatment.

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

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 strikes resembling public demonstrations. Restrictions on freedom of association also included fines and prison sentences for illegal strikes. The regime did not make any serious attempt to effectively enforce applicable laws during the year.

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 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, except for Palestinians who may serve as elected officials

in unions.

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 regarding 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 or criminalize 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." In March, the regime introduced amendments to the penal code abolishing the penalty of temporary hard labor and replacing it with temporary and life imprisonment. There was little information available on regime efforts to enforce relevant laws during the year.

Terrorist groups, including ISIS and HTS, reportedly forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited some foreigners, including migrants from Central Asia, children, and Western women, to join them. Some children in IDP camps across northeastern Syria, including al-Hol, were potential human trafficking victims used in direct hostilities or in support roles by armed groups, including ISIS. Thousands of Yezidi women and girl captives of ISIS remained missing and were presumed to have been victims of sex trafficking and subjected to 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/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

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. The labor law prohibits women from working during certain hours and does not allow them to work in jobs deemed hazardous, arduous, or morally inappropriate. Additional regulations prohibit women from working in factories or several industries, including mining, agriculture, energy, and construction. 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.

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 most forms of 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, and the labor law allows an employer to decrease the wages of persons with disabilities

whenever their productivity is substantially reduced as attested by a medical certificate. 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. The government did not uphold this provision. Discrimination occurred in hiring and access to worksites.

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

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law provides for a national minimum wage for all sectors of the economy. 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. The law on minimum wage states it should rise gradually to meet the cost of living. In January the regime raised civil and military salaries by 30 percent to 92,970 SYP (\$37) per month and pensions by 25 percent, per a legislative decree issued in December 2021. The government did not effectively enforce laws related to the minimum wage and overtime. There is no employer liability for late payment of wages, allowances, or other social benefits. Many 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. Media reported the regime considered defection from public sector careers to be a political action or antigovernment activity, according to an April 2021 report by the Danish Immigration Service. The report estimated 138,000 cases involving workers leaving a public position without notice were filed with courts between 2011 and 2017. Of the 50,000 verdicts, 38,000 cases were decided in favor of the state and 12,000 in favor of the employee. Punishments ranged from fines to being charged with terrorism, according to the report.

The public-sector workweek is 35 hours, and the standard private-sector workweek is 40 hours, excluding meals and rest breaks. Hours of work may be adjusted

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. There was little information available on regime efforts to enforce relevant laws during the year.

Occupational Safety and Health: The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for enforcing the minimum wage and other regulations pertaining to acceptable conditions of work. The government did not effectively enforce occupational safety and health (OSH) laws or standards as set by the regime. Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remains with experts and not the worker based on hazards inherent to the nature of work. The law does not protect workers who remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety from losing their employment.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: Penalties for violations of labor related laws were less than other laws and were rarely enforced. 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 regarding health and safety conditions with special committees established to adjudicate such cases. 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. 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.

Informal Sector: Foreign workers, especially domestic servants, were 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 law does not explicitly grant refugees the right to work except for Palestinians. While the regime rarely granted non-Palestinian refugees a work permit, many refugees found work in the informal sector as guards, construction workers, or street vendors and in other manual jobs. 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. Wage and hour regulations, as well as occupational health and safety rules, do not apply to migrant workers, rendering them more vulnerable to abuse.

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 from leaving the country.