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Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in May 2023

Restoring Relations With the Syrian Regime
is an Insult to the Rights of the Regime's Victims

Monday 05 June 2023

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

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I. Introduction and Methodology

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

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

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

II. Brief on May's Most Notable Developments

Bombings and military operations

May saw Syrian regime forces continuing to carry out artillery attacks against northwestern Syria, where we documented separate attacks focusing on the villages and towns of Jabal al-Zawiya in the southern suburbs of Idlib and the western suburbs of Aleppo, as well as in Sahl al-Ghab in the western suburbs of Hama and the northern suburbs of Latakia; all of these areas are close to the dividing lines with armed opposition factions, with regime force also shelling villages and towns in the suburbs of Idlib that are far from the dividing line, at times when the residents were harvesting crops. On May 15, Syrian regime artillery forces fired multiple shells at Kafr Aweed village in southern Idlib, [killing one civilian](#). Additionally, one of the shells fired in this attack landed near a mosque in the village with no damage recorded. On May 31, shelling of agricultural lands in Sahl al-Ghab caused widespread fires that destroyed large quantities of crops.

In southern Syria, al-Jesri village in the al-Laja area in eastern Daraa was targeted on May 8 by a Syrian regime artillery squad stationed in al-Jbab town in northern Daraa. The area also saw clashes between Syrian regime forces and unidentified gunmen.

On May 24, Syrian regime forces deployed reinforcements to the vicinity of Talbisa city in the northern suburbs of Homs. These reinforcements established themselves in Katibat al-Ghantou, while military checkpoints were set up along the al-Sa'n al-Asswad road in the east of the city, all in tandem with the construction of berms and further fortification of the existing checkpoints both in Talbisa city and on its outskirts. This followed a meeting between a number of regime intelligence officers in Homs city and a delegation of local dignitaries held at al-Safir Hotel in Homs city on May 17 which aimed to address security issues in the city. The regime officials specified a set of demands related to drug-trafficking and abductions which have mostly been taking place in Homs city and on the Homs-Hama international highway. The regime threatened that there would be a city-wide security crackdown and that all those refusing to comply with those demands would be deported to northern Syria if the dignitaries failed to fulfill those demands within 15 days. On May 23, the Talbisa city's dignitaries issued a statement following a series of meetings with representatives of the families living in the city. The statement explicitly stressed that all drug dealing activities are banned, and called for combating organized and non-organized crimes, as well as ending the presence of arms and associated anarchy in Talbisa city. The statement also mentioned forming a task force of local people to protect the entrances and exits of the city, as well as the highway.

In late-May, the Russian air force carried out two airstrikes, their first in 2023, in the southern suburbs of Idlib. The first attack, which took place on May 26, targeted Fleifel village, located on the dividing lines separating areas controlled by Syrian regime force, on one side, and armed opposition factions and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), on the other. The second attack, on May 30, targeted a house in al n al-Manabea' area on the northwestern outskirts of Sarja village in Jabal al-Zawiya. A young civilian man riding a motorbike who was passing by the targeted building was injured, while the house itself was partially destroyed. The next day, Russian news agencies published [a video](#) of Russian warplanes targeting the house with multiple missiles.



Moreover, on May 8, seven civilians were killed, including five children and one woman, in two concurrent airstrikes. In al-Sha'ab village in the far southeast of Suwayda governorate, one of the two attacks targeted the house of the head of the drug trafficking and Captagon networks in southern Syria, who was also known as the figure responsible for recruiting and arming smugglers in the region in coordination and collaboration with the Syrian regime's 'al-Ferqa al-Rabe'a' (Fourth Division), which is headed by Major

General Maher Assad, brother of the head of the Syrian regime. [In a report](#) documenting the incident that was released on May 12, SNHR stressed that Jordanian forces and the Syrian regime bear responsibility for these civilians' deaths. On May 4, [CNN](#) reported that Ayman al-Safadi, Jordan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that his country would do whatever is necessary to combat the threat of drugs, including "taking military action" inside Syria to eliminate this threat.

On May 3, we recorded the killing of [an elderly civilian](#) in bombardment by an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), commonly known as a drone, believed to be operated by international coalition forces. The UAV fired a rocket targeting the victim in Arad Jbeila while he was herding sheep on the outskirts of Qurqaniya village in northwestern Idlib. On May 9, [the Associated Press \(AP\)](#) reported that the US military was investigating reports of a civilian casualty in a strike in northwestern Syria that allegedly targeted a senior Qaeda leader. The AP report also cited John Moore, a spokesperson for the US Central Command (CENTCOM), as saying that the US military is "in the process of confirming the identity of the individuals killed in the strike."

Meanwhile, [more civilians were killed by landmines across Syria](#) in May, mostly in the governorates of Aleppo, Daraa, and Deir Ez-Zour, with the monthly total of six civilian fatalities bringing the total number of victims killed by landmines since the beginning of 2023 to 83 civilians, including 16 children and seven women.



May also saw more [assassinations of civilians at the hands of unidentified gunmen](#) across Syria, mostly in Daraa governorate.

On May 1, the Syrian regime's [Syrian Arab News Agency \(SANA\)](#) reported that Israeli warplanes had targeted multiple points in the vicinity of Aleppo city, in addition to targeting Aleppo International Airport, which resulted in casualties and put the airport out of commission.

Living and Security Conditions

In May, economic, living, services, and security conditions continued to decline across all sectors in areas under the Syrian regime's control, with a particularly sharp deterioration seen in the services sector. Regarding the power crisis specifically, the Syrian regime government is still implementing a rationing policy, exacerbating the suffering of the residents in regime areas. On May 15, the Syrian Exchange News website cited Ghassan al-Zamel, [Minister of Electricity](#) in the Syrian regime government, who stated that various factors are leading to increasing electricity prices. Further exacerbating the suffering of citizens in regime areas, with the chronic power shortages leaving many reliant on batteries and solar panels to generate power, the prices of both batteries and solar panels rose by 25 percent in May, according to a report published on May 23 by the [pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper](#).

Moreover, residents in regime-held areas are also still grappling with rising prices for virtually all goods, most crucially food supplies and fuel. For instance, according to a May 5 report published on the the pro-regime '[Watan Online](#)' website, the price of one kilogram of sugar jumped from 7,500 S.P. to 8,200 S.P. in one day. On May 22, the [pro-regime Tishreen newspaper](#) reported that sugar is again nowhere to be found on the local market in parallel with an unprecedented price rise, with one kilogram of sugar being sold at 9,000 S.P. [Children's milk has also become a scarce commodity](#), with another steep price rise seeing the cost of the essential item doubling, according to the report published on May 22 by the [Tishreen newspaper](#).

Meanwhile, [fuel prices saw further increases](#) in regime-held areas. [On May 22](#), the Syrian regime's Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection set the price of subsidized household gas tanks at 15,000 S.P., while the free price of the same gas tank, when purchased using what's known as the 'electric card' was set at 50,000 S.P. The same ministry also set the cost for an industrial gas tank at 75,000 S.P., in addition to setting the price for one liter of [95-octane fuel](#) at 7,600 S.P., a 1,000 S.P. increase from the 6,600 S.P. price set by the Ministry [back in February](#).

In northwestern Syria, civilians' already severe suffering continues to worsen under deteriorating economic and living conditions in parallel with rising prices for food and grocery supplies, all intensified by the people's waning purchasing power due to rampant unemployment and poverty, especially in areas housing internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps, with wages for those in work in the area also continuing to decline.

The situation in Northeastern Syria remains similarly dire, with worsening living and security conditions. Prices of food, fuel and other essential commodities in the region continue to rise due to the controlling forces' failure to regulate the market, not to mention the state of rampant insecurity in the area that has continued for a few months.

In May, the residents of Manbij and Ein al-Aran city in northeastern Aleppo governorate continued to suffer under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as the group continued its restrictive approach in light of the popular protests against its policies. As a result, some grocery supplies have become scarce, most importantly flour, leading to low levels of bread production, and, in turn, to further increases in bread prices.



On May 30, municipal workers employed by the Kurdish Self-Administration authority found a mass grave in Manbej city in Aleppo suburbs, while they were carrying out repair work around the hotel used by the Civil Administration to house its committees and departments. A total of 10 bodies were found, with more likely to be uncovered as the search continues. According to the preliminary intelligence we acquired, those dead bodies date back to the period when ISIS was in control of the city, when the group used the same building as its headquarters. Some of the bodies found were handcuffed, leading to speculation that they were killed in field executions.

Forced displacement

In May, the suffering of IDPs in northwestern Syria continued in relation to both living conditions and the ongoing humanitarian crisis, with the ever-increasing prices, especially of food supplies, on one hand, and the rampant unemployment and virtually non-existent purchasing powers among residents in the area, especially those in IDP camps, on the other, during a period characterized by severe shortages of humanitarian relief, meaning that humanitarian needs reaching unprecedented levels.

We also documented [more fires](#) in IDP camps in northwestern Syria in May. On May 11, an electrical malfunction in [a number of IDPs tents](#) caused a fire in a number of tents in Bab al-Salama Camp in near Sejjo village in northern Aleppo. The blaze damaged three tents.

In the camps in northeastern Syria, on the subject of foreign states repatriating their nationals, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan revealed [in an official statement](#) published on May 21 that it had repatriated 104 individuals (29 families) of Tajiki nationals, including children, teenagers, and women, who were held in the camps in northeastern Syria.



On May 29, 62 Syrian families from Aleppo governorate (approximately 250 people) left al-Hawl Camp in eastern Hasaka traveling towards Manbej city in eastern Aleppo, thanks to mediation by tribal intermediaries.

Meanwhile, on May 20, the SDF carried out a raid and arrest campaign in the two IDP camps of Hawayej Boums'a and Mheimda in western Deir Ez-Zour. SNHR documented [the arrest of 12 civilians](#) from Deir Ez-Zour city who were taken to an undisclosed location.

In al-Rukban Camp, located on the Syrian-Jordanian borders in eastern Homs city and populated by approximately 7,500 people, the already dire living situation was worsened by two dust storms that caused suffocation among a number of residents, especially among children, in light of an almost complete lack of any medical services in the camp.



With regard to Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, on May 23, the World Food Programme (WFP) released its [Jordan Country Brief for April 2023](#), in which it revealed that a 25 percent year-on-year increase in the average amount of debt owed by Syrian refugees among refugees, both in host communities and in camps. The report said that the fact that the monies owed in debt are predominately used for food purchases, rent, and health expenses is “alarming”.

May saw more antagonistic statements by Lebanese officials against the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. For instance, the [al-Jadeed TV Website](#) cited Hector Hajjar, the Minister of Social Affairs in the Lebanese caretaker cabinet, as saying, “We are working on accelerating the process of returning Syrian refugees to their country” and suggesting paying cash assistance to people in Syria in order to encourage refugees to return.

On May 27, Imran Riza, the UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon, Ivo Freijsen, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Representative in Lebanon, and Abdallah Alwardat, the WFP Country Director and Representative in Lebanon released [a joint statement](#) on “temporarily pausing” the disbursement of cash assistance in dual currency to refugees for the next month, stating that discussions are still being held on the best mechanism to be implemented for achieving this. This came only four days after the same officials released [a joint statement](#) on resuming disbursing cash assistance in dual currency to the refugees.

Refoulment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon

On May 1, [Reuters](#) reported that the Syrian refugees who had been detained and deported by the Lebanese security forces were arrested and conscripted into Syrian regime forces upon their forcible return to Syria. The news agency revealed that, in the month of April, 450 Syrian were arrested in over 60 raids carried out by the Lebanese military, or at checkpoints, while over 130 individuals were deported in the same month. According to the same report, some of those deported were officially recognized Syrian refugees who had registered with the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), and some were unaccompanied minors.

On May 11, SNHR released [a joint statement](#) with 20 Lebanese and international organizations noting that hundreds of Syrians had been recently and summarily deported by the Lebanese army to Syria where they face the threat of persecution or other dangers. The statement notes that such deportations come “amid an alarming surge in anti-refugee rhetoric in Lebanon and other coercive measures intended to pressure refugees to return, said a group of 20 national and international organizations today.” To that end, the statement calls on the international community to fulfill its obligations and increase its assistance.

On May 15, Lebanon’s General Directorate of General Security announced on its [official Twitter account](#) that its centers would no longer accept settlement requests by Syrian nationals who entered Lebanon via illegal channels. According to the Directorate, the decision was made to give refugees the chance to directly settle their situation when they voluntarily leave Lebanon at the border centers and departments, in order to avoid a ban of future entry to Lebanon and would enable them to re-enter the country legally through the proper channels, provided that they rectify their situation before June 15, 2023. It is worth noting that most Syrian refugees in Lebanon have entered the country illegally without being able to acquire official papers. As such, this decision affects a large proportion of the Syrian refugees in the country.

On May 28, [BBC Arabic](#) reported a statement by Issam Sharaf al-Din, the Caretaker Minister of the Displaced Affairs, who said that there would be further deportations of Syrian refugees from Lebanon, since their return is a “rightful and necessary goal”. Mr. Sharaf al-Din added that coordinating with the UNHCR on the Syrian side has currently been placed on hold over the disbursement of assistance to Syrian refugees returning to Syria, which he said would encourage others to return. The Lebanese Minister stated wrongly that the main reason behind Syrian refugees’ failure to return to Syria is related to their material conditions, rather than citing the real reason, which is that Syria is still unsafe for their return.

Political and human rights situation

On May 1, the UNHCR released [a report](#) revealing that, as the conflict in Syria enters its 13th year, 15.3 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance across the country, constituting a five percent increase from 2022. The report also stresses that the February 6 earthquake further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, adversely affecting approximately 8.8 million people in Syria.

On May 1, [Jordan's Anti-Narcotics Department](#) said that Jordanian authorities had thwarted an attempt to smuggle narcotics from Syrian territory. The government agency added that after a rigorous search of the area, 1.33 million Captagon pills and an AK-47, along with ammunition, had been recovered. The department revealed that the operation resulted in the killing of one smuggler, while others fled back to Syria.

On May 3, [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#) unveiled its World Press Freedom Index for the year 2023, [with Syria being ranked among the world's 10 worst countries with regard to press freedom](#) (now occupying 175th place out of 180 countries), a further regression from its 171st place in last year's index. The RSF noted that Syria remains one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists who often find themselves “[caught in the crossfire between Bashar al-Assad's murderous army, militias, and Turkish interventions](#).” RSF further revealed that Syria is still the country with the most journalists held hostages.

On May 8, Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, revealed in [a briefing](#) to the UN Security Council that the Technical Secretariat of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has not yet received the required documents from the Syrian regime despite the Secretariat already having provided the regime with the list of pending declarations. Ms. Nakamitsu further revealed that it is the Secretariat's assessment that Syria's declaration cannot be deemed accurate and complete considering the gaps, inconsistencies, and unresolved discrepancies.

On May 8, the White House released [a statement](#) revealing that US President Joe Biden has extended the sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime by another year. The statement added that the US President also called on the Syrian regime and its supporters to end their vicious war against the Syrian people, enact a countrywide ceasefire, facilitate the unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance to all Syrians in need, and negotiate a political settlement process in accordance with Security Council resolution 2254.

On May 9, the [Iraqi Ministry of Interior](#) reported that Baghdad hosted the International Conference on Combating Narcotics, which featured representatives from eight states, including a Syrian regime delegation. The ministry added that the conference aimed to consolidate efforts to address the drug epidemic and examine the available figures and information. It is worth noting the discrepancy in the Syrian regime attending such events despite [many reports](#) which confirm that the regime itself is one of the most prominent suppliers of Captagon, most of whose profits feed its own networks.

On May 10, [a quadrilateral meeting](#) was held in Moscow by the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the Syrian regime. The attendees agreed to commission the deputies of each foreign minister to devise a roadmap to further develop relations between Turkey and Syria in coordination with each of the four states' ministries of defense and intelligence. The attendees also underscored the importance of advancing the political process in Syria in line with Security Council resolution 2254 and establishing the necessary infrastructure for the safe return of Syrian refugees.

On May 12, Amnesty International released [a statement](#) stressing that, with millions of earthquake victims in northwestern Syria still dependent on UN cross-border humanitarian assistance for survival, the UN should continue to deliver aid to the area via all border crossings whether or not the Syrian regime decided to keep the Bab al-Salam and al-Rai crossings open after the Syrian regime's authorization ended on May 13. According to [a legal analysis](#) published by the group on the same day, it is lawful to deliver impartial humanitarian assistance to the civilians in critical need of such aid with no authorization from the Security Council or the Syrian regime under international law, since no alternatives exist, in light of the crucial need to continue the UN cross-border assistance process to prevent the suffering of civilian residents and grave human rights violations in northwestern Syria.

On May 13, [Reuters](#) reported that the Syrian regime had decided to extend its authorization for the UN and relevant UN organs to use the two additional border crossings, namely Bab al-Salama and al-Rai, for three months ending on August 13, to enable delivery of post-earthquake aid to northwestern Syria.

On May 15, the [US Department of State's](#) Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) released its annual report on international religious freedom for the year 2022, including in Syria. The report noted that sectarian violence, fueled and exacerbated by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict, is still continuing, while also shedding light on the widespread destruction of infrastructure and the targeting of individuals on a sectarian basis by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict. The report further revealed that sectarian violence is still going on in Syria due to the tensions between religious groups, further exacerbated by regime actions, worsening economic conditions, and the ongoing conflict in a broader sense. SNHR was the second-most cited source in the report. We released [a statement](#) on the report on May 16.

On May 20, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the US released [a joint statement](#) emphasizing the G7 states' position of refusing to normalize relations with the Syrian regime or contribute to the reconstruction process as long as no progress has been made with respect to the political resolution process. Paragraph 59 of the G7 Hiroshima Leaders' Communiqué asserts that the G7 states "remain firmly committed to an inclusive, UN-facilitated political process consistent with UNSCR 2254 in Syria." The statement further warns that the international community "should only consider normalization and reconstruction assistance once there is authentic and enduring progress towards a political solution." Moreover, the G7 states expressed their continued support for the OPCW's work as well as their commitment to holding accountable those responsible for the use of chemical weapons and violations of international law.

On May 23, [the Agence France-Presse \(AFP\)](#) news agency reported a statement by that Catherine Colonna, France's Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, asserting that the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad, should be tried for his responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of victims and the use of chemical weapons. Ms. Colonna asserted that Europe lifting sanctions on the Syrian regime is "not planned", as Paris will not change its position towards the Syrian regime.

On May 30, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US Representative to the UN, said in [a briefing](#) to the Security Council on the political and humanitarian situation in Syria that Bashar Assad sitting at a table with other leaders does nothing to help the Syrian people. Ms. Thomas-Greenfield revealed that the US is working on acquiring a 12-month authorization for use of all border crossings, namely Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam, and al-Rai, through a Security Council resolution this July.

Restoring relations with the Syrian regime

On May 1, the foreign ministers of Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Syrian regime held [a consultative meeting](#) in the Jordanian capital Amman as part of Jordan's proposal to initiate an Arab role to solve the Syrian crisis on the basis of "a step-for-step" approach.

On May 3, the [President of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi](#), arrived in Damascus with a delegation of senior officials for a two-day visit. Raisi met with the head of the Syrian regime and a number of regime officials. It should be noted that this was the first visit of an Iranian president to Syria since 2010. [According to Raisi](#), the Iranian delegation signed 15 documents during the visit. Iran remains one of the Syrian regime's most important allies, backing and supporting the regime in committing multiple violations both politically and militarily. On April 26, Mehrdad Bazrpash, Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, revealed during a technical discussions session held by the economic Syrian-Iranian joint committee in Damascus that eight special committees have been formed to establish vital relations between the two countries, one of which is a committee charged with following up on loans and debts due for repayment in order to conduct an accurate investigation of the actual sum of incurred loans. [According to the pro-regime al-Watan Newspaper](#), Mr. Bazrpash revealed that understandings were reached in the past to satisfy those loans in the form of granting land to Iran, affirming that while Tehran is understanding of Syria's current conditions, there are legal requirements to be met in Iran. The results of such meetings only serve to advance Iran's vision of completely absorbing all vital sectors in Syria, taking advantage of the Syrian regime's complete subservience to Tehran, especially with Syria's mounting public debt to Iran's regime.

On May 7, the [Council of the Arab League](#) held a meeting at the level of foreign ministers to discuss developments in Syria. A statement released following the meeting revealed that the Council of the Arab League has decided that Syrian regime delegations would resume participation in the Arab League's meetings, after Syria's membership had been suspended for 12 years in line with a resolution issued on November 12, 2011. In a comment on this decision on May 8, reported by [AFP](#), a US Department of State spokesperson asserted, **"We will not normalize relations with the Bashar Assad regime"**, further confirming that US sanctions on the Syrian regime **still apply in full**. The AFP report also revealed that Qatar had opposed the decision to readmit Syria into the Arab League. Majed bin Mohammad Al Ansari, the spokesperson for Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asserted that Qatar's position towards the Syrian regime remains unchanged, and that any normalization between Doha and the Syrian regime is "conditional first and foremost on making progress with a political solution that meets the aspirations of the Syrian people."

On May 10, AFP revealed that Saudi Arabia had decided to resume the work of its diplomatic mission [in Syria](#), a decision made over a decade since Riyadh closed its embassy in Damascus. Citing a statement released by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AFP reported that this decision was made while taking into account the decision of the council of the Arab foreign ministers to readmit Syria into the Arab League. The AFP report also stated that the Syrian regime had reciprocally decided to resume the work of its diplomatic mission in Riyadh. Furthermore, [the AFP report revealed](#) that the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad, had received an official invitation from Nayef bin Bandar Al-Sudairi, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Jordan, to participate in the Arab Summit. According to the AFP report, this was the first invitation of its kind since the Syrian conflict began in 2011.

On May 18, the 32nd Arab Summit at the level of leaders began in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The two-day summit was attended by a Syrian regime delegation, [presided over by Bashar Assad, the head of the Syrian regime](#), for the first time in nearly a decade. The regime's participation came after [an official invitation was issued by the King of Saudi Arabia on May 10](#). Following the summit, a statement entitled the '[Jeddah Declaration](#)' was issued by the participants. On the same day, SNHR released a statement entitled, 'Readmitting the Syrian Regime into the Arab League Does Not Mean that Syria is Safe for the Return of Refugees Since the Regime is Still Committing Crimes Against Humanity', in which the group stressed that the Syrian regime has given no indications of goodwill towards the Syrian people, with approximately 136,000 Syrian citizens still imprisoned in regime detention centers. The group expressed serious concerns that any restoration of relations with the Syrian regime would lead to Syrian refugees being forced to return to Syria. In fact, SNHR has already documented the refoulment of no fewer than 753 Syrian refugees from Lebanon. The statement further reveals that the refoulment and forced repatriation of Syrian refugees constitute blatant violations of customary international law. Any governments carrying out such practices bear legal responsibility for the torture, killing, enforced disappearance, and other violations that will potentially be perpetrated by the Syrian regime against these forcibly returned refugees.

Accountability and advocacy

On May 2, The [US Department of the Treasury's](#) Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) revealed that, in collaboration with Turkish authorities, two financial facilitators for the HTS and the Qaeda-affiliated 'Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad' (The Tawhid and Jihad Battalion) had been included on the US sanctions list. The statement reveals that the first of these figures, Omar Alsheak, commonly known as Abu Ahmed Zakour, has held several leadership-level positions with HTS, while the second figure, a Turkish individual, has been receiving funds in Turkey since 2018 to buy arms and military equipment for the two groups.

On May 3, [SNHR](#) released a report to mark World Press Freedom Day summarizing the most notable violations against media workers in Syria. The report stresses that violations against citizen journalists and freedom of press and opinion have been perpetrated continuously since the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria 12 years ago.

On May 5, [the Swiss government](#) revealed that it had amended its Ordinance imposing Measures against Syria, adding 25 natural persons and eight legalpersons to the annex of the Ordinance, which is a sanctions list for Syria and the Captagon trade. Among those added were three cousins of the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad, namely Samer Kamal Assad, Wasim Badia Assad, and Mudar Riffat Assad, as well as a number of officials, businessmen, and pro-regime militia members involved in the drug trade.

On May 12, France's Court of Cassation announced that it had examined the rules of [French law](#) restricting victims of crime from facing justice for serious crimes committed outside of France. The Court concluded that "the necessary conditions have been met for the French justice system to charge Syrian nationals involved in investigations for acts committed in Syria." Commenting on this assessment, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released [a statement](#) noting that "while the decisions confirmed the jurisdiction of French courts over a significant number of pending cases, they do not address the full scope of restrictive conditions that remain in French law." HRW's statement added that the French government still needs to enact immediate reforms to remove the legal barriers, which risks France "becoming a safe haven for those involved in the world's worst crimes." SNHR welcomes this decision that support the path of justice for the victims and creates a change to file lawsuit in French courts against individuals responsible for human rights violations in Syria.

On May 16, the US Congress's Committee of Foreign Affairs approved [a bill](#) aimed at combating normalization with the Syrian regime. Should the bill enter into law, it would prohibit the US from recognizing or normalizing relations with any Syrian government presided over by Bashar Assad. The bill also includes expansions for the CAESAR Act to include individuals who support the People's Assembly of Syria and the Baath Party in Syria.

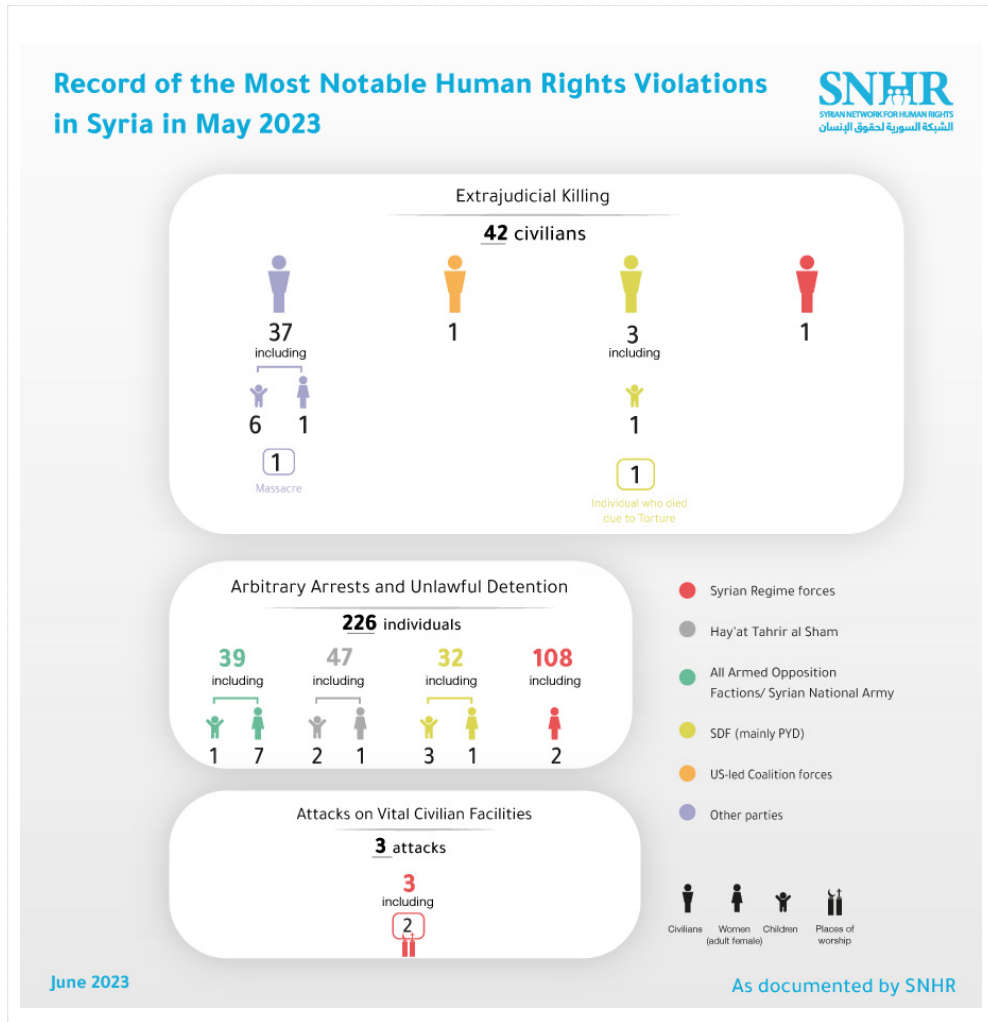
On May 17, SNHR released [a statement](#) revealing that its Executive Director Fadel Abdul Ghany represented the group in an Event on the Sidelines of the OPCW's Fifth Review Conference, held in The Hague on May 15-19. In his speech, Mr. Abdul Ghany shed light on SNHR's exhaustive work on the issue of chemical weapons in Syria over nearly a decade which has involved releasing dozens of reports and statement on the use of chemical weapons in the country. He explained that SNHR now possesses a large database on the incidents involving the use of chemical weapons which it has documented, which includes the names of the victims and survivors of those attacks, as well as data on hundreds of individuals involved in the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

On May 30, the US Department of the Treasury released [a statement](#) revealing that it had designated two Syrian companies, al-Fadel Exchange and al-Adham Exchange Company, as having "secretly helped" the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad, as well as its two allies the Lebanese group Hezbollah and the Iranian regime's Quds Corps. The statement also revealed that the OFAC had similarly designated three brothers who own and run al-Fadel Exchange, namely Fadel, Mut'i, and Muhammad Ma'ruf Balwi.

In January, SNHR briefed the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the UN Special Rapporteur on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights while Countering Terrorism- Specific work on victims of terrorism, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, on 12 cases of enforced disappearance, including a woman and her five children.

III. Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in May

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



A. Extrajudicial killing

In May, SNHR documented the death of 42 civilians, including seven children and one woman (adult female), most of whom were killed at the hands of other parties. We also documented the death of one individual who died due to torture. Furthermore, we documented one massacre in May. We also issued a report on June 1 detailing the civilian victims documented killed at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria in the previous month.

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

A. Main parties:

- **Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):**¹ two civilians:
One civilian.
- **All armed opposition factions/SNA:**
three civilians, including one

B. Other parties:

We documented the deaths of 94 civilians in May, including seven children and five women, at the hands of other parties, distributed as follows:

- **Landmines whose source we have been unable to identify:** Six civilians.
- **Gunfire whose source we have been unable to identify:** 18 civilians.
- **Bombings whose perpetrators we have been unable to identify:** two civilians, including one child.
- **Killings by parties we have been unable to identify:** Three civilians.
- **Jordanian forces:** Seven civilians, including five children and one woman.
- **Turkish forces:** One civilian.

B. Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance

In May 2023, SNHR documented at least 226 cases of arbitrary arrest, including six children and 11 women (adult female), at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria. Most of these arrests were carried out by Syrian regime forces in the governorates of Damascus suburbs, then Damascus. We issued a report on June 2 detailing the cases of arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearances which we documented in May at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria.

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

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

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

- **Syrian regime forces:** 108 individuals, including two women.
- **HTS²:** 47 individuals, including two children and one woman.
- **All Armed Opposition factions/SNA:** 39 individuals, including one child and seven women.
- **SDF:** 32 individuals, including three children and one woman.

C. Attacks on vital civilian facilities

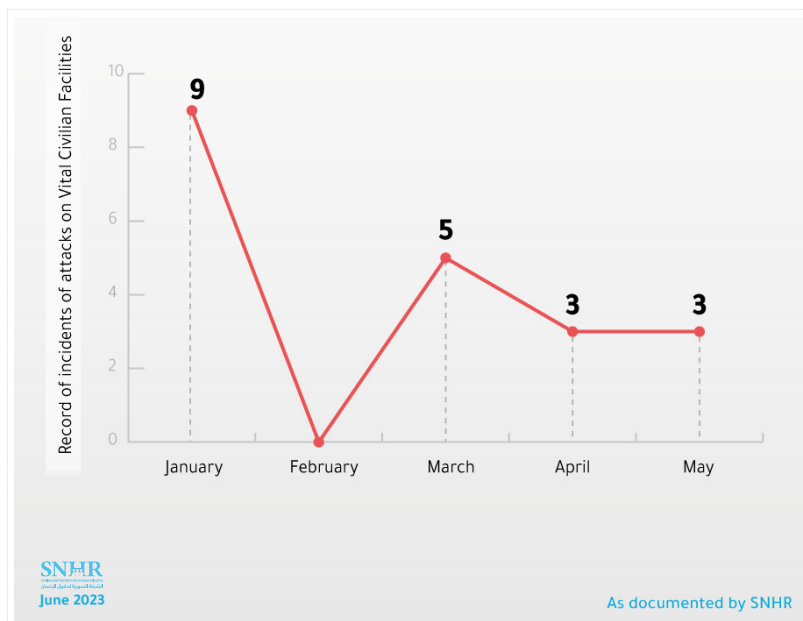
SNHR documented at least three attacks on vital civilian facilities during May 2023, all of which were perpetrated by Syrian regime forces.

Two of the attacks targeted places of worship.

The attacks on vital civilian facilities recorded in May were distributed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria as follows:

Perpetrator Party	Syrian Regime Forces
Attacked Facility	
Places of Worship	
Mosques	2
Infrastructure	
Water Facilities and Resources	1
Total	3

This brings the total number of attacks on vital civilian facilities since the beginning of 2023 to 20 attacks carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria. These attacks are distributed by month as follows:



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

As shown on the graph, attacks on vital civilian facilities continued in May at the same rate as seen in April. May accounted for approximately 15 percent of all attacks on vital civilian facilities documented to date in 2023.

Most notable attacks on vital civilian facilities documented in May:

On Wednesday, May 3, 2023, Syrian regime artillery forces fired multiple shells at Ma'ar Ballit village in Jabal al-Zawiya in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. One of the shells landed [near the Grand Mosque](#) in the center of the village with no damage recorded to the mosque building. The village was under the joint control of armed opposition factions and the HTS at the time of the incident.

On Wednesday, May 3, 2023, Syrian regime artillery forces fired a shell at the [Majdaliya Water Station](#) in Majdaliya village in Jabal al-Zawiya in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. The shell landed in the water station's main yard, partially destroying the surrounding [perimeter fence](#). The village was under the joint control of armed opposition factions and HTS at the time of the incident.

SNHR notes that the water station has been out of commission since 2020 after the residents fled the village and the electricity was cut as a result of the military operations carried out against the area by Syrian-Russian alliance forces. As of this writing, the station remains inactive.



Destruction caused by a ground-based attack by Syrian regime forces on the water station in Majdaliya village in Idlib - May 3, 2023

D. Indiscriminate attacks and attacks using prohibited weapons

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

IV. Attachments

1. [42 Civilians, Including Seven Children, One Woman, and One Individual Who Died due to Torture Documented Killed in Syria, in May 2023](#)
2. [At Least 226 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in May, Including Six Children and 11 Women and Eight Women](#)

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- SNHR notes that, for the past 12 years, the Syrian regime has been involved in the most horrific types of violations against the Syrian people, some of which amount to crimes against humanity. Since the Syrian regime continues to commit such violations up to the present day, as documented in the numerous reports we have released, any normalization of relations with the regime or efforts to rehabilitate it are acts of support for a criminal entity involved in crimes against humanity, which constitute a violation of international law.
- The evidence we have gathered indicates that attacks continue to be directed against civilians and civilian objects. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have committed various crimes, including extrajudicial killings, arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances. In addition, the indiscriminate bombardment and other attacks carried out caused the destruction of facilities and buildings. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the war crime of attacking civilians has been committed in many cases.
- The Syrian regime has not only violated international humanitarian law and customary law, but has also breached a number of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 2139, resolution 2042 on the release of detainees, and resolution 2254, all without any accountability.
- We could find no record of any warnings being issued by the Syrian regime or Russian forces prior to any attack as required under international humanitarian law. This has been the case since the beginning of the popular uprising for freedom, providing another blatant demonstration of these forces' total disregard for the lives of civilians in Syria.
- The magnitude and frequency of the violations, the disproportionate use of military force, the indiscriminate manner of the bombing, and the coordinated approach of these attacks lead to the inescapable conclusion that these acts are wholly deliberate and based on high-level orders, and as such constitute a part of state policy.
- The indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment carried out by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces is considered to be a clear violation of international humanitarian law, with such indiscriminate killings amounting to war crimes.

- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has violated international humanitarian law, causing the death of many civilians, as well as damage to vital civilian facilities.
- All Armed Opposition factions/SNA have violated UN Security Council Resolution 2139 through carrying out attacks that are considered to violate customary international humanitarian law, causing civilian casualties or accidental injuries.
- All the attacks documented in this report, particularly bombings, have caused massive collateral damage involving loss of lives, injuries, or significant damage to civilian objects. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.
- The use of explosive munitions to target densely populated areas reflects a criminal and wholly deliberate mindset, with the perpetrators clearly intending to inflict the greatest possible number of deaths, which is a clear contravention of international human rights law and a flagrant violation of the Geneva IV Convention (arts. 27, 31, 32).

Recommendations

UN Security Council

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

International Community

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

UN Human Rights Office

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

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

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

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

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

The United Nations Special Envoy for Syria

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

Syrian regime

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

Russian regime

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

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

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

All Armed Opposition factions/SNA

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

Humanitarian Organizations

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

Acknowledgment

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