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The Syrian Regime Arrests 19 Refugees Forcibly Deported from Lebanon



Press release: (Download the full report below)

The Hague – The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) revealed in its latest monthly report released today that no fewer than 214 cases of arbitrary arrests were documented in August 2024, with those detained including 13 children and seven women. The group also noted that the Syrian regime has arrested 19 refugees who were forcibly deported from Lebanon.

The 21-page report notes that, given the staggering rates of continuing arbitrary arrests, the number of Syrian citizens classified as missing has skyrocketed, so much so that this can be called a phenomenon in itself. Indeed, Syria is now one of the worst countries worldwide in terms of the numbers of ‘disappeared’ citizens. The report adds that the Syrian regime surpasses many of the world’s other authoritarian regimes by virtue of having absolute hegemony over the legislative and judicial branches of government. The regime has wielded this hegemony to promulgate a multitude of laws and decrees that violate international human rights law, as well as the principles of law and the parameters of arrests and interrogation established in domestic legislation and the current Constitution of 2012. A part of this process, the report stresses, is legitimizing the crime of torture. Syrian law contains several texts that outlaw torture, including Article 53 of the current Syrian constitution which bans arbitrary arrest and torture and Article 391 of the Public Penal Code, which provides that anyone who uses coercion during interrogation shall receive a timed prison sentence ranging from three months to three years, as well as wholly prohibiting torture. Despite these texts, however, other legal texts, including Law No. 16 of 2022 on Criminalizing Torture, explicitly contradict the aforementioned legal articles, and legitimize impunity for torturers.

The report summarizes the arbitrary arrests/detentions and the releases of detainees from various detention centers documented as having been carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in August 2024. The report does not, however, include abductions carried out by unidentified parties. Another exception made by SNHR is of individuals detained for committing criminal offenses, such as murder, theft, narcotics-related crimes, and other crimes that have no political nature or are unrelated to the armed conflict, dissident activism, or freedom of opinion and expression. The report also touches upon the laws and decrees promulgated by the parties to the conflict in relation to issues of arrest and enforced disappearance in the period covered. In much of its reportage, the report incorporates a descriptive and analytical methodology.

The report documents no fewer than 214 cases of arbitrary arrest/detention in August 2024, with those detained including 13 children and seven women (adult females). Of these, 173 have subsequently been classified as enforced disappearances. Syrian regime forces were responsible for 113 of the 214 cases, including of three children and one woman, while all armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA) were responsible for 46 cases, with those arrested including six children and five women. Additionally, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were responsible for 37 cases, including of four children and one woman, while Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) were responsible for 18 cases.

The report also shows the distribution of August's cases across Syria's governorates. Analysis of the data shows that Aleppo governorate saw the highest number of arbitrary arrests/detentions, followed by Rural Damascus governorate, then in descending order, Deir Ez-Zour, Damascus, Homs, Hama and Idlib, and Daraa. The report additionally compares the number of arbitrary arrests/detentions carried out by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria with the numbers of releases of detainees from the various forces' detention centers documented in August 2024. In this regard, the report stresses that the number of arbitrary arrests far surpasses the number of releases from detention centers, with the number of releases equaling approximately 30 percent of all the detentions documented; this confirms again that at least two or three times as many people are detained as are released, primarily by the Syrian regime, which indicates that these arrest and detention practices are standard policy in comparison to the extremely limited numbers of people released by all parties to the conflict, but mainly from regime detention centers.

The report further notes that Syrian regime forces carried out more arrests/detentions of refugees who had been forcibly repatriated from Lebanon. These arrests, which took place at the al-Masna Border Crossing on the Syrian-Lebanese border, were carried out after the Lebanese army had carried out raid and arrest campaigns targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon who were then transferred to the border for deportation. Most of those arrested at the border by Syrian regime forces were taken to security and military detention centers in the governorates of Homs and Damascus. Moreover, the report notes that regime forces carried out widespread arrests/detentions of civilians in the governorates of Rural Damascus, Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo on the pretext of the detainees failing to join the regime's military or reserve forces as part of its mandatory military service policy. These arrests were carried out during raids or mass arrests at checkpoints, and even targeted individuals who had previously agreed to settle their security status with the regime in the areas that saw settlement agreements. Most of these arrests were carried out by the security branches for the purpose of extorting ransom money from the family. There were also a number of arrests/detentions by regime forces targeting civilians trying to return from areas under the control of armed opposition factions and the HTS to their original residences in regime-held areas, as well as several arrests/detentions by regime forces targeting citizens, including children, in the governorates of Daraa, Deir Ez-Zour, and Aleppo. Most of these arrests were carried out as part of raids and mass arrests, as well as at checkpoints.

On a related note, the report stresses that, through these arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances carried out in August, the Syrian regime continues to violate the orders of the Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued on November 16, 2023, on requesting provisional measures in the case brought by Canada and the Netherlands against the Syrian regime on the application of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Meanwhile, the report notes, the SDF also continued enforcing the group's policies of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in August 2024. In pursuit of these policies, SDF personnel continued carrying out campaigns of mass raids and detentions, targeting civilians on the pretext of fighting ISIS, with some of these arrest campaigns backed by US-led Coalition helicopters. We also documented arrests/detentions of civilians over accusations of working with the SNA. Moreover, we documented more arrests/detention of civilians for forced conscription, with these detainees taken to SDF military training and recruitment camps, which are concentrated in SDF-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate. Additionally, the report documented a number of arrests targeting individuals accused of being affiliated with the Arab tribes' forces. Those arrests were concentrated in Deir Ez-Zour governorate. The SDF also continued abducting children with the objective of conscripting them for military training, with these children being sent to military training camps. The parents and families of these conscripted children are not allowed to contact them, while the SDF refuses to disclose their fate.

As the report further reveals, HTS detained more civilians in August 2024. These arrests, which were concentrated in Idlib governorate and some areas of rural Aleppo governorate under the group's control, targeted media activists, political activists, and local dignitaries. Most of these arrests were carried out in connection with the detainees expressing opinions critical of HTS's management of areas under its control. These detentions are routinely and arbitrarily carried out in the form of raids in which HTS members storm their victims' homes, often breaking down the doors, or abducting their victims in the street or while they're passing through temporary checkpoints. We also documented arrests/detentions mostly carried out as part of raids and mass arrests, or at checkpoints in Idlib governorate that targeted individuals over their participation in the recent anti-HTS protests in the governorate. Most of these arrests were concentrated in Ariha city.

Furthermore, the report states, armed opposition factions/SNA continued carrying out arbitrary arrests/detentions and kidnappings in August 2024, including of women. Most of these detentions were conducted on a mass scale, targeting individuals coming from areas controlled by the Syrian regime or the SDF. In addition, we documented detentions that exhibited an ethnic character, with these incidents concentrated in areas under the control of the armed opposition factions/SNA in Aleppo governorate. Most of these arrests occurred without judicial authorization and without the participation of the police force, which is the sole legitimate administrative authority responsible for arrests and detentions through the judiciary, as well as being carried out without any clear charges being presented against those being detained. Furthermore, we documented raids and arrests by SNA personnel targeting civilians accused of working with the SDF, with these arrests being concentrated in some of the villages which are administratively part of Afrin city in Aleppo governorate. We also recorded arrests/detentions by SNA personnel of civilians returning to their houses in SNA-held areas, with these arrests being concentrated in Afrin city. In addition, the report recorded arrests targeting media workers who have been arrested without any clear charges being brought against them. Most of these arrests were concentrated in eastern rural Aleppo governorate. Furthermore, we documented arrests targeting a number of individuals who were travelling from regime-held areas to the Syrian-Turkish borders to cross irregularly into Türkiye. These arrests were concentrated in Afrin city.

On the subject of releases, the report documents the release of 19 individuals by Syrian regime forces, including three children and one woman. One of the releases was in connection with the amnesty decree promulgated by the Syrian regime on April 30, 2022 (Decree No. 7 of 2022). The detainee in question was released from the government complex in Daraa city. In Damascus governorate, we documented the regime's release of one individual originally from Daraa governorate. The detainee in question was released after serving the full term of their arbitrary sentence. As such, that release was not related to any of the amnesty decrees that have been promulgated to date, with the detainee having been imprisoned for about three years in regime detention centers. The report also documented the release of 17 individuals, including three children and one woman, all of whom had been held for periods ranging from a few days to a few months without trial and without appearing before a court. Most of these detainees came from the governorates of Rural Damascus, Aleppo, and Daraa, with the majority having spent the duration of their detention in regime security branches.

As the report further reveals, 24 individuals, including one child, were released from SDF detention centers. Fourteen of these, including one child, were released after being detained for periods ranging from a few days to four months. Most of those released came originally from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, and Aleppo. Meanwhile, the SDF released 10 individuals in connection with Amnesty Act No. 10 of 2024, promulgated by the group on July 17, 2024, which pardons crimes committed by Syrian nationals prior to that date. Those released had been detained for periods ranging from three months to one year, with most of them hailing originally from the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Hasaka.

The report also documents HTS' release of 11 individuals from its detention centers in Idlib governorate, with the released detainees having been detained for periods ranging from a few days to one year, without any clear charges being brought against them. Elsewhere, all armed opposition factions/SNA released 13 individuals, including two children and three women, after detaining them for periods ranging from a few days to a few months without bringing any clear charges against them or putting them on trial. Most were released only after their families had been extorted into paying sums of money to secure their release.

As the report further notes, SNHR's data is classified as a reputable principal source of information by many UN bodies, being used in numerous statements and resolutions. The most recent of these was a draft resolution on the human rights situation in Syria (A/C.3/78/L.43), passed by a vote on Wednesday, November 15, 2023, which condemned the Syrian regime's continuation of gross, systematic, and widespread violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. This latest resolution also acknowledged that the number of detainees in Syria continues to rise steadily, already exceeding 135,000. Relatedly, the resolution holds the regime responsible for the systematic use of enforced disappearance, which, it notes, constitutes a crime against humanity.

The report notes that the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons is one of the most crucial human rights issues in Syria which there has been no progress in resolving despite its inclusion in several UN Security Council resolutions, as well as in UN General Assembly resolutions, in Kofi Annan's plan, in Security Council resolution 2254 of December 2015, and finally in the statement on cessation of hostilities issued in February 2016.

The report stresses that the Syrian regime has not fulfilled any of its obligations in any of the international treaties and conventions it has ratified, most particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It has also violated several articles of the Syrian Constitution itself, with thousands of detainees imprisoned without any arrest warrant for many years, without charges, and prevented from appointing a lawyer and from receiving family visits. Approximately 68 percent of all detentions documented have subsequently been categorized as enforced disappearance cases.

The report further notes that, in light of the continuing high rates of arbitrary arrests, torture, and enforced disappearance at the hands of Syrian regime forces, we see no indicator of any willingness on the Syrian regime's part to end torture or comply with the ICJ's order for provisional measures since its issuance on November 16, 2023. Even worse, the regime continues to imprison 136,528 arbitrarily arrested detainees/forcibly disappeared persons in its detention centers, all of whom are still being subjected to torture, which further confirms that the Syrian regime explicitly continues to contravene the Convention against Torture, which the regime ratified in 2004, and continues to fail to comply with the Convention.

The report additionally notes that the other parties (Syrian Democratic Forces, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, and all Armed Opposition factions/Syrian National Army are also all obliged to implement the provisions of international human rights law, and that they too have committed widespread violations through arrests and enforced disappearances.

In the report, SNHR again calls on the UN Security Council to follow through with the implementation of UN Security Resolution 2042, Resolution 2043, and Resolution 2139.

The report stresses that the UN must form an impartial special committee to monitor cases of arbitrary arrest and reveal the fate of the 112,000 missing persons in Syria, 85 percent of whom are detained by the Syrian regime. The report adds that pressure should be applied on all parties to immediately reveal their detention records in accordance with a timetable, and to immediately make detainees' whereabouts public, and allow humanitarian organizations and the International Committee of Red Cross to have direct access to them.

Lastly, the report emphasizes that children and women should immediately be released from captivity, and that families and friends of detainees or wanted individuals should not be detained as prisoners of war, as well as providing a number of additional recommendations.