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World Report 2024



Syria

Events of 2023

A destroyed tent can be seen as a result of a missile attack targeted a camp for displaced people on the outskirts of Idlib city by the Syrian government.

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In 2023, Syrians endured severe abuses and hardship due to the ongoing conflict, worsened economic conditions, and general insecurity. The United Nations estimated that, for the first time since the start of the conflict, Syrians [in every sub-district of the country](#) experienced some degree of “humanitarian stress.” Although conditions remain unsafe, refugee-hosting countries Türkiye and Lebanon unlawfully deported thousands of Syrians back to Syria.

February’s devastating earthquakes worsened already dire conditions, especially in hard-hit rebel-held areas of the northwest, where millions were left without access to critical search-and-rescue reinforcements or lifesaving aid for over a week. Despite calls for a nationwide ceasefire, hostilities persisted, resulting in civilian casualties and displacement. Arab states readmitted Syria to the Arab League without demanding accountability or reform.

In positive news for accountability, Canada and the Netherlands filed a joint case at the International Court of Justice against Syria over widespread and systematic torture. Individual accountability efforts continued with war crimes convictions in European courts, and in June, the UN established a new mechanism to address the fate of the over 100,000 missing persons in Syria.

Government-Held Areas (Central, West, and Southern Syria)

Syrian security forces and government-affiliated militias [continued to arbitrarily detain](#), disappear, and mistreat people across the country. Authorities also continued to [unlawfully confiscate property](#) and restrict access to areas of origin for returning Syrians.

Despite passing a [law](#) in March 2022 criminalizing torture, torture and ill-treatment in government facilities continued and deaths in detention were documented, according to a [July 2023 UN Commission of Inquiry \(COI\) report](#). In a [report issued in August](#), the commission also documented arbitrary arrests and detention through the application of a draconian cybercrimes law introduced in April 2022.

In late August, initially prompted by worsening economic conditions, anti-government protests spread across the southern Druze-majority province of Sweida and, to a more limited extent, in the former opposition-controlled neighboring province of Daraa. They were the largest protests to take place in government-controlled Syria since 2011, but unlike in 2011, the government had, at the time of writing, refrained from using lethal force against the protesters.

In early September, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad [abolished](#) the notorious military field courts, where thousands of people are thought to have been sentenced to death without due process, and referred all pending cases to the military judiciary. Human rights advocates have long called for the dissolution of these courts, but there are concerns that the decision may lead to the erasure of court records and other evidence related to enforced disappearances, hampering efforts of family members to learn the fate of missing loved ones.

Northwest Syria

Opposition-held northwest Syria is home to more than 4.1 million civilians, at least half of whom have been displaced at least once since the start of the conflict. Civilians in these areas are effectively trapped, lacking resources to relocate, unable to seek asylum in Türkiye, and fearing persecution if they attempt to relocate to government-held areas.

In Idlib and western Aleppo, [indiscriminate attacks by Syrian-Russian military forces](#) on civilians and critical civilian infrastructure [persisted](#) in 2023.

According to the [UN COI's](#) August report, Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant anti-government armed group in Idlib, continued to raid and arbitrarily detain activists, journalists, and other civilians voicing critical opinions. Another COI report published in July [documented](#) new cases of torture and ill-treatment in detention.

Following credible independent reports that a US military strike killed a civilian on May 3, 2023, in Idlib, Human Rights Watch and 20 other organizations [called on](#) the US to ensure a robust investigation, commit to transparency, make amends, and ensure accountability.

Turkish-Occupied Territories of Northern Syria

In the Turkish-occupied territories of northern Syria, various factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Military Police, a force established by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) to curb faction abuses, subjected scores of people to multiple abuses with impunity. Abuses included arbitrary arrest and detention, forcible disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, sexual violence, and unfair military trials. In 2023, the US returned Türkiye to its [list](#) of countries implicated in the use of child soldiers in response to its support to factions of the Syrian National Army accused of child recruitment.

SNA factions [continued to violate](#) civilians' housing, land, and property rights, including by forcefully seizing homes, lands, and businesses. And hundreds of thousands of Syrians who fled their homes during and after Türkiye's successive military operations in the region remain displaced and dispossessed.

Northeast Syria

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-backed Kurdish-led armed group that controls much of northeast Syria, continued to arbitrarily detain civilians, including journalists, according to an [August 2023 UN COI report](#) that also documented deaths in detention in al-Hasakeh and Raqqa central prisons.

A [2023 UN report](#) on children and armed conflict concluded that child recruitment had increased in Syria, with cases in the SDF-controlled areas representing more than half of those documented.

As of mid-November, the SDF and Asayish regional security forces continued to arbitrarily detain at least 60,000 suspected members of Islamic State (ISIS) and family members from Syria and nearly 60 other countries. Detention conditions remained life-threatening, degrading, and inhumane. Most detainees are children. At least 39 countries had repatriated or facilitated the returns of about 9,000 of their citizens, including at least 4,000 in 2023 alone. Most repatriations were to neighboring Iraq.

Throughout the year, [drone strikes by Turkish forces](#) and hostilities between Turkish-backed local armed groups and the SDF led to civilian deaths and injuries.

A [water dispute](#) between Türkiye and the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the civilian wing of the SDF, continued to jeopardize the right to water of nearly 1 million people in al-Hasakeh city and its surroundings.

Clashes between the SDF and its Arab-led Deir-al-Zour Military Council began in late August and heavily impacted civilians, with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [documenting](#) the killings of at least 23 civilians and dozens of arrests by the SDF of people for their alleged involvement in the hostilities.

Economic Crisis and Obstacles to Humanitarian Aid

By mid-2023, over 90 percent of Syrians lived below the [poverty line](#), at least [12 million](#)—more than half the population—could not access or afford enough quality food, and at least 15 million required some form of humanitarian aid to survive. More than 600,000 children were chronically malnourished. More than 12 years of war have decimated Syria's civilian infrastructure and services, severely affecting access to shelter, health care, electricity, education, public transportation, water, and sanitation. According to the [UN COI](#), women and children with chronic conditions and disabilities, including people with untreated injuries dating back to 2019, are particularly harmed by a lack of access to adequate health care in internment camps in northeast Syria. People across the country faced hardship due to severe fuel shortages and rising food prices. According to OCHA, many female-headed households, older people, people with disabilities, and children are disproportionately [affected](#) by the compounding drivers of the crisis in Syria.

The Syrian government continued to impose severe restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid in the government-held areas of Syria and elsewhere in the country and to divert aid to punish those who express dissent. A [lack of sufficient safeguards](#) in procurement practices by UN agencies providing aid in Syria has resulted in a serious risk of financing abusive entities.

In July, the UN Security Council failed to renew the cross-border aid mechanism for Syria when [Russia vetoed a resolution](#) on its continuation, closing a nine-year-old avenue for delivering

humanitarian assistance to non-government-controlled parts of northwest Syria without the Syrian government's consent. In late September, after [negotiations](#) involving UN agencies, the Syrian government, and HTS, the dominant armed group in Idlib, [an agreement was reached](#). This agreement allowed for the resumption of aid deliveries through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for six months and extended the use of Bab al-Salam and Al-Ra'ee border crossings for another three months. The Syrian government granted UN agencies permission to use these two border crossings a week after a series of devastating earthquakes struck northern Syria, causing severe disruptions in the UN-led aid delivery system through Bab al Hawa. This disruption left millions in rebel-held areas [without access to critical lifesaving aid](#) precisely when they needed it the most.

While the Syrian government's [discriminatory diversion of humanitarian aid](#) remains the biggest obstacle to the equitable delivery of assistance to many parts of Syria, [complex and wide-ranging sanctions](#) imposed by the US, UK, EU, and others on the Syrian government, officials, and related entities have also at times hampered the principled and impartial delivery of humanitarian aid to communities in need and the rehabilitation of critical infrastructure, such as healthcare and sanitation facilities.

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

Displacement remains one of the most dire and protracted consequences of the war. Since the start of the armed conflict in 2011, 12.3 million have been forced to flee the country, according to OCHA, with 6.7 million currently internally displaced across the country. In northeast Syria, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people live in overstretched and under-resourced camps and temporary shelters, some of which [do not receive sustained or sufficient aid](#).

Against a backdrop of anti-refugee sentiment, Türkiye, which hosts nearly [3.3 million refugees](#), deported thousands of Syrians to northern Syria in 2023. Turkish border guards [indiscriminately shot](#) at Syrian civilians on the border with Syria as well as tortured and used excessive force against asylum seekers and migrants trying to cross into Türkiye.

Between April and May, Lebanese Armed Forces [summarily deported thousands](#) of Syrians, including unaccompanied children, back to Syria. Lebanon hosts more than an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees who fled since 2011, making it the country with the [highest population of refugees per capita](#) in the world.

International Accountability and Justice Efforts

In April, judges in France ordered the trial of three senior Syrian security officials accused of complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity. In May, France's Court of Cassation [concluded](#) that the necessary conditions were met for the French judicial system to take up cases involving Syrian nationals accused of serious crimes committed in Syria. In 2023, other countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, pursued similar cases under their universal jurisdiction laws.

In June, Canada and the Netherlands jointly initiated proceedings against Syria at the International Court of Justice for alleged violations of the Convention against Torture. The court held hearings in October on their request for provisional measures, and on November 16, it [issued its order](#), directing the Syrian government to take all measures within its power to prevent acts of torture and other abuses.

The International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), an investigative body established by the UN General Assembly in December 2016, continued to gather and preserve evidence for future criminal prosecutions.

The Investigation and Identification Team of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague continued to investigate responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict. The team [has confirmed that](#) Syrian government forces used chemical weapons on multiple occasions.

Women's and Girls' Rights

A June UN COI [report](#) highlighted the severe impact of the long-running conflict on women and girls, including challenges for female-headed households, disrupted healthcare access, rising forced marriages, difficulties in securing housing and property rights, and pervasive gender-based violence.

In government-held areas, women face ongoing discrimination in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance under the Personal Status Law. This law denies financial support to women who refuse to live with their husbands without a “valid excuse” or work without their husband’s consent, despite 2019 amendments. Although article 548 of the penal code was repealed in 2020, reducing sentences for harming female relatives during alleged “illicit” sexual acts, other provisions still allow reduced sentences for violence against women. Additionally, the penal code unfairly penalizes women for adultery, imposing harsher sentences than men.

Disability Rights

Children and adults with disabilities in Syria face particular challenges to access basic services and have their rights met. According to the Humanitarian Needs Assessment, households with members with disabilities reported spending 50 percent more on health care and medical expenses compared to other households. [As of December 2022, children with disabilities are “particularly likely](#) to be deprived of their education,” and over [60 percent](#) of school-age children with intellectual or physical disabilities have never attended school or any other form of education.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Syrian state and non-state actors have [subjected](#) men, boys, transgender women, and nonbinary people to sexual violence during the Syrian conflict, resulting in severe physical and mental health consequences. Under article 520 of the penal code, “unnatural sexual intercourse” is punishable by up to three years in prison.

Key International Actors

The UN-led peace process, including the constitutional committee, made no visible progress in 2023. Russia, Türkiye, the United States, and Iran continued to provide military and financial support to warring factions.

Israel has [conducted aerial strikes](#) in Syria, including on military targets of the Syrian government’s allies Iran and Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite political party and armed group. Such strikes [targeted both Aleppo and Damascus airports](#) in 2023, at times forcing their temporary closure.

Individuals credibly implicated in atrocity crimes, entities within or affiliated to the Syrian government, and ISIS continue to be [under sanctions](#) by the US, European Union, and the United Kingdom.