

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1027
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Syrian Network for Human Rights
Titel:	At least 459 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in April 2019. Including 272 Cases of Enforced Disappearance
Udgivet:	2. maj 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. juni 2019

At least 459 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in April 2019

Including 272 Cases of Enforced Disappearance



SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Thursday, May 2, 2019

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

Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances have been amongst the most widespread violations since the early days of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011. These are considered to be the most common and pervasive regime violations against Syrian citizens, affecting hundreds of thousands of Syrians. These violations are carried out by the Syrian security services, as well as their affiliated militias, as part of a deliberate and planned strategy, often in a sweeping indiscriminate manner, in order to instill terror and fear into the largest possible number of Syrian people. Approximately eight months after the start of the popular uprising, other parties began to emerge in Syria, also carrying out arrests and kidnappings. The process of documenting the cases of detention and cataloguing whether detainees are released or join the ranks of the forcibly disappeared has been one of the greatest challenges and difficulties faced by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, as is clarified in our methodology¹.

Since 2011, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has created complex electronic programs to archive and categorize the detainees' data, which the team collects and verifies; this enables us to catalogue the detainees according to gender, the location where each was arrested, the governorate from which each detainee originally came, and the party responsible for their arrest. These programs also enable us to cross-index cases and make comparisons between these parties, as well as identifying the governorates from which the largest proportion of residents have been arrested and disappeared.

¹ "Syrian Network for Human Rights Methodology", Syrian Network for Human Rights, <http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/SNHR_Methodology_en.pdf>



Given the importance and sensitivity surrounding the violation of arrest of Syrian citizens, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has since its establishment never stopped issuing daily news of arrest incidents, or publishing monthly reports documenting the arrests, enforced disappearances and releases that took place in the preceding month, in addition to issuing an annual report, as well as publishing dozens of other reports on different detention centers run by various parties to the conflict, and additional special reports concerning detainees. Also, the SNHR periodically submits special forms to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the Special Rapporteur on the question of torture.

Most of the arrests in Syria are carried out without any judicial warrant while the victims are passing through regime checkpoints or during raids, with the security forces of the regime's four main intelligence services often responsible for extra-judicial detentions. Every detainee is tortured from the very first moment of his or her arrest and denied any opportunity to contact his or her family or to have access to a lawyer. The authorities also flatly deny the arbitrary arrests they have carried out and most of the detainees are subsequently forcibly disappeared.

The Syrian regime is responsible for no fewer than 87 percent of all the arbitrary arrests that we have documented, and is the first and most prominent of all the parties to the conflict in systematically perpetrating this violation. In most cases, victims' families are unable to accurately identify the body responsible for making the arrest, given the vast array of forces affiliated with the Syrian regime (Iranian militias, the Lebanese group Hezbollah, and others), in addition to the four main regime security agencies and their many branches, all of which are authorized to arrest and torture detainees, and to commit the crimes of enforced disappearance.

The issue of detainees and 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 resolutions of the UN Security Council, as well as in UN General Assembly resolutions, in Kofi Annan's plan, and finally in the statement of cessation of hostilities issued in February 2016, which states that "all parties undertake to work for an early release of any arbitrary detained persons, particularly women and children", and in Security Council resolution 2254 of December 2015, article 12, which states that all detainees, especially women and children, must be released immediately. Despite all these resolutions and other official statements, no progress has been made on the issue of securing the release of detainees in any of the rounds of negotiations sponsored by international parties regarding the conflict in Syria.



In light of these considerations in regard to this particular issue, we therefore recommend:

- 1- Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, which are still ongoing, as detailed in this SNHR monthly report, must be ended immediately. The fates of all detainees must be revealed, and their families' right to visit them must also be ensured immediately.
- 2- All detainees imprisoned for merely exercising their political and civil rights must be released unconditionally. The use of women and children as prisoners of war must be stopped and they must all be released.
- 3- The independent international monitors of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which was established by the UN, and the International Committee of the Red Cross must be granted access to all official and unofficial detention centers without establishing any prior arrangements or any restrictions or conditions.
- 4- A UN committee should be formed to monitor and periodically assess the release of the detainees according to a timetable that must be presented by all the detaining parties, primarily the Syrian regime forces that are responsible for 87 percent of all detentions.
- 5- All rulings issued by the regime's field military courts and terrorism courts should be suspended or repealed, since they are non-compliant with domestic and international legislation, as well as failing to provide guarantees of a fair trial.

Methodology

This report outlines the record of arbitrary arrests by the parties to the conflict documented in April. In addition, it records the most notable raids and arrests at checkpoints that resulted in deprivation of freedom, as well as shedding light on the most notable individual cases and incidents of arbitrary arrest that the SNHR's team documented in April, as well as categorizing cases and incidents of arrest according to the location of the incident.

According to the SNHR's database, we can categorize cases of arrest according to the governorate in which the incident occurred, and according to the governorate from which the detainee originally came. In this report and in most of our reports, we categorize the record of arrests according to the place where the arrest took place, not according to the governorate from which the detainee originally came. It should also be noted that sometimes we categorize the cases of arrest according to the governorate from which the detainee originally came in order to show the magnitude of loss and violence suffered by the people of that governorate compared to other governorates, in which case we refer to this in the report.



The report also documents arbitrary arrests that subsequently turned into enforced disappearances. A number of criteria must be met before SNHR will classify a case as an enforced disappearance: the individual must have been detained for at least 20 days without his or her family being able to obtain any information from the relevant authorities about their status or location, with those responsible for the disappearance denying any knowledge of the individual's arrest or whereabouts.

The SNHR team implements strict standards in evaluating and assessing any incident of arbitrary arrest in order to avoid any faults in recording any incidents of detention, imprisonment, or deprivation of freedom in accordance with the international laws and the aforementioned set of principles on arbitrary arrest. The Detainee and Forcibly-Disappeared Department at SNHR records cases of arrest which departmental personnel collect from various sources, such as: victims' families, SNHR members in Syrian governorates, cooperating local activists, and former detainees, before diligently working to contact the families of the detainees and forcibly disappeared persons, as well as people close to them and people who survived detention, for the purpose of collecting as much information and data as possible, in light of the extraordinary and extremely complex challenges. We also record eyewitnesses' accounts and track cases of arrest to update these records regularly in order to determine the fate of a detainee, their place of detention, and the circumstances of their arrest. We have created on our website a special form [to document a detainee](#) to facilitate access and contact with victims' families.

The ongoing daily process of documenting detainees also comes with other additional challenges for SNHR, which has been documenting detainees' cases since 2011. One of the most notable challenges amongst these is the reluctance of victims' families to cooperate and reveal or provide details of any information on their family members' arrest, even confidentially, more especially if the arrested individual is female, due to a well-founded fear still prevalent in Syrian society that being discovered doing so would result in more torture and further danger for their loved ones and themselves. Instead, families try to negotiate with security forces which usually blackmail these families and demand cash payments, effectively ransoms, that can amount to thousands of dollars in some cases. Despite the fact that SNHR possesses lists detailing the cases of more than 127,000 detainees, including children and women, we can safely say that our estimate of the actual number of detainees exceeds 215,000.



The failure of the international community and of all the organs of the United Nations to apply pressure on the Syrian authorities to release even one individual (including those whose sentences are completed), even prisoners of conscience, has affirmed the conviction of many within Syrian society that it is useless to cooperate in the documentation process. Most of the releases achieved were part of exchange deals with the armed opposition. The detainee figures included in this report don't include prisoners with a criminal background, but do include cases of arrest that are based on the internal armed conflict, mainly due to opposition activity against the ruling authorities, as well as cases of detention to suppress freedom of opinion and expression.

II. April Outline

Syrian Regime forces in April continued with their campaigns of persecution and arrest, focusing primarily on civilians, former armed opposition fighters and their families in the areas that had signed settlement agreements with Syrian Regime forces. Our monitoring also confirmed that Syrian Regime forces arrested some of the previously forcibly displaced civilians as part of these settlement agreements who returned from north Syria to their hometowns. In addition, Syrian Regime forces in April arrested individuals who had returned from neighboring countries who should supposedly have been protected by the amnesty laws and reconciliation offers established by the Syrian regime.

Syrian Regime forces, throughout the month of April, continued with their policies of pursuing civilian members of the families of activists involved in the popular uprising for democracy and of the families of fighters of factions of the Armed Opposition in areas under their control, with SNHR documenting the Syrian Regime forces carrying out campaigns of raids and arrests that targeted entire families related to members of factions of the Armed Opposition. These arrests, which included women and children, were concentrated in the cities of Hama, Latakia, and Homs.

Syrian Regime forces also carried out raids and mass arrests targeting all segments of society aged between 18 and 42 years, with the aim of conscription and reserve military service in their forces.

We also monitored kidnappings for ransom carried out by Syrian Regime forces' security apparatuses, particularly by personnel of the Military Security forces and local militias. These abductions were concentrated in the major cities' centers, especially the cities of Hama, Latakia, and Aleppo.



In April, we recorded that Syrian Regime forces released 34 detainees from their detention centers between March 1 and March 28, most of whom had served their sentences. We also recorded that Syrian Regime forces released nine detainees on April 22, as part of a deal made with the "Free" National Army, which is a faction of the Armed Opposition.

Also in April, we recorded that Syrian Regime forces arrested dozens of civilians, mostly elderly people and women, while they were visiting governmental departments, particularly the Immigration and Passports Department in major cities' centers, doing so whilst these individuals were in the process of obtaining official documents. We recorded that a large number of them have become forcibly disappeared.

Meanwhile, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces continued enforcing their policies of arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance throughout the month of April, targeting political activists and members of civil society groups who oppose their ideological views. These arrests were concentrated in Hasaka governorate. Additionally, Syrian Democratic Forces also carried out mass arrests of Arab civilians in areas under their control. These arrests, which included entire families, were concentrated in Raqqa governorate.

The arrests carried out by Syrian Democratic Forces targeted IDPs residing in areas under their control, mainly the residents of refugee camps, with the Syrian Democratic Forces making various allegations against these individuals, such as suspected kinship relationships between them and members of ISIS or members of Armed Opposition factions. We recorded several incidents in which the Syrian Democratic Forces arrested many members of the same family.

In addition to these incidents, April also saw the arrests of members of civil society groups by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, whose members also continue to pursue and arrest armed opposition fighters belonging to factions affiliated with the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operation rooms, with these arrests being concentrated in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate and the northern suburbs of Hama governorate.

In April, we also recorded that Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested and prosecuted students and cadres from the 'Free' University of Aleppo.

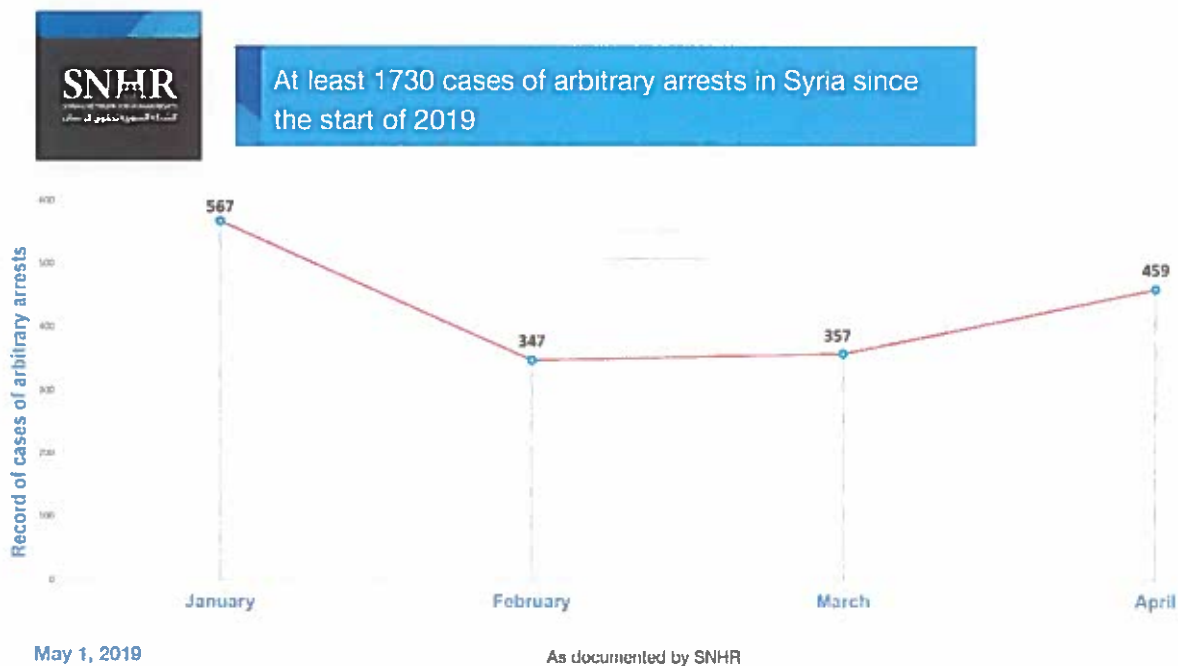


Factions of the Armed Opposition, meanwhile, continued making arrests in the territories under their control, which were concentrated in Aleppo governorate, particularly in the Afrin and al Bab areas, throughout the month of April. Most of these arrests occurred without judicial authorization and without the participation of the police force, which is the legitimate administrative authority responsible for arrests and detentions through the judiciary. Those responsible for these operations were specific factions who detained individuals without any clear charges. The aim of these arrests was to spread fear among the population in the areas under the influence of the faction controlling the area. We recorded several cases of arrests and kidnappings carried out in order to extort ransom money to secure the hostages' release.

III. Record of Cases of Arbitrary Arrests by the Parties to the Conflict

A. Record of cases of arbitrary arrests since the start of 2019:

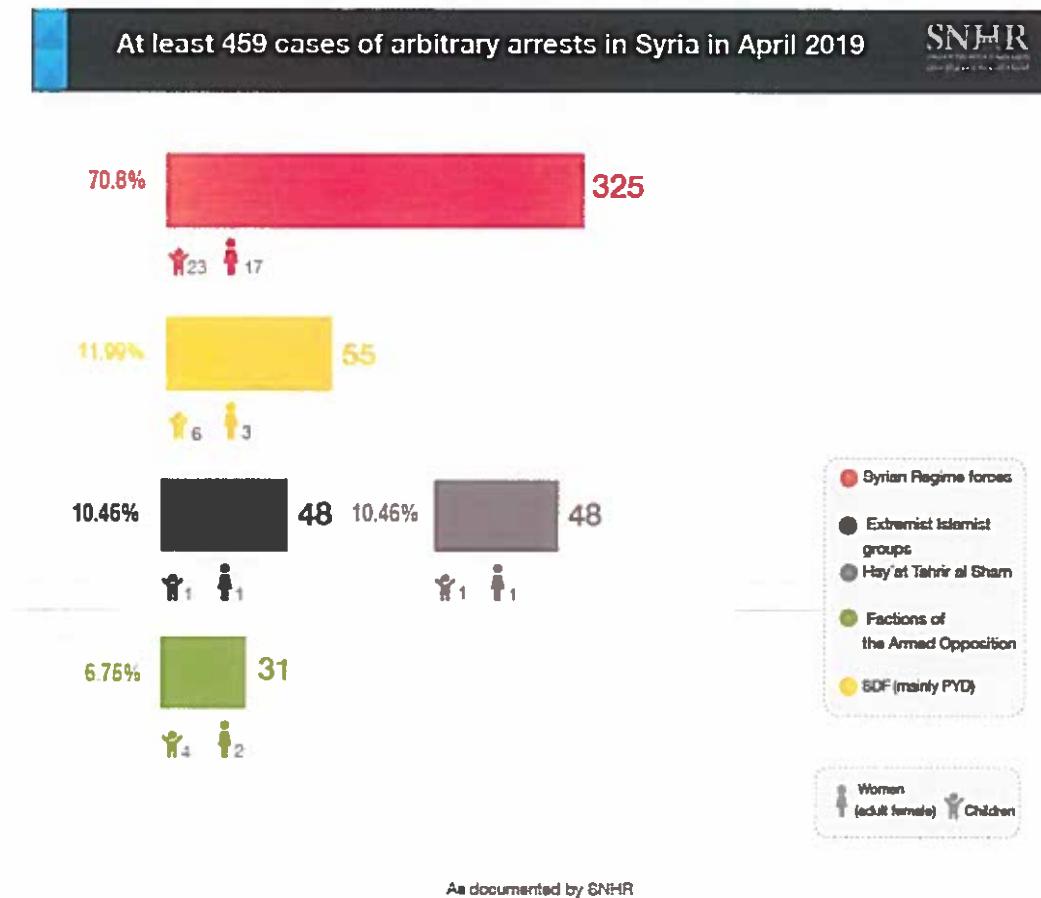
SNHR documented 1,730 cases of arbitrary arrests at the hands of the main perpetrator parties in Syria since the start of 2019 up to May 2019, distributed as follows:



B. Record of cases of arbitrary arrests in April:

SNHR documented at least 459 cases of arbitrary arrests in April 2019, including 34 children and 23 women (adult female), at the hands of the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria, including 272 which have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

These arrests were distributed according to the main perpetrator parties responsible, as follows:



A. Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):

325 individuals, including 23 children, and 17 women. 211 of these have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

B. Extremist Islamist groups:

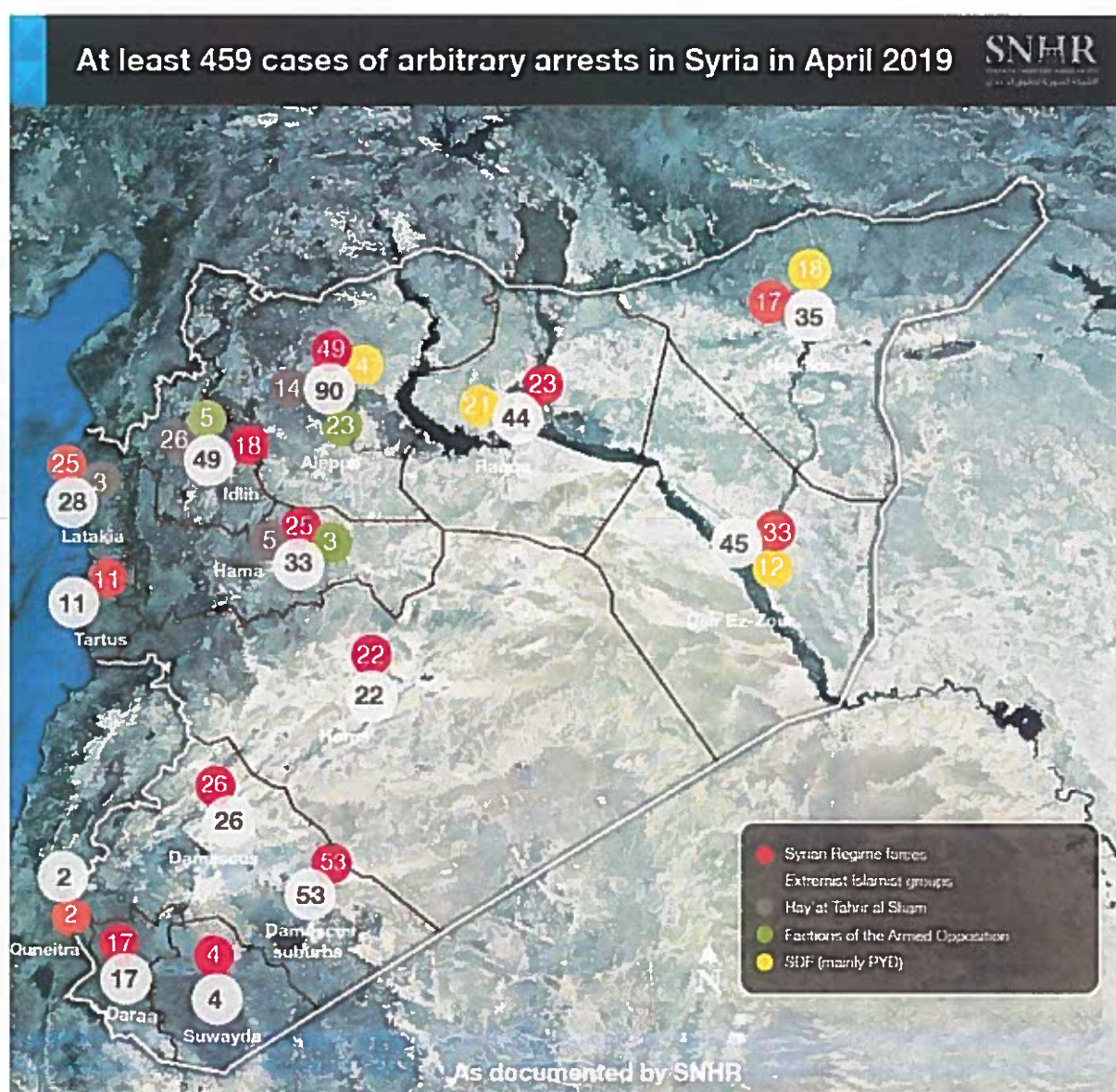
- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of factions of the Armed Opposition): 48 individuals, including one child and one woman. 21 of these have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.



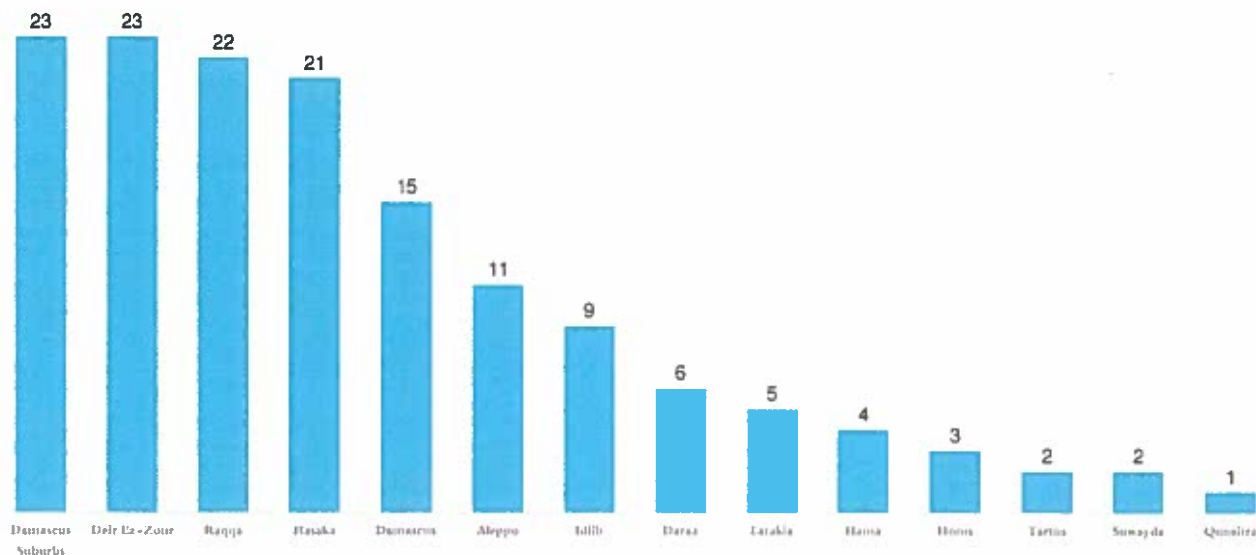
C. Factions of the Armed Opposition: 31 individuals, including four children and two women. 11 of these have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

D. Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party): 55 individuals, including six children and three women. 29 of these have subsequently been categorized as cases of enforced disappearance.

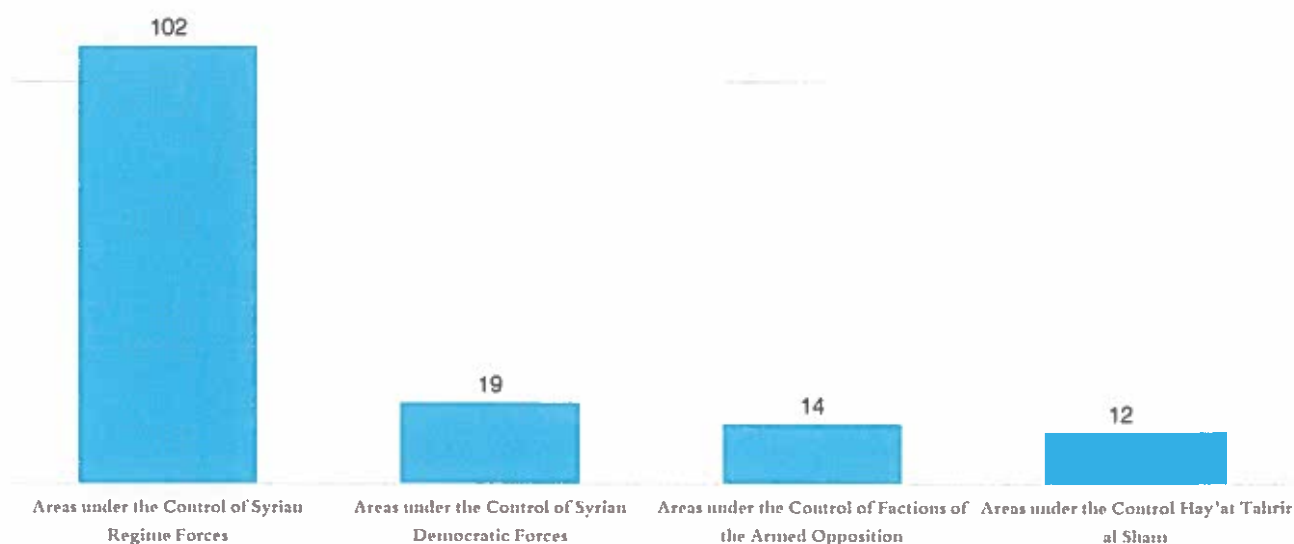
The following map shows the distribution of cases of arbitrary arrests documented in April across all the Syrian governorates by the main perpetrator parties:



We also documented at least 147 raids and checkpoints in April, which resulted in deprivation of freedom. These were distributed across all governorates as follows:



Record of raids and checkpoints, distributed according to the responsible party as follows:



IV. Most Notable Cases and Incidents of Arbitrary Arrest in April:

A. Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):

Most notable incidents:

On Thursday, April 4, 2019, Syrian Regime forces launched a campaign of raids and arrests in al Quneitra city. Three civilians, who had previously signed settlements, were documented as being arrested, and taken to an undisclosed location.

On Tuesday, April 9, 2019, Syrian Regime forces launched a campaign of raids and arrests in Jieroud city, northwest of Damascus Suburbs governorate. Nine civilians were documented as being arrested and taken to an undisclosed location.

Most notable cases:

Hamza al Nasr and Mohammad Farid al Nasr, from Dael city in Daraa governorate's northern suburbs, were arrested on Thursday, April 18, 2019, by Syrian Regime forces as they were passing through a regime checkpoint in Homs city while they were heading from Dael city to Idlib governorate; both were among those who had previously signed settlements. Their fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to their family.

Mohammad Nawaf al Farraj and his son, Osama, from Inkhel city in Daraa governorate's northern suburbs, were arrested by Syrian Regime forces on Wednesday, April 10, 2019, following a raid on their house in Inkhel city. Mohammad Nawaf was released on Saturday, April 13, 2019, critically ill. The fate of his son, Osama, remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to their family.

Qutaiba Mohammad Shbat, from al Sheikh MAskin city in Daraa governorate's northern suburbs, was arrested on Monday, April 8, 2019, following a raid on his house in al Sheikh MAskin city; he was among those who had previously signed settlements. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.



B. Extremist Islamist groups

- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of factions of the Armed Opposition):

Most notable cases

Mohammad Waqqas, a member of the political body in Idlib city, an activist in the popular uprising, and a member of Sarmada city's Coordination body, from Sarmada city in Idlib governorate's northern suburbs, was arrested on Monday, April 1, 2019, by gunmen of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in the middle of Sarmada city, before being released the next day, Tuesday, April 2, 2019.



Omar Mohammad al Akhras, a 55-year-old activist in the popular uprising from Einjara village in Aleppo governorate's western suburbs, was arrested on Sunday, April 7, 2019, by gunmen of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham as he was passing through one of their checkpoints near Afrin city in Aleppo governorate's northern suburbs; he was released the next day, Monday, April 8, 2019.



Mohammad Abdul Wahhab Joulaq, a laboratory technician from Kafrouma village in Idlib governorate's southern suburbs, works at Ma'aret al Numan Central Hospital in Ma'aret al Numan city in Idlib governorate's southern suburbs. He was arrested on Saturday, April 6, 2019 by gunmen of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham as he was passing through one of their checkpoints at the western entrance to Ma'aret al Numan city while he was heading to his workplace in the city. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.



Razzouq Aboud, aged 60, from Sarmin city in Idlib governorate's northern suburbs, was arrested by gunmen of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham on Saturday, April 22, 2019, in a raid on his house in Sarmin city. His fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to his family.



On Saturday, April 20, 2019, gunmen of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham arrested three college students studying at Idlib University, Mohammad Sallal, Moutaz al Othman and Mohammad al Hussein, respectively majoring in English Language, Laboratory Institute and Business Management, all from al Ghadafa village in Idlib governorate's eastern suburbs. They were arrested as they were passing through one of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's checkpoints at the eastern entrance to Idlib city. Their fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to their families.

C. Factions of the Armed Opposition

Most notable incidents:

On Thursday, April 11, 2019, members affiliated with factions of the Armed Opposition launched a campaign of raids and arrests in Adamo village in Rajo district of Afrin city in Aleppo governorate's northern suburbs. Nine civilians were documented as being arrested, and taken to an undisclosed location.

On Wednesday, April 10, 2019, members affiliated with factions of the Armed Opposition launched a campaign of raids and arrests in Deir Souran village in Sheran district of Afrin city in Aleppo governorate's northern suburbs. Six civilians were documented as being arrested, and taken to an undisclosed location.

Most notable cases:

Brothers Shawwakh, Hussam and Ali al Hasan were arrested by elements affiliated with factions of the Armed Opposition during a raid on their home in Afrin city in Aleppo governorate's northern suburbs on Monday, April 8, 2019. Their fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to their family.



D. Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic forces

Most notable incidents:

On Monday, April 8, 2019, Syrian Democratic Forces arrested three civilians from the same family in a raid on their home in Abu Hardoub village in Deir Ez-Zour governorate's eastern suburbs and took them to an undisclosed location.

On Monday, April 15, 2019, Syrian Democratic Forces launched a campaign of raids and arrests on Theyban town in Deir Ez-Zour governorate's eastern suburbs. Nine civilians, including three brothers, were documented as being arrested, and were taken to an undisclosed location.

Most notable cases

Mrs. Bushra al Mahmoud, from Jamous village, which is administratively a part of Slouk town in Raqqa governorate's northern suburbs, was arrested on Monday, April 1, 2019, by Syrian Democratic Forces in a raid on her place of residence in Hawijet Abdi, which is administratively a part of Tal Abyad city in Raqqa governorate's northern suburbs. Her fate remains unknown to SNHR, as well as to her family.

Asmaa Mohammad al Sheikh, from al Tabaqa city in Raqqa governorate's western suburbs, aged 18, was arrested on Thursday, April 4, 2019, along with her four-month-old infant by Syrian Democratic Forces while she was passing through one of their checkpoints north of Manbej city in Aleppo governorate's eastern suburbs heading from Izaz city in Aleppo governorate's northern suburb to al Tabaqa city; they were released three days later on Sunday, April 7, 2019.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

- The SNHR believes that the Syrian regime has not fulfilled any of its obligations under any of the international treaties and conventions which it has ratified. We refer specifically to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It also violated several articles of the Syrian Constitution itself, with thousands of detainees detained without any arrest warrant and held for many years, without charges, and prevented from appointing a lawyer and from receiving family visits. Eighty-five percent of all detentions documented have subsequently been categorized as enforced disappearance cases, with detainees' families being denied any information on their loved ones' whereabouts, while anyone making enquiries about the detainees faces the risk of being arrested themselves for doing so.



- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham imposes absolute authority over the large areas it controls and the residents there. The group which has a political entity, and has developed a highly hierarchical structure, is therefore obliged to implement the provisions of international human rights law. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has committed widespread violations through arrests and enforced disappearances.
- Factions of the Armed Opposition have carried out arrests and torture against a number of residents in areas under their control.
- Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic forces have violated many basic rights and practiced numerous violations such as torture and enforced disappearance. They also have a political entity with a largely hierarchical structure and are, therefore, also obliged to apply the provisions of international human rights law.

Recommendations

Security Council

- Monitor the implementation of Resolution 2042, adopted on April 14, 2012, Resolution 2043, adopted on April 21, 2012, and Resolution 2139, adopted on February 22, 2014, all of which demand the immediate cessation of the crime of enforced disappearance.

Human Rights Council

- Follow up on the issue of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons in Syria and highlight this issue in all annual meetings.
- Cooperate and coordinate with all active local human rights groups in Syria.

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 more evidence and data.

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

Address the cases mentioned in this report and past reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide more evidence and data.

United Nations and the guarantors of the Astana talks

- An impartial special committee should be formed to monitor cases of enforced disappearance, and to make progress in revealing the fate of the nearly 95,000 documented missing persons in Syria, approximately 86 percent of whom are detained by the Syrian regime.

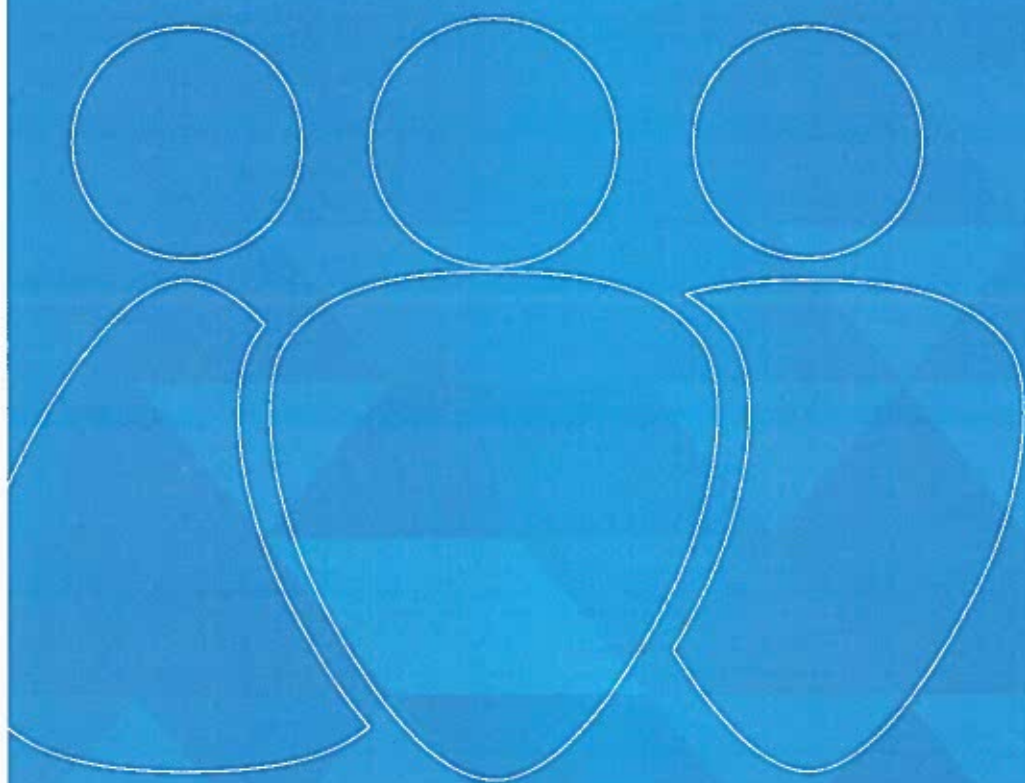


- Immediately begin applying pressure on all parties to ensure that they immediately reveal their detention records according to a timetable. In the meantime, detention places should be revealed immediately, and humanitarian organizations and the International Committee of the Red Cross should be allowed to visit them directly.
- Release children and women, and stop holding families and friends as war hostages.
- We call on the official recently appointed to take charge of the detainee file at the UN special envoy's office to include the issue of the detainees during the upcoming round of Geneva talks, as this issue is of far greater importance to the Syrian people than other longer-term issues which can be jointly addressed later by the parties after a political settlement is reached, such as the constitution.

Acknowledgments

Our sincere thanks to the relatives and families of the victims, their friends, eyewitnesses and local activists who have contributed effectively to the collection and verification of data.





@snhr



Info@sn4hr.org

www.sn4hr.org

