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2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Syria during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the regime and other actors; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious abuses in a conflict, including reportedly unlawful or widespread civilian deaths or harm, enforced disappearances or abductions, torture, physical abuses, and conflict-related sexual violence; unlawful recruitment and use of children in armed conflict by the regime and other armed actors; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, or enforcement of or threat to enforce criminal libel laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, workplace violence, child, early, and forced marriage, femicide, and other forms of such violence; substantial barriers to sexual and reproductive health services access; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of ethnic groups including Kurdish and Yezidi residents; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; enforcement of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and existence of the worst forms of child labor.

The regime did not take credible steps or government action to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Regime-linked paramilitary groups reportedly engaged in frequent abuses, including massacres, indiscriminate killings, kidnapping of civilians, physical abuse, sexual violence, and unjust detentions. Regime-aligned militias reportedly launched numerous attacks that killed and injured civilians. Russian and Iranian forces, as well as affiliated paramilitaries such as Lebanese Hizballah, caused civilian deaths and destroyed civilian infrastructure and property. Armed terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham committed a wide range of abuses, including killings, kidnappings, physical abuse, and recruitment or use of child soldiers. ISIS carried out killings, attacks, and kidnappings, including against civilians. There were no reports of investigation into or prosecution for such actions. Abuses by armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey (Türkiye) in the northern region of the country reportedly focused on Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other civilians, and included: killings; abduction and disappearance of civilians; physical abuse, including sexual violence; forced displacement from homes; looting and seizure of private property; transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey; recruitment or use of child soldiers; and looting and desecration of religious sites. Opposition governance entities, including the Syrian Interim Government "Ministry of Defense" and Military Judiciary Department, investigated some

claims of abuses committed by the armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey that made up the Syrian National Army, and conducted some judicial proceedings, but there was no information available during the year regarding their conclusions. Elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces reportedly engaged in abuses, including abuses involving attacks striking residential areas, physical abuse, unjust detention, recruitment or use of child soldiers, restrictions on expression and assembly, and destruction and demolition of homes. The Syrian Democratic Forces investigated some allegations against its forces and imposed punishments on some members for abuses, but statistics were unavailable.

Section 1.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

A. ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIFE AND OTHER UNLAWFUL OR POLITICALLY MOTIVATED KILLINGS

There were numerous reports the regime or its agents, as well as other armed actors, committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, in relation to the conflict during the year. No governmental bodies meaningfully investigated whether security force killings were justifiable or pursued prosecutions.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), at least 1,032 civilians, including 181 children and 150 women, were killed by conflict parties during the year. The regime was responsible for 225 of these documented killings, according to the SNHR.

The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria (COI) and numerous human rights groups reported the regime killed persons in detention facilities, both by execution and torture. According to the Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison, detainees were not notified regarding their execution decisions in advance, and instead were transferred to execution chambers in the evening for a sentence to be carried out on the same day or the following day. According to the SNHR, at least 59 individuals, including one child and two women, died due to torture by conflict parties during the year, with the regime responsible for 34 of these deaths.

On August 14, the SNHR and local media reported regime security forces stormed the house of Muhammad Saeed al-Khadija in southern Idlib Governorate, beat him with rifle butts, and then shot and killed him. Regime security forces reportedly prevented al-Khadija's family from burying him until the family signed a document declaring he died of a heart attack. The attack reportedly happened after al-Khadija criticized the deterioration of services in his city and the mistreatment of individuals returning to it.

On August 21, the SNHR reported regime security forces shot dead a child, age 15, following a verbal dispute at a checkpoint in the Deir Ez-Zour Governorate.

Other actors in the conflict were also implicated in unlawful killings (see section 1.i.).

B. DISAPPEARANCE

There were numerous reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of regime authorities, and the vast majority of those disappeared since the start of the conflict remained missing. In its annual report on enforced disappearance, the SNHR reported the regime used enforced disappearance "in a systematic manner" to intimidate society, spread fear, and consolidate control. The SNHR documented at least 112,713 individuals, including 3,105 children and 6,698 women, remained

forcibly disappeared by conflict parties from March 2011 through August. According to the SNHR, the Assad regime was responsible for 85 percent of those disappearances (96,103), including 2,327 children and 5,739 women. The SNHR documented 1,923 persons were forcibly disappeared during the year by conflict parties, with the regime responsible for 942 of these cases. The regime forcibly disappeared critics, perceived dissidents, journalists, medical personnel, and protesters, as well as their families and associates. Most disappearances reported by domestic and international human rights documentation groups appeared to be politically motivated, and a number of prominent political prisoners detained in previous years remained missing.

According to nongovernmental organization (NGO) and UN reporting, many families were unaware of the status of their detained or disappeared family members and learned relatives they believed to be alive had died months or even years earlier. In some instances, families learned the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones by identifying images of victims in published photos or videos of killings and massacres. In many cases the regime denied the presence of these individuals in its detention centers until it released death notifications.

A report issued by the COI in July found “there is little known about the fate or whereabouts of those detained incommunicado.” The COI reported “families are rarely provided official information even when their family members died in custody, with return of bodies and personal effects being rarer.” According to the SNHR, the regime withheld death certificates until victims’ families signed false statements exonerating it. The regime did not announce publication of notifications on updated state registers, return bodies to families, or disclose locations of remains. The SNHR recorded at least nine forcibly disappeared persons in regime detention centers had been registered as dead in the civil registry records during the year. The SNHR also obtained during the year hundreds of unreleased death certificates spanning different years for forcibly disappeared persons in regime detention centers about whom the regime failed to notify families. The SNHR alleged these deaths were due to torture, since the regime did not return victims’ bodies to their families and the deaths were not announced at the time of their occurrence. For example, the SNHR reported that on August 7, the family of Faraj Foad al-Jamous, whom the regime arrested in 2018 and forcibly disappeared in 2022, learned al-Jamous had been registered as dying in 2019; the SNHR alleged he died due to torture and medical negligence.

NGOs and UN entities reported families of the disappeared often feared reprisals, extortion, and requests for bribes when reporting cases and that authorities harassed and verbally abused women who inquired regarding the fate of their detained or disappeared spouse or attempted to obtain a death certificate.

Some terrorist groups and armed opposition groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected regime affiliates, journalists, and activists (see section 1.i.).

The regime made no effort to prevent, investigate, or punish such actions and did not comply with measures, such as search commissions, to ensure accountability for the disappearances.

C. TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN, OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT, AND OTHER RELATED ABUSES

The law prohibited such practices and prescribed up to three years’ imprisonment for violations, but there were credible reports regime authorities engaged in systemic torture, abuse, and mistreatment to punish perceived opponents.

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

NGOs and the COI continued to report the regime employed torture, including forcing objects into the victim's rectum or vagina, administering electric shocks, suspension by one or two limbs for prolonged periods, folding persons into car tires, whipping exposed body parts, burning body parts, and extracting nails and teeth.

In its July report on torture, the COI reported that in February, members of the General Intelligence Directorate suspended a man detained in Idlib by his limbs for prolonged periods and folded him in car tires. Although he did not know the reason for his detention, the man reportedly agreed to confess to anything after being hung by his hands with his feet off the ground.

The COI and Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported regular use of torture against perceived regime opponents at regime facilities. Human rights groups identified numerous detention facilities where regime officials reportedly tortured prisoners, including the Mezzeh Airport detention facility; Military Security Branches 215, 227, 235, 248, and 291; Adra Prison; Sednaya Prison; the Harasta Air Force Intelligence Branch; Harasta Military Hospital; Mezzeh Military Hospital 601; and the Tishreen Military Hospital. The Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison reported in October security forces subjected detainees to torture and mistreatment in military hospitals, often obstructing medical care or exacerbating existing injuries as a technique of abuse and interrogation. It reported once a detainee at Tishreen Military Hospital was killed, the body was transferred to a mass grave where it was beaten and trampled before burial and the cause of death was recorded as a cardiac arrest.

NGOs assessed the regime perpetrated violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including the detention and torture of medical workers.

The COI's July report detailed the regime's widespread practice of sexual violence, including rape, against men, women, and children in detention. The report documented the case of one detainee in the Military Intelligence's "Palestine" branch who was sexually abused by guards who repeatedly inserted sticks or glass bottles into his rectum to "torture" him and cause him to "lose his honor." The report also documented the case of a woman detained for months at a Military Intelligence branch in Homs whom a guard removed from her cell and sexually assaulted after placing a plastic bag over her head. The guard reportedly severely beat her with a cable all over her body, including her eyes, after she fought back.

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

Impunity was pervasive for regime security and intelligence forces. Numerous NGOs concluded that regime forces continued to inflict systematic, officially sanctioned torture on civilians in detention with impunity. There were no known prosecutions or convictions in the country of regime security force personnel for abuses and no reported regime actions to increase respect for human rights by the security forces.

On November 16, however, in a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) brought by the Netherlands and Canada against Syria for violating its responsibilities as a state party to the Convention Against Torture, the ICJ issued provisional orders for the regime to "take all measures within its power to prevent acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" as well as to "prevent the destruction and ensure the preservation of any evidence related to allegations of such acts." The ICJ also ordered the regime to "ensure that its officials, as well as any organizations or persons which may be subject to its control direction, or influence do not commit any acts of torture or other acts of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." The regime requested a postponement to facilitate its participation in the hearings that led to the provisional measures decision and did not participate in the hearings. Instead, it submitted a letter on October 10 and outlined its position denying allegations of torture for the court's consideration.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions remained harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical and psychological abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Prison facilities were grossly overcrowded with little space to sit or sleep, contributing to extreme exhaustion from lack of sleep. Access to and quality of food, potable water, sanitation, heating, proper ventilation, lighting, and medical care were poor and life threatening. Authorities kept prisoners confined in cells for long periods without an opportunity for movement, exercise, or use of showers and sanitary facilities.

The regime maintained a vast network of detention centers where detainees were subjected to human rights abuses. In July, the COI reported dire and appalling conditions in regime detention facilities amounted to ill-treatment and in some cases could amount to torture. Reports from human rights groups and former detainees suggested that there continued to be many informal detention sites and that authorities held thousands of prisoners in converted military bases and in civilian infrastructure, such as schools and stadiums, and in unknown locations. Activists asserted the regime housed detainees in factories and vacant warehouses that were overcrowded and lacked adequate sanitary facilities.

In some cases, authorities transferred detainees from unofficial holding areas to intelligence services facilities. Detention conditions at security and intelligence service facilities continued to be the harshest, especially for political or national security prisoners.

Inside prisons and detention centers, the prevalence of death from disease remained high due to unsanitary conditions and the withholding of food, medical care, and medication. The COI reported infestations of mites, lice, ants, and rats exacerbated the lack of adequate washing facilities in various facilities. Regime authorities did not undertake remedial action. Prisoners received inadequate or no medical care, leading to death from preventable conditions in unhygienic cells. Local NGOs and medical professionals reported authorities denied medical care to prisoners with pre-existing health needs, such as diabetes, asthma, and cancer, and often denied pregnant women any medical care. Released prisoners commonly reported sickness and injury resulting from such conditions. According to NGO reporting, survivor detainees collectively reported hundreds of detainee deaths in custody of government security branches, from both torture and inhuman treatment.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) oversaw more than 20 detention centers in the northeast holding approximately 9,000 ISIS fighters detained during defeat-ISIS Coalition operations. The largest of these was the Provincial Internal Security Forces detention center in Hasakah, estimated to hold the bulk of ISIS detainees in the country. Detainees were not provided with sufficient food and water, and medical care was lacking, raising concerns regarding malnutrition and the overall lack of medical supplies throughout the northeast region.

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

Administration: There were no credible mechanisms or avenues for prisoners in regime facilities to complain or submit grievances, and authorities routinely failed to investigate allegations or document complaints or grievances. Activists reported there was no ombudsman to serve on behalf of prisoners and detainees.

In areas where regime control was weak or nonexistent, localized corrections structures operated. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders oversaw facility administration. Former police forces or members of armed opposition groups operated facilities in areas not under regime control. Nonstate actors often lacked training to run facilities.

Independent Monitoring: The regime prohibited independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions, and diplomatic and consular officials had minimal access. The regime similarly ignored UN and international community calls for unhindered access by independent, impartial, international humanitarian and medical organizations to all regime detention centers.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) attempted to gain access to detention centers across the country through negotiation with all parties and made more than 80 visits to places of detention that included support related to nutrition, water, and health care for detainees in 13 of the visited sites. The ICRC had access to some regime-controlled central prisons under the Ministry of Justice but was unable to access regime-controlled intelligence and military detention facilities. Syrian armed opposition groups did not provide the ICRC access to its detention facilities in the northwest during the year. In the northeast, the SDF provided the ICRC access to some of its detention facilities.

Reportedly, the regime often failed to notify foreign governments when it arrested, detained, released, or deported their citizens, especially when the case involved political or national security charges. The regime also failed to provide consular access to foreign citizens known to be in its prisons and, on numerous occasions, claimed these individuals were not in its custody or even in the country.

D. ARBITRARY ARREST OR DETENTION

The constitution prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention, but a 2011 decree permitted the regime to detain suspects for up to 60 days without charge if suspected of “terrorism” or related offenses. According to the COI, local news sources, and various human rights organizations, regime security forces made arbitrary arrests and held individuals in prolonged or indefinite detention. The law provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court, but the regime did not observe this requirement.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law generally required a warrant for arrest in criminal cases, but police often cited emergency or national security justifications for acting without a warrant, which was permitted under the law. Under the constitution and code of criminal procedure, defendants had to be informed of the reasons for their arrest, were entitled to legal aid, and were presumed innocent until convicted by a court in a fair trial; however, the regime did not observe these requirements. Civil and criminal defendants had the right to bail hearings and possible release from pretrial detention on their own recognizance, but the regime applied the law inconsistently. At the initial court hearing, which could be months or years after the arrest, the accused could retain an attorney at personal expense or the court could appoint an attorney, although authorities did not ensure lawyers’ access to their clients before trial. In its September report, the COI stated detainees continued to be held incommunicado and in dire conditions, particularly in branches run by the security apparatus. NGOs reported families of detainees paid bribes to regime officials, including judges, to identify the location of detainees or obtain their release, during both pretrial and trial phases.

In cases involving political or national security offenses, authorities reportedly often made arrests in secret, with cases assigned in an apparently arbitrary manner to the Counterterrorism Court (CTC), courts martial, or criminal courts. The CTC, military field courts, and military courts were exempt from the code of criminal procedure applied by ordinary courts, and they denied basic rights to defendants. On September 3, the regime issued a decree dissolving the military field courts. The SNHR assessed the regime did so to mitigate perception of its involvement in enforced disappearance as approximately a quarter of those forcibly disappeared by the regime were previously referred to the military field courts.

By law persons arrested or detained, regardless of whether on criminal or other grounds, were entitled to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention and any delay in

obtaining judicial process. If the court found authorities detained persons unlawfully, the detained persons were entitled to prompt release, compensation, or both. The regime did not observe this requirement, however, and few if any detainees had the ability to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court or obtain prompt release and compensation for unlawful detention.

The regime reportedly detained suspects incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and denied them the right to a judicial determination of their pretrial detention.

Arbitrary Arrest: According to NGO reports, confirmed by regime memoranda secured and released by human rights documentation groups, regime security branches secretly ordered many arrests and detentions. Because the regime continued to withhold information on detainees, estimates varied widely, but the COI assessed regime forces and affiliated militias held thousands of persons arbitrarily or unlawfully in detention facilities. As of December, the SNHR reported at least 156,457 persons, including 5,235 children and 10,199 women, remained arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared by conflict parties; it attributed approximately 87 percent of these cases to the regime (136,047 including 3,696 children and 8,495 women), including the Syrian Arab Army, General Intelligence Directorate, Air Force Intelligence Directorate, General Administration Division, and Political Security Directorate. During the year, the SNHR documented at least 2,317 cases of arbitrary arrest, including 129 children and 87 women, by conflict parties. The regime was responsible for 1,063 of these arbitrary arrests, according to the SNHR.

Human rights organizations reported those arrested were typically not told why they were arrested. Those informed of the charges rarely had access to evidence supporting the charges. The COI noted arbitrary actions by the regime's security apparatus, coupled with unfair proceedings by the counterterrorism and military field courts, exposed Syrians to further violations and crimes.

In most cases authorities reportedly did not identify themselves or inform detainees of charges against them until their arraignment, often months or years after their arrest. Individuals detained without charge did not qualify for release under regime-issued amnesty decrees.

The SNHR documented the regime's arbitrary arrest of at least six health-care sector workers during the year, and reported authorities arbitrarily arrested men and boys at checkpoints often without citing a reason. The cases included defectors returning following the issuance of an amnesty, only to be arrested. During the year, the SNHR documented at least 386 arbitrary detentions involving individuals who had agreed to reconciliation agreements with the regime; some were detained from several days to several months and many were forcibly disappeared.

According to the COI's September report, a father was arbitrarily arrested at an army checkpoint with his family at the beginning of the year and was held incommunicado for nearly one month by several intelligence agencies and suffered torture and ill-treatment.

On April 4, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported regime security forces arrested a young man inside an immigration and passport office building in Damascus while he was trying to receive a passport, without informing him of the charges pressed against him. There was no further information on whether he subsequently was released.

There also were instances of nonstate armed groups reportedly engaging in unjust detention (see section 1.i.).

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem. Authorities reportedly held thousands of detainees incommunicado for months or years before releasing them without charge or bringing them to trial, while many detainees died in prison. A shortage of available courts and lack of legal provisions for speedy trial or plea bargaining contributed to lengthy pretrial detentions. There were numerous reported instances in which the length of detention equaled or exceeded the maximum sentence for the alleged crime. Official statistics on the detainee population held in pretrial detention were not available.

E. DENIAL OF FAIR PUBLIC TRIAL

The constitution provided for an independent judiciary, but the government did not respect judicial independence and impartiality. Authorities regularly subjected courts to political influence and prosecutors and defense attorneys to intimidation and abuse.

Outcomes of cases where defendants were affiliated with the opposition appeared predetermined, although defendants sometimes bribed judicial officials and prosecutors to affect their cases. NGOs reported the regime at times shared with proregime media outlets lists of in-absentia sentences targeting armed opposition groups before the court issued the sentences. The SNHR reported most individuals detained by regime authorities during the year were denied access to a fair public trial.

Trial Procedures

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

The constitution provided for defendants' right to a presumption of innocence until proven guilty, but numerous reports indicated the CTC or courts martial did not respect this right. Defendants had the right to prompt, detailed notification of the charges against them, with interpretation as necessary, but authorities did not respect this right, and a number of detainees and their families reported they were unaware of the charges against them. Defendants were sentenced without being present at hearings. In September, the COI reported young men and women were sentenced to death in absentia without being represented by legal counsel. Some reportedly learned their verdict months after their trial.

The law entitled most defendants to representation of their choice but did not permit legal representation for defendants accused of spying. The law provided for a court-appointed lawyer in all stages of a trial, with the exception of the preliminary investigations that could be conducted without the presence of a lawyer. Courts generally did not uphold these provisions. NGOs reported court-appointed attorneys did not mount effective defenses for the clients. Special courts, such as military courts, were exempted from these provisions and did not appoint attorneys for defendants.

In September, the COI reported that the regime, HTS, and the SDF continued to deny detainees access to a lawyer and subjected detainees to incommunicado detention. The SNHR reported detainees on trial in military courts were often transferred to unknown locations. Human rights groups reported families of individuals detained by the regime continued to be unable to access information on the status of their relatives.

Human rights groups reported the regime, if it provided anything at all to defense lawyers, in some cases provided prosecution case files that did not include any evidence. By law defendants could present witnesses and evidence or confront the prosecution witnesses, but authorities often did not respect this right. Defendants could not legally be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but family members and NGOs routinely reported defendants were coerced, tortured, and intimidated to acquire information and force confessions. In September, the COI reported courts continued to use forced confessions.

Convicted persons could appeal verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation. Not all citizens enjoyed these rights equally, in part because interpretations of religious law provided the basis for elements of family and criminal law and discriminated against women. Some personal status laws applied sharia regardless of the religion of those involved.

Numerous human rights organizations asserted trials before the CTC, military field courts, and military courts were unfair and summary in nature, sometimes resulting in death sentences. Death sentences issued by extraordinary courts were not subject to review by the Ministry of Justice's Special Pardon Committee, whose mandate was to review final death sentences referred to it by criminal courts. The president had the power to appoint and dismiss members of the Special Pardon Committee.

Media and NGO reports suggested the regime denied some, and in certain cases all, constitutionally guaranteed protections to those accused of political crimes, violence against the regime, or providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in opposition-held areas. Sentences for persons accused of antigovernment activity tended to be harsh, if the cases reached trial, with violent and nonviolent offenders receiving similar punishments. The regime did not permit defendants before the CTC to have effective legal representation.

Nonstate actors often did not respect fair trial guarantees. In opposition-controlled areas, legal accountability procedures varied by locale and the nonstate armed group in control where local governing structures assumed these responsibilities. NGOs reported civilians administered these processes employing customary sharia laws in some cases and national laws in others. Sentencing by opposition sharia councils sometimes resulted in public executions without an appeals process.

In the areas under its influence, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), previously known as the Self Administration of North and East Syria, continued to implement a legal code based on its "Social Contract." Reports described the Social Contract as a mix of Syrian criminal and civil law, with laws concerning divorce, marriage, weapons ownership, and tax evasion drawn from EU law, but without certain fair trial standards, such as the prohibition of arbitrary detention, the right to judicial review, and the right to appoint a lawyer. The justice system within DAANES' areas consisted of "courts," legal committees, and investigative bodies. There was no comprehensive court structure in the areas under the influence of DAANES. The Autonomous Administration, as a nonstate actor, ran a limited justice system to adjudicate the disposition of Syrian detainees in the northeast, and many Syrian detainees remained in detention awaiting such adjudication. Non-Syrian detainees remained in these detention centers until they could be repatriated to their home countries. The SDF managed a program to release nonviolent Syrian detainees who had been tried through the SDF justice system and served at least part of their sentences back to their home communities under a tribal sponsorship program.

Human rights groups and media organizations reported HTS denied those it had detained the opportunity to challenge the legal basis or unjust nature of their detention in its sharia justice system. HTS reportedly permitted confessions obtained through torture and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families. According to the September COI report, HTS held detainees "incommunicado in secret detention facilities referred to as 'security prisons.'"

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were numerous reports of political prisoners and detainees. Amnesty International and other human rights organizations reported the regime continued to detain civilians on a massive scale, particularly those perceived to oppose the regime, including peaceful demonstrators, human rights activists, journalists, lawyers, doctors, humanitarian aid workers, and political dissidents and their families. Authorities refused to release information regarding the numbers or names of persons detained on political or security-related charges. The four government intelligence agencies – Air Force, Military, Political Security, and General – were responsible for most arrests and detentions.

Prison conditions for political or national security prisoners, especially accused opposition members, reportedly were much worse than those for ordinary criminals. According to local NGOs, authorities deliberately placed political prisoners in crowded cells with convicted and alleged felons and subjected them to verbal and physical threats and widespread torture. Political prisoners also reported they often slept on the ground due to lack of beds and faced frequent searches. Some

former detainees and human rights observers reported the regime also denied political prisoners access to reading materials and prohibited them from praying in their cells.

Many prominent civilian activists and journalists detained or forcibly disappeared following the 2011 protests reportedly remained in detention at year's end. There were no known developments in the majority of cases of reported disappearances from prior years, including persons believed to be forcibly disappeared by regime forces.

NGOs reported the regime used the counterterrorism law to arrest and convict nonviolent activists on charges of aiding terrorists in trials that violated basic due process rights. Although authorities reportedly brought charges under the guise of countering violent militancy, allegations included peaceful acts such as distributing humanitarian aid, participating in protests, and documenting human rights abuses.

Amnesty: On November 16, the regime issued Decree No. 36 purportedly granting general amnesty, with some conditions, to detainees who were charged with misdemeanor crimes, terminally ill, or were at least age 70 and whose crimes were committed prior to the decree issue date. The decree also purportedly granted amnesty to those who absconded from the military and either remained in the country or left the country providing that the person surrendered themselves within three or six months, accordingly. It also purportedly issued partial amnesties commuting death sentences to life imprisonment and reducing life sentences to 20 years in prison. Local media and NGOs reported the amnesty announcement came less than two hours after the ICJ's ruling for the regime to cease the use of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Human rights organizations claimed the amnesty did not facilitate the release of political prisoners. The regime's attorney general in Damascus claimed on November 20 that 500 detainees were released through the amnesty, according to local media. The SNHR recorded no releases of political prisoners or others in connection to the November 16 amnesty at year's end.

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

F. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

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

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence: The regime allegedly killed or used violence or threats of violence against individuals in other countries for politically motivated reprisal. On May 21, unknown assailants in Essen, Germany, stabbed to death a Syrian activist who had revealed a number of regime officials involved in human rights violations who had sought refuge in Germany, according to activists and local media.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: Regime and regime-affiliated groups threatened and harassed witnesses in trials against regime officials in national courts in Europe, as well as their families in Syria. Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) reported in May and July that several witnesses in the trial in Germany of Alaa M., a Syrian physician accused of torturing and killing civilians in military hospitals and in a regime intelligence services detention center, received personal threats for testifying. At least two witnesses for the trial also reported their families in Syria being intimidated, according to SJAC. SJAC contended witnesses were reluctant to participate in Syria-related investigations in European countries because of these kinds of threats.

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

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

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

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

G. PROPERTY SEIZURE AND RESTITUTION

Regime security forces evicted persons from their places of residence and routinely seized, auctioned, or demolished detainees' property and personal items without due process or adequate restitution. The law provided for the confiscation of movable and immovable property of persons convicted of terrorism. Security forces did not catalog these items in accordance with the law, and although detained individuals had the right to retrieve their confiscated belongings after release, authorities often did not return the property. Persons with a backlog of service bills or back taxes who were unable to pay their debt to the regime were given a brief window to leave their property, while intelligence forces summarily seized homes and businesses of some former opposition members. The regime seized land, houses, and capital of perceived opponents living abroad and redistributed them to its supporters. The COI reported in March that regime seizures of property, auctioning of rights, and prohibition of access to property without due process or compensation could amount to violations of housing, land, and property rights.

In May, the SNHR reported more than 14 million citizens lost their land and property due to the regime's property laws. The military conscription law allowed the Ministry of Finance to confiscate the assets of "[military] service evaders" and their families who failed to pay the military exemption fee, without requiring authorities to provide notice or the opportunity to challenge the decision. Human rights groups described this practice as an attempt to extort citizens living abroad and to dissuade refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from returning. According to the Ministry of Defense, military exemption fees ranged from approximately 17.5 million Syrian pounds (SYP) to 25 million SYP (\$7,000 to \$10,000). Civilian pilots applying for military exemption were required to pay the equivalent of \$10,000 to \$15,000.

According to media reports and activists, regime forces also seized property left by refugees and IDPs and used confiscations to target regime opponents. The CTC could try cases in the absence of the defendant, providing legal cover for the confiscation of property left by refugees and IDPs. In its March report, the COI found some displaced persons who returned to regime-controlled territory were prevented from accessing their homes or had to pay bribes to members of the local administration to regain access to their residential properties. According to local media, the regime continued to auction the land of displaced persons to investors.

On March 26, 15 militia members affiliated with the regime's military security branch arrested a farmer and his son in Eastern Ghouta, transferred them to an unknown location under the pretext of excavating the property in search of weapons and ammunition buried by the opposition, and

confiscated furniture, electrical tools, and other items from around the farm, according to local media.

On September 15 and October 31, local media reported the regime indiscriminately demolished dozens of buildings in the Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood in the Rif Dimashq Governorate under the pretext of removing rubble. Media reported the regime did not differentiate between buildings posing a threat to public safety and those that did not, and alleged the regime's actions violated the law.

Armed groups also reportedly evicted persons from their places of residence and seized residents' properties. In March, the COI reported factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of armed Syrian opposition groups supported by the government of Turkey, prevented civilians from regaining access to their properties, threatened them with arrest for reclaiming properties, or forced them to pay "fees" to return to their properties. NGOs reported factions of the SNA often carried out detentions in conjunction with property appropriation, forcing many to leave the area and preventing their return. Although some persons reported instances of property restitution, the vast majority remained unable to reclaim their homes and lands. Due to threats of detention during the year and potential reprisal from SNA factions involved in both the complaint and the restitution process, many refrained from submitting, or withdrew, complaints to informal local grievance committees concerning extortion, property appropriation, and the imposition of levies. The COI also reported women faced additional challenges due to pre-existing gender inequalities and were reluctant to seek redress for property-related violations from such all-men committees.

The COI concluded SNA members "continued to commit...pillage...which may amount to...war crimes." NGOs continued to assess these and other abuses by armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey were part of a systematic effort to enforce demographic change targeting Kurdish Syrians.

H. ARBITRARY OR UNLAWFUL INTERFERENCE WITH PRIVACY, FAMILY, HOME, OR CORRESPONDENCE

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary searches, but the regime routinely failed to respect these prohibitions. Police and other security services frequently bypassed search warrant requirements in criminal cases by citing security reasons or emergency grounds for entry into private property. Arbitrary home raids occurred in large cities and towns of most governorates where the regime maintained a presence, usually following antigovernment protests, opposition attacks against regime targets, or resumption of regime control.

The regime continued to open mail addressed to both citizens and foreign residents and routinely monitored private internet communications arbitrarily and unlawfully, including email. It also utilized surveillance technologies and practices including internet and social media controls, blocking or filtering of websites and social media platforms, sensors, spyware, data analytics, recording devices, and nonconsensual location tracking.

Numerous reports confirmed the regime punished large numbers of family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives, such as by arbitrarily placing them on a list of alleged terrorists, freezing their assets, lodging threats against them, detaining them, torturing them, and even killing them. The regime also threatened to arrest or arrested children to punish dissent of their parents or for other political purposes.

I. CONFLICT-RELATED ABUSES

The regime, proregime militias such as the National Defense Forces, armed opposition groups supported by Turkey that made up the SNA, the SDF, violent extremist groups such as HTS and

ISIS, foreign terrorist groups such as Hizballah, and the governments of Russia, Turkey, and Iran were all involved in armed conflict throughout the country during the year.

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

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

Attacks impacting and destroying schools, hospitals, places of worship, water and electrical stations, bakeries, markets, civil defense force centers, densely populated residential areas, and houses were common throughout the country. According to the COI, the regime's arbitrary requirement that citizens obtain its clearance ("security clearance") to move, construct a house, open a shop, or apply for a job restricted freedoms and housing-related rights and led to extortion, property seizures, and the loss of livelihoods and basic services.

As of December, there were more than 5.1 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and 6.8 million IDPs in the country. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 15.3 million Syrians, nearly 70 percent of the population, were in dire need of humanitarian assistance and 90 percent of the population lived in extreme poverty.

Killings: Media sources and human rights groups varied in their estimates of how many persons were killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, with estimates ranging up to 550,000 killed.

The SNHR reported parties to the conflict killed 1,032 civilians, including at least 181 children and 150 women, during the year. According to the SNHR, during the year the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies killed 245 civilians, including 63 children and 41 women. The SNHR recorded at least 19 massacres, which they defined as any incident in which a party killed five or more noncombatants, resulting in the deaths of at least 362 persons during the year. The regime, Russian forces, or aligned militias were responsible for seven of the massacres killing 77 persons, including 26 children and eight women.

The Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict reported in June that it had verified 2,438 grave violations against 2,407 children in 2022, including the killing and maiming of at least 711 children, the plurality of which were attributed to regime and proregime forces.

Regime and proregime forces reportedly conducted aerial bombardments and shelling of civilian areas, attacking civilians in hospitals, ambulances, residential areas, schools, and IDP settlements throughout the year. In its September report, the COI found regime forces "may have launched indiscriminate attacks resulting in death or injury of civilians" and "direct attacks against civilians and civilian objects," which the COI concluded could amount to war crimes.

The SNHR reported the regime bombed areas affected by the devastating February 6 earthquake 119 times from February 6 to April 10, killing five civilians and wounding 42 others.

NGOs reported hostilities continued in the country's southern region during the year, including through attacks by unknown assailants targeting individuals affiliated with the regime, progovernment figures, and "reconciled" opposition fighters and civilians. For the first time in five years, the regime's air force carried out airstrikes on Dara'a and conducted military raids on Tafas and Nawa, where large numbers of opposition fighters who refused to "reconcile" with the regime remained, according to the COI's September report.

On October 5, an unclaimed drone attack during a graduation ceremony for cadets at a regime military academy in Homs killed at least 120 persons, including women and children, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The regime claimed in a statement that "armed terrorist groups" were responsible without identifying a group. On the same day, the regime and Russian

forces launched a military campaign in the northwest affecting more than 2,300 locations across Idlib and western Aleppo, killing at least 70 persons and displacing 120,000, according to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. HRW reported the regime used cluster munitions and incendiary munitions during these attacks, which also damaged critical services and infrastructure including 23 health facilities and hospitals, 17 schools, mosques, displacement camps, and markets. On October 24, an airstrike hit an IDP camp in Idlib Governorate, killing five family members including a pregnant woman, two infants, and their grandmother, age 70, according to HRW.

The Syria Civil Defense, also known as the White Helmets, reported regime forces conducted “double-tap” attacks – a practice of striking a location, then striking the same location again soon after to kill and maim rescuers trying to help the injured – in the northwest during the year.

The regime reportedly killed four medical professionals, including one woman, and one member of the civil defense during the year. On July 11, a regime guided missile killed White Helmets volunteer Abdul Basit Ahmad Abd al-Khaleq after it struck his rescue vehicle as he traveled to inspect areas affected by regime artillery shelling in Aleppo, according to the SNHR. On October 30, local media reported a regime missile strike on an ambulance in Idlib killed a paramedic and injured two others.

On January 27, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) released a report concluding there were reasonable grounds to believe that on April 7, 2018, the Syrian Arab Air Force conducted a chlorine attack in Douma that killed 43 persons and affected dozens more. Observers assessed that the regime retained a residual chemical weapons capability during the year.

The SNHR documented the SDF killed 74 civilians, including nine children and 11 women, during the year. On August 10, the SNHR reported the detention, torture, and death of an elementary school teacher by the SDF. On December 3, the SNHR reported the SDF shot to death Faransa Hamad al-Rouzaq while she was riding a motorbike in eastern Deir Ez-Zour Governorate.

The SNHR documented HTS killed 16 civilians, including two children and five women, during the year. On December 9, HTS fired multiple shells in response to the regime, striking towns in western rural Aleppo Governorate, killing two women and a child and injuring 22 civilians, according to the SNHR.

The SNHR documented ISIS killed one civilian during the year. On March 24, April 15, and April 16, local media with ties to the regime attributed the shooting and killing of at least 50 persons while collecting truffles in the countryside of Hama to members of ISIS; dozens more of the truffle collectors went missing, according to local media.

The SNHR documented the SNA killed 17 civilians, including five children and one woman, during the year. On March 20, members of the SNA faction Jaysh al-Sharqiyah shot and killed four Kurdish men outside their home in Jindires while they celebrated Newroz, the Kurdish New Year holiday, according to local media and human rights NGOs. HRW reported the SNA military police division announced the detention of the alleged attackers. The Syrian Interim Government’s adjudicatory proceedings to determine the alleged attackers’ disposition continued at year’s end. Jaysh al-Sharqiyah denied that its members had acted on official orders. In its September report, the COI found the killing of the four Kurdish men could amount to the war crime of murder.

The COI in March and September reported multiple instances of torture and death in SNA detention, primarily in detention centers in Raju, Ra’s al-Ayn, and Hawar Killis. Local media reported on August 18 a civilian named Hazem Mohsen Tafiliya in Afrin died under torture in a SNA military detention facility after attempting to cross into Turkey.

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

The COI reported on January 18 “a likely Turkish guided air-to-ground missile” – apparently fired from a drone – hit a pickup truck located east of Qahtaniyah town, killing the “two men inside” as well as a civilian man and a boy, age 11, nearby, and injuring several other civilians, including children. In September, the COI reported ground and aerial attacks between Turkey and SNA factions and the SDF led to civilian deaths and injuries in Aleppo, Hasakah, and Raqqa governorates.

From December 23 to 27, Turkey launched airstrikes into northeast Syria, mainly in Hasakah, Kobani, and Qamishli, that killed 10 civilians and caused significant damage to civilian infrastructure including hospitals and factories, according to local media and human rights organizations. The Turkish defense minister publicly announced on December 27 these attacks were in retaliation for December 22 and 23 attacks by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) on Turkish military outposts in Iraq that killed 12 Turkish service members.

The COI reported that on May 8, “an airstrike on a house...east of Suwayda, widely attributed to the Royal Jordanian Air Force, killed seven civilians including a man accused of drug trafficking, his wife and five children, and injured another child.” The COI noted that while there was no claim of responsibility, the strike came shortly after Jordan warned that it would take military action inside the country to address drug trafficking.

Abductions: Regime and proregime forces reportedly were responsible for most disappearances during the year.

Armed groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected regime affiliates, perceived dissidents, journalists, and activists.

The COI reported the SDF continued to unjustly detain civilians, including women and children, and held them in detention without charge. According to the SNHR, the SDF detained 641 civilians, including 91 children and six women, during the year. The SNHR and the NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice reported instances of SDF fighters detaining civilians, including journalists, human rights activists, and opposition party members. NGOs reported cases of unjust detention at the hands of the SDF in the context of anti-ISIS operations. In some instances, the detainees’ locations remained unknown. In its September report, the COI reported there were reasonable grounds to believe the SDF “continue[d] to unlawfully deprive individuals of their liberty.” On February 26, the SDF detained Kurdish journalist Goran Azm, two other men, and a boy, age 15, suffering from cancer in a Qamishli market without revealing their whereabouts, according to local media.

DAANES maintained telephone lines for persons in Hasakah and Raqqa to inquire if their relatives had been detained during the year. The SDF allowed the ICRC access to some detention facilities to monitor and report on conditions. The SDF investigated most allegations against its forces. Some members of the SDF were prosecuted for abuses, but statistics were unavailable.

According to the COI and human rights organizations, HTS continued to unjustly detain political opponents, journalists, activists, and civilians perceived as critical, including on social media, of their rule or religious doctrine. According to the SNHR, HTS detained 248 individuals, including four children and seven women, during the year. On July 12, local media reported HTS raided Killi camp for displaced persons in northern Idlib and detained 37 individuals, including 12 women, on charges of incitement against the entity due to their participation in protests.

Although ISIS no longer controlled territory, the fate of 8,648 individuals, including 319 children and 255 women, abducted by ISIS since 2014 remained unknown, according to the SNHR. More than 2,700 women and children, mainly Yezidis, remained unaccounted for after ISIS reportedly transferred them and others from Iraq to Syria and sold them into sex trafficking, forced them into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave them as “gifts” to ISIS commanders. On June 3, Yezidi human rights activist Nadia Murad announced six Yezidi women were rescued after more than eight years of ISIS captivity and returned to Iraq.

There were no updates during the year on the fate or whereabouts of activists and religious leaders believed to have been abducted by ISIS, armed opposition, or unidentified armed groups at the earlier stages of the conflict.

The COI and the SNHR reported kidnapping and unjust detention by factions and police forces of the SNA continued. According to the SNHR, SNA factions detained at least 365 individuals, including 10 children and 25 women, during the year. According to COI reporting in September, persons detained by factions and individual members of the SNA were held incommunicado for up to a year, not informed of the reasons for their detention, and not permitted access to legal representation. Family members were denied information concerning detainee whereabouts and some family members seeking information on the fate or whereabouts of loved ones were threatened or arrested. In some instances, relatives were allowed contact with detainees only after paying bribes or pressuring SNA members.

The COI reported in September that many of the victims of detention by SNA factions were Kurdish and were suspected of having ties to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the SDF. It reported in March that Kurdish detainees were routinely questioned on their alleged ties to these entities. On August 21, local media reported SNA faction Suleiman Shah Brigade raided the houses of and detained 18 Kurds for resisting participation in demonstrations against the imposition of U.S. sanctions on the group earlier that month.

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

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to the COI and NGOs, the regime and its affiliated militias consistently engaged in physical abuse, punishment, and torture of opposition fighters and civilians. Numerous organizations and former detainees reported nearly all detainees in regime detention experienced physical abuse and torture at some point during their detention.

The SNHR estimated parties to the conflict committed at least 15 incidents of sexual violence against women and girls during the year, attributing five cases to the regime, six to the SNA, and four to the SDF. The COI reported in February that members of armed groups, such as the SNA and HTS, committed the war crime of rape and other forms of sexual violence.

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

During the year, the SNHR attributed 10 deaths due to torture, including one child, to the SDF. In its July report on torture, the COI documented SDF torture and ill-treatment including against activists, NGO workers, and political opponents. On March 14, local media reported a young man, Khader al-Sattam, was tortured to death by the SDF in the Alaya prison in Qamishli city four months after his arrest.

During the year, the SNHR attributed three deaths due to torture to the SNA. In September, the COI reported there were reasonable grounds to believe SNA members continued to "arbitrarily deprive individuals of liberty and may have committed the war crime of torture and cruel treatment." In July, the COI reported credible accounts during the year of beatings and other torture by members of the SNA to extract confessions, noting the use of tasers and electric shocks including to the genitals and other forms of sexual violence in makeshift detention facilities. The COI also noted persons suspected of YPG or SDF ties were among victims of such acts and detainees primarily of Kurdish origin were interrogated regarding their faith and ethnicity and denied food or water. On August 18, local media reported civilian Hazem Mohsen Tufayli was tortured to death in an SNA Afrin military police prison after he was arrested trying to cross the border to Turkey. SNA police allegedly prevented activists from examining his body after it was handed over to the military hospital in Afrin.

The COI and other human rights organizations reported the frequent presence of Turkish officials in SNA detention facilities, including in interrogation sessions where torture was used. In July, the COI reported that during an interrogation session in the Sultan Murad-operated Hawar Kilis prison in Azaz, a Turkish official assisted in suspending a Kurdish detainee by his limbs for a prolonged period while interrogating him through an interpreter on his alleged links to the YPG, and threatened the detainee with rape.

During the year, the SNHR attributed eight deaths due to torture, including one woman, to HTS. In July, the COI reported that HTS continued to “carry out the war crime of cruel treatment and torture” and that these tactics were most commonly used to force confessions or punish individuals. According to the COI and human rights organizations, HTS continued to torture and abuse activists, media workers, and others critical of HTS. Human rights groups also reported HTS routinely detained and physically abused civilians deemed to have violated the group’s stringent interpretation of sharia, which rejected secularism. HTS reportedly permitted confessions obtained through torture in its sharia “courts,” denied detainees the opportunity to challenge the legal basis or unlawful nature of their detention, and executed or disappeared perceived opponents and their families.

Child Soldiers: The Secretary of State determined Syria had governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces and pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias that forcibly recruited and used child soldiers during the reporting period of April 2022 to March 2023. See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons* Report at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

The *UN Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, published in June, reported the recruitment and use of 1,696 children (1,593 boys and 103 girls) in the conflict between January and December 2022. According to the report, 1,688 of the children served in combat roles. The report attributed 637 verified cases to the SDF (633 to the YPG and YPG-affiliated Women’s Protection Units and four to other components of the SDF), 611 verified cases to the SNA, 383 verified cases to HTS, and 25 verified cases to Syrian government forces and proregime militias, among other actors.

According to the *UN Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic*, the SDF “progressed in implementing the 2019 action plan” to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, resulting in the disengagement of a further 33 children from SDF ranks. The SDF took disciplinary measures against personnel who violated action plan commitments. The report noted, however, increased numbers of verified cases of recruitment and use of child soldiers by the SDF.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: In cities where the regime regained control during the year, the COI reported the regime restricted residents’ movement and access to health care and food. Human rights groups reported the regime and its allies frequently imposed these and other collective measures to punish communities, including by restricting humanitarian access; looting and pillaging; expropriating property; extorting funds; engaging in arbitrary detentions and widespread conscription; detaining, forcibly disappearing, or forcibly displacing individuals; engaging in repressive measures aimed at silencing media activists; and destroying evidence of potential war crimes.

In April, the White Helmets reported millions of Syrian civilians lived in areas contaminated with mines and unexploded ordnance due to years of bombing by the regime and Russia. The SNHR reported 114 civilians, including 26 children and 11 women, were killed by remnants of war and unexploded ordnance during the year. On January 31, a remnant of war exploded in a town south of Idlib and killed a civilian and injured two others, according to the White Helmets and local media. The White Helmets reported from January to November 13, its teams documented 15 explosions of remnants of war in the northwest that killed two men and four children and injured 23 civilians, including 16 children and three women.

The United Nations estimated approximately 12 million Syrians were food insecure. Various human rights and various media organizations found the regime implemented a policy and legal framework to manipulate humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funding to benefit itself, reward those loyal to it, and punish perceived opponents. The regime regularly restricted humanitarian organizations' access to communities in need of aid, selectively approved humanitarian projects, and required organizations to partner with vetted local actors to ensure the humanitarian response was siphoned centrally through and for the benefit of the regime, at the cost of preventing aid from reaching the population unimpeded. Organizations reported entities such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent faced difficulties accessing areas retaken by the regime.

The regime routinely disrupted the supply of humanitarian aid, including medical supplies and assistance, to areas under siege as well as to some recaptured areas. In areas under its control, the regime insisted that independent humanitarian groups implement most assistance through regime-linked organizations. It reportedly pressured Syrian employees of humanitarian groups to submit to regime demands that violated humanitarian principles. The regime refused to provide unfettered access in areas under its control for needs assessments, aid distributions, and post-distribution monitoring. UN agencies and NGOs continued to seek to deliver humanitarian assistance to opposition-held areas subject to regime offensives, but the regime continued to restrict crossline operations originating from Damascus.

In February and March, local media and Amnesty International reported the regime diverted and stole humanitarian aid meant for those impacted by the February 6 earthquakes.

In July, Russia, backed by the regime, vetoed the UN Security Council's reauthorization of UN cross-border humanitarian assistance for the country. The regime then offered its consent to further UN cross-border assistance from Turkey but under a set of conditions the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) deemed unworkable. In August, the regime withdrew most of its conditions but affirmed UN cross-border access would be for only a limited period.

On August 16, local media reported that hundreds of tons of expired UN humanitarian aid, including food and medical supplies, was found buried in Tartous. The media attributed it to prolonged storage within regime warehouses and the regime's refusal to distribute the aid to its citizens.

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

In March, Amnesty International reported some SNA factions obstructed and diverted humanitarian aid aimed at alleviating the suffering of tens of thousands of civilians in Aleppo after the February earthquakes.

The SNHR documented 77 attacks on schools throughout the year, attributing 44 attacks to the regime. Human rights organizations reported that repeated attacks on schools, growing poverty rates amidst economic crisis, recruitment of child soldiers, and violent treatment of children in detention centers continued to hamper the ability of children to receive an education.

NGOs and media outlets documented repeated and continuing attacks striking health facilities and other infrastructure in northwest Syria perpetrated by regime and Russian forces. According to UNOCHA, more than half of all health facilities in the country were closed or partially functioning.

Human rights organizations detailed the practice in which, after hostilities ceased and local truces were implemented, regime and proregime forces required certain individuals to undergo a reconciliation process as a condition to remain in their homes. Various sources continued to report cases during the year in which the regime targeted persons who agreed to reconciliation agreements.

On January 5, Syrians for Truth and Justice reported on the regime's use of security clearances as a systematic tool of oppression against citizens. The report noted the process loomed large over all aspects of life in the country and put citizens at the mercy of security forces to do many activities, including to buy, sell or rent an apartment, start and license a business, organize a concert, obtain a passport, or obtain a graduation diploma.

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

The regime renewed in October its efforts to recapture areas in Idlib under the control of HTS, resulting in civilian casualties, with HTS reportedly launching counterattacks against regime positions. These attacks, although much fewer and smaller in scale than those by the regime and proregime forces, reportedly caused some civilian casualties and destruction of infrastructure.

The COI and NGOs continued to report armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey engaged in the systemic and repeated looting and seizure of civilian homes and property, particularly those of Kurds, resulting in civilian displacement. The COI and NGOs reported SNA militias continued to profit from their control over real estate and agricultural exports seized from the local population.

During the year, local media reported Turkey, sometimes in cooperation with factions of the SNA or SNA military police, transferred civilian detainees to Turkey. On August 26, local media reported Turkish security forces, in cooperation with SNA military police, transferred three Kurdish detainees from a detention center in Tal Abyad, Syria to a prison in Urfa, Turkey. The three detainees, including a young woman, were arrested in April for trying to cross into Turkish territory and were alleged to have worked for and belonged to the PKK.

Section 2.

Respect for Civil Liberties

A. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, INCLUDING FOR MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND OTHER MEDIA

While the constitution provided for limited freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, the regime severely restricted this right, often terrorizing, abusing, arresting, or killing those who attempted to exercise this right.

Freedom of Expression: The law contained a number of speech offenses limiting the freedom of expression, including provisions criminalizing expression that, for example, “weakens the national sentiment” in times of war or defamed the president, courts, military, or public authorities. The law included several categories for material banned from publication, including content affecting national unity and national security, harming religions and beliefs or state symbols, or inciting sectarian strife. The law imposed a one- to three-year sentence on anyone who criticized or insulted the president. Additionally, the law imposed a minimum six-month jail sentence and fine for citizens residing in the country or abroad found responsible for broadcasting or spreading disinformation that undermined the state's reputation or financial standing or improved the reputation of unnamed enemy states.

The law similarly criminalized the broadcasting of false news or claims undermining confidence in the national currency. It also provided for a prison sentence of at least one year for anyone who, in writing or in speech, called for the relinquishing of Syrian territory. The regime routinely characterized expression as illegal, and individuals could not criticize the regime publicly or

privately without fear of reprisal. The regime also stifled criticism by broadly invoking provisions of law prohibiting acts or speech inciting sectarianism. The regime monitored political meetings and relied on informer networks.

On March 25, local media reported the regime arrested activist and blogger Rami Vitale in Latakia on charges of insulting the minister of interior by publishing a Facebook post calling for the perpetrators of torture and violence against detained child beggars in Latakia to be held accountable.

On August 20, local media reported regime security services arrested activist Ahmed Ibrahim Ismail in Latakia after he criticized living conditions and regime corruption on his Facebook page.

Violence and Harassment: Regime forces reportedly detained, arrested, harassed, and killed journalists, including ones associated with networks favorable to the regime, and other writers for works deemed critical of the state. Both the regime and violent extremist groups routinely detained, intimidated, and tortured YouTubers and other citizen journalists.

The regime and, to a lesser extent, HTS, ISIS, and other armed groups targeted and killed both local and foreign journalists, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Freedom House. The SNHR documented the regime killed one journalist and arrested at least nine journalists and media workers, including two women, during the year. RSF reported the risk of arrest, abduction, torture, or death caused journalists to flee the country.

On August 10, local media reported Khalil al-Mousa, a journalist and war correspondent working for regime-aligned media outlets, was killed under torture in Sednaya Prison a year after a proregime Iranian-backed paramilitary group kidnapped him and another journalist. He faced allegations of “undermining the state’s prestige” and “weakening national morale” for reporting that exposed Iranian and Syrian figures involved in drug trafficking.

On August 17, local news outlets reported regime forces beat, shot, and killed a civilian in Maarat al-Numan for criticizing the deterioration of public services and the mistreatment of returning residents. According to local news, the regime prevented the victim’s family from burying him until they agreed to attribute his death to cardiac arrest.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: Although the law provided for the “right to access information about public affairs” and banned “the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists,” press and media restrictions outweighed freedoms. Forms of censorship included intimidation, banning individuals from the country, dismissing journalists from their positions, and ignoring requests for continued accreditation.

The law contained many restrictions on freedom of expression for the press, including provisions criminalizing publication of so-called false news and content affecting “national unity and national security.” The law further prohibited publication of any information regarding the armed forces and the publication on social media of false news causing fear and panic, with prison sentences of up to 15 years with hard labor.

The regime strictly controlled the dissemination of information, including on developments regarding fighting between the regime and the armed opposition, the spread of disease, human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime, and trials of regime officials in third-country courts. Prohibited topics included criticism of the regime, sectarian tensions, and problems facing religious and ethnic minority communities. The Ministries of Information and Culture censored domestic and foreign publications prior to circulation or importation and prevented circulation of content determined to be critical or sensitive. The regime prohibited publication or distribution of any material security officials deemed threatening or embarrassing to the regime. Censorship was usually more stringent for materials in Arabic.

The regime exercised extensive control over local print and broadcast media, and the law imposed strict punishment for reporters who did not reveal their sources in response to regime requests.

Only print publications whose reporting promoted and defended the regime remained in circulation. Books critical of the regime were illegal. The regime owned some radio stations and most local television companies, and the Ministry of Information closely monitored all radio and television news broadcasts and entertainment programs for adherence to regime policies. Despite restrictions on ownership and use, citizens widely used satellite dishes, although the regime jammed some foreign Arabic-language networks.

Local journalists reported they engaged in extensive self-censorship on subjects such as criticism of the president and his family, the security services, and Alawite religious groups due to fear of reprisal, including arrest, torture, and death.

On July 8, the Ministry of Information canceled the accreditation of the BBC in areas under its control following the outlet's June 27 investigative report into the regime's involvement in the captagon drug trade, according to local media.

On July 13, local media reported the General Authority for Radio and Television suspended the sports program entitled *The Captain*, presented by Mohammed al-Khatib, after the broadcast mentioned Iran and Russia's control of Syria.

Libel/Slander Laws: The law criminalized libel, slander, insult, defamation, and blasphemy, and the regime used such provisions to restrict public discussion and to detain, arrest, and imprison journalists perceived to have opposed the regime.

National Security: The regime regularly cited laws protecting national security to restrict freedom of expression, including for members of the press, to arrest and punish critics of the government, and to deter criticism of regime policies or public officials.

Nongovernmental Impact: According to Freedom House, media freedom varied in territory held by armed opposition groups, but local outlets were typically under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction. Human rights organizations reported violent extremist opposition groups detained, tortured, and harassed journalists and posed a serious threat to press and media freedoms.

In March and September, the COI reported HTS continued to detain civilians "arbitrarily" including activists, journalists, and others who were critical of their rule and religious doctrine. HTS also reportedly continued to restrict the work of media workers whom it perceived as challenging their rule and disparaging their ability to provide security or services to residents. HTS reportedly referred to violations of its media "law" – a text that was not publicly available – when silencing critical reporting and intimidating journalists. The COI reported those held for voicing negative views of HTS were forced to sign a pledge committing not to criticize the group to secure their release. In March, the COI reported on a journalist HTS and its "media directorate" repeatedly threatened, harassed, and interrogated over the previous year regarding his reporting on living conditions in Idlib and alleged violations committed by HTS. The "media directorate" reportedly suspended the journalist from work for three months and forced him to sign a pledge to stop speaking publicly regarding HTS. According to the COI, HTS's restrictive actions led to self-censorship by residents who removed social media posts for fear of retaliation; some individuals were subjected to online defamation campaigns, including for work promoting gender equality.

In March, the COI reported SNA members arrested individuals who expressed opposing or critical views. On June 23, members of the SNA civil police assaulted media activists Ahmed al-Khatib and Abu Bakr al-Saqqa in Azaz and prevented them from doing their job, according to the Syrian Journalists' Association, and did the same in October, in the same northern town, to journalist Ayham Hilal.

Local media reported DAANES and the SDF subjected journalists to arrest, suspension from work, and nonrenewal of journalistic assignments under the pretext of violating laws or supporting media

outlets the SDF considered prohibited. Activists alleged that although DAANES' "media law" stipulated penalties ranging from a warning to a fine and a one-week suspension, DAANES suspended journalists for up to two years and permanently withdrew the licenses of channels. On August 15, a masked military group affiliated with SDF intelligence raided the workplace of journalist Barzan Hussein. The group allegedly assaulted the journalist and members of his family who tried to prevent his arrest. Self-Administration officials acknowledged his arrest and Barzan was reportedly released from custody in October. On November 6, DAANES issued a circular threatening journalists with legal accountability if they prepared reports for unlicensed media organizations or without obtaining prior authorization.

Internet Freedom

The regime restricted and disrupted access to the internet and censored online content.

The regime continued to block circumvention tools used to access censored content, internet security software that could prevent state surveillance, and other applications that enabled anonymous communications. The Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE) and private internet service providers (ISPs) implemented censorship using various commercially available software programs. ISPs did not publicize the details of how blocking was implemented, or which websites were banned. It was unclear which state agency typically made the blocking decisions the STE implemented. Websites covering politics, minorities, human rights, foreign affairs, and other sensitive topics were censored or blocked outright.

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

Freedom House reported self-censorship was widespread online and continued as users contended with threats and violent reprisals for critical content. Sensitive topics included President Assad, former president Hafez Assad, the military, the ruling Baath Party, and influential government officials. Other sensitive subjects, including religious and ethnic tensions, and corruption allegations related to the president's family, were also off limits. Individuals and groups reportedly could not express views via the internet, including by email, without prospect of reprisal. The regime applied the law to regulate internet use and prosecuted users. During the year, the SNHR documented the arrest of 114 individuals, including eight women, under the cybercrimes law. Citizen journalists and other civilians were frequently targeted based on their digital activism. Hackers linked to Iran and Russia continued cyberattacks against those reporting on human rights violations.

The regime interfered with and blocked internet service, text messages, and two-step verification messages for password recovery or account activation. The regime employed sophisticated technologies and hundreds of computer specialists for filtering and surveillance purposes, such as monitoring email and social media accounts of detainees, activists, and others. The security branches were largely responsible for restricting internet freedom and access, and the regime did not prosecute or otherwise restrict their activities.

The regime also restricted or prohibited internet access in areas under attack. Regime officials obstructed connectivity through their control of key infrastructure, at times shutting down the internet and mobile telephone networks entirely or in areas of unrest. Authorities limited the amount of data citizens were able to use through an "internet rationing" scheme. There was generally little access to state-run internet service in besieged areas unless users could capture signals clandestinely from rooftops near regime-controlled areas. Some towns in opposition-held

areas had limited internet access via satellite connections. Some activists reportedly gained access independently to satellite internet or through second- and third-generation (2G and 3G) cellular telephone network coverage.

The regime manipulated online content, including by creating false content aiming to undermine the credibility of human rights and humanitarian groups. The progovernment Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) hacker group frequently launched cyberattacks to disable websites and post proregime messages. In addition to promoting hacking and conducting surveillance, the regime and groups it supported, such as the SEA, reportedly planted spyware and other malware in cellphone applications to target human rights activists, opposition members, and journalists. Local human rights groups blamed regime personnel for instances in which malware infected activists' computers. Arbitrary arrests raised fears that authorities could detain internet users at any time for online activities perceived to threaten the regime's control, such as posting on a blog or social media.

Observers accused the SEA of slowing internet access to force self-censorship on regime critics and diverting email traffic to regime servers for surveillance. The SEA allegedly targeted women online during the year including by defaming women who participated in antiregime protest in Suwayda.

B. FREEDOMS OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

The regime limited the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution provided for the freedom of peaceful assembly, but the law granted the government broad powers to restrict this freedom. The regime generally restricted freedom of peaceful assembly whether through these broad powers or unlawful measures.

The Ministry of Interior required permission for demonstrations or any public gathering of more than three persons. As a rule, the ministry authorized demonstrations only by regime-affiliated groups or the Baath Party, which orchestrated them on numerous occasions. Throughout the year, the regime suppressed peaceful protests, including in Dara'a, Suwayda, and Deir Ez-Zour, at times shelling these locations, opening fire, and arresting perceived and actual protesters.

Local media reported on regime attempts to suppress months-long antiregime protests that began in August in Suwayda against poor living conditions. The protests' scope grew significantly, with thousands participating in the governorates of Dara'a and Suwayda, in addition to other protests in Damascus, Rif Dimashq, Latakia, Tartus, Aleppo, and Deir Ez-Zour. On August 26, the SNHR reported it documented the regime's use of arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance of protesters and slandering of protesters or anyone criticizing the regime as traitors or collaborators working with foreign entities. The SNHR also alleged the regime attempted to stage counterdemonstrations where loyalists chanted proregime slogans and threatened regime opponents. On September 13, local media reported the regime fired on protesters in Suwayda attempting to close the Baath Party branch headquarters, injuring three individuals.

On November 7, local media reported regime security forces arrested three Palestinian activists in southern Damascus for organizing a Gaza solidarity protest in which approximately 100 Palestinians from local refugee camps participated without obtaining prior security approval, and dispersed demonstrators.

According to human rights activists and press, the SDF suppressed freedom of peaceful assembly in areas under its influence. On January 23, the SDF arrested more than 100 participants in demonstrations in Raqqa following the killing of a baby girl and her mother, according to local media. On February 4, local media reported the SDF fired on dozens of demonstrators in villages in Deir Ez-Zour protesting the SDF and demanding the release of detainees.

HTS continued to suppress freedom of peaceful assembly in areas under its influence. In September, the COI reported HTS arrested at least three women protesting the group's large-scale May and June arrest campaign targeting alleged opposition party members. HTS also detained three journalists covering the same demonstrations, according to the COI.

According to human rights activists and press, SNA factions suppressed freedom of peaceful assembly in its areas of influence. On May 4, local media reported a member of the SNA's civil police attacked women in Raju camp for displaced persons, located in Afrin, when they tried to gather to demonstrate in front of the Turkish base.

Freedom of Association

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

None of the local human rights organizations operated with a license, due to the regime's practice of denying or failing to act on registration requests, reportedly on political grounds, but some functioned under organizations with requisite registration. The regime continued to block the multiyear effort by journalists to register a countrywide media association, but journalists in exile continued efforts to improve press freedom and freedom of expression through the Syrian Journalists' Association, an independent democratic professional association established in 2012 by Syrians in exile.

The regime selectively enforced the 2011 decree allowing establishment of independent political parties, permitting only proregime groups to form official parties (see section 3). According to local human rights groups, opposition activists declined to organize parties, fearing the regime would use party lists to target opposition members.

Under laws criminalizing membership and activity in illegal organizations, as determined by the regime, security forces detained individuals linked to local human rights groups, prodemocracy student groups, and other organizations perceived to be supporting the opposition, including humanitarian groups.

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

C. FREEDOM OF RELIGION

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

D. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

The constitution provided for freedom of movement "within the territories of the state unless restricted by a judicial decision or by the implementation of laws," but the regime and other armed groups restricted internal movement and travel and instituted security checkpoints to monitor travel

throughout the regions under their respective control. The regime impeded some activists and journalists from traveling abroad, while others who received clearance to travel were interrogated upon return.

In-country Movement: In areas outside regime control, regime forces blocked humanitarian access, leading to severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care, and deaths. The same impacts resulted from regime attacks on Idlib Governorate and southern parts of the country, while fear of death and regime retribution resulted in mass civilian displacement and additional breakdowns in service provision and humanitarian assistance. Violence, coupled with significant cultural pressure, severely restricted the movement of women in many areas. Additionally, the law allowed certain men relatives to place travel bans on women.

Regime security forces, as well as local and foreign militias, controlled checkpoints to monitor and limit movement. The COI reported regime security officials extorted residents at checkpoints, and in some cases prevented civilians from fleeing besieged towns. The regime also barred foreign diplomats, including UN and OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) delegations, from visiting most parts of the country and rarely granted them permission to travel outside Damascus. The consistently high level and unpredictability of violence severely restricted movement throughout the country.

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

In areas they influenced or controlled, armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as HTS also restricted movement, including with checkpoints. NGOs continued to report HTS imposed restrictions on women and girls' freedom of movement and attempted to control and interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

While the Syrian Democratic Council and the SDF generally supported IDP communities in the northeast, approximately 50,000 individuals, one-third of whom were Syrian nationals, remained at al-Hol and al-Roj displaced persons camps in northeast Syria without freedom of movement.

An international NGO and local authorities managed the overcrowded al-Hol camp, with security by the SDF and Asayish, the DAANES internal security forces. Many residents were from former ISIS-held areas, and half were children under age 12. The COI reported in September that boys in the camp risked being transferred to military detention centers alongside adult alleged former ISIS fighters once they reached puberty. The COI reported the SDF transferred at least 10 foreign, non-Iraqi boys from al-Hol to the Orkesh child rehabilitation center in Hasakah on January 31 without providing families a reason for their removal or opportunities for regular contact or visits following the separation.

Living conditions in al-Hol camp remained difficult and camp residents were not able to freely move or leave the camp. In September, the COI reported conditions continued to worsen with insufficient medical care and education, and noted malnourishment was a concern. In the same report the COI assessed conditions in the al-Hol and al-Roj camps amounted to unlawful deprivation of liberty and cruel or inhuman treatment. On April 22, the SDF killed a boy, age 11, in al-Hol camp after he allegedly crossed the camp fence to retrieve a soccer ball, according to local media. While humanitarian organizations continued providing basic, life-saving assistance, at times services were reduced due to security incidents and operations as well as lockdowns.

Foreign Travel: While citizens had the right to travel internationally, the regime denied applications for passports and other vital documents, based on the applicant's perceived political views, association with or support for opposition groups, or ties to geographic areas where the opposition dominated. Additionally, the regime often banned travel by journalists and human rights

or civil society activists, their families, and affiliates. The regime comprehensively banned international travel of opposition members, often targeting any such individual who attempted to travel. Local media and human rights groups repeatedly stated opposition activists and their families hesitated to leave the country, fearing attacks and arbitrary detention at airports and border crossings.

The regime also imposed exit visa requirements and routinely closed the Damascus International Airport and border crossings, claiming the closures were due to violence or threats of violence. Difficulty in accessing the free online portal to apply for a passport and the exorbitant costs to obtain them were prohibitive for many. Many citizens reportedly learned of the ban against their travel only when authorities stopped them at points of departure. The regime reportedly applied travel bans without explanation or explicit duration, including in cases when individuals sought to travel for health reasons.

Women older than 18 had the legal right to travel without the permission of men relatives, but a husband could file a request with the Interior Ministry to prohibit his wife from departing the country. The regime allowed Syrians living outside of the country whose passports had expired to renew at consulates, but many who fled as refugees were reluctant to do so fearing the regime could direct reprisals against family members still in the country.

Citizenship: Syrians born abroad to parents who fled the conflict and remained in refugee camps generally did not have access to Syrian citizenship documents.

E. PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

The regime inconsistently cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to noncitizens seeking refugee and asylum status in the country. The regime provided some cooperation to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which assisted Palestinian refugees in the country. As of August 2022, the most recent data available, UNRWA recorded more than 568,000 Palestinian refugees residing in the country.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the regime had a system for providing protection to refugees. UNHCR and UNRWA were able to maintain limited protection spaces for refugees and asylum seekers, although violence hampered access to vulnerable populations. In coordination with both local and international NGOs, the United Nations continued to provide such individuals essential services and assistance.

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Both regime and opposition forces reportedly besieged, shelled, and otherwise made inaccessible some Palestinian refugee camps, neighborhoods, and sites, which resulted in severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care and humanitarian assistance, and civilian deaths. The United Nations estimated at least 40 percent of Palestinian refugees remained in protracted displacement.

Freedom of Movement: Regime and opposition forces reportedly restricted the freedom of movement of Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps. On November 19, Action Group for Palestinians of Syria stated the regime tightened security measures on Palestinian camps and neighborhoods by adding checkpoints and limiting exit-entry movements.

Refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities in the country also faced protection risks, multiple displacements, tightened security procedures at checkpoints, and difficulty obtaining required residency permits, all of which resulted in restrictions on their freedom of movement.

Employment: The law did not explicitly grant refugees, except Palestinians, the right to work. While the regime rarely granted non-Palestinian refugees a work permit, many refugees found work in the informal sector including as guards, construction workers, and street vendors.

Access to Basic Services: The law allowed Palestinian refugees to receive identity cards and the same access to basic services provided to citizens. The regime also allowed Iraqi refugees access to publicly available services, such as health care and education, but residency permits were available only to refugees who entered the country legally and possessed a valid passport. The lack of access to residency permits exposed refugees to risks of harassment and exploitation and severely affected their access to public services.

F. STATUS AND TREATMENT OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS)

During the year, the United Nations estimated there were more than 6.8 million IDPs in the country and 5.1 million Syrian refugees outside the country due to the conflict since 2011. The regime forcibly displaced populations from besieged areas and restricted movement of IDPs. The regime generally did not provide sustainable access to services, assistance, and protection for IDPs or returning Syrian refugees. UNHCR estimated the February earthquake displaced more than 500,000 persons.

Violence and instability continued to be the primary cause for displacement, most often citizens fleeing regime and Russian aerial attacks. UNOCHA reported a military campaign by the regime and Russian forces in October displaced 120,000 persons across Idlib and western Aleppo. On October 24, local media reported Russian airstrikes killed five civilians, including women and children, and injured others in an IDP camp in western Idlib.

UNOCHA reported more than 275,000 spontaneous IDP return movements between January and November.

The regime did not promote the safe, voluntary, and dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs, and in some cases authorities refused to allow IDPs to return home. UN humanitarian officials reported most IDPs sought shelter with host communities or in collective centers, abandoned buildings, or informal camps. IDPs were routinely denied return to their places of origin due to regime restrictions, while others feared arrest in retaken or formerly besieged areas, including Rif Dimashq, Dara'a, Quneitra, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo.

During the year, the SNHR documented the regime arrested at least 156 individuals returning to regime-controlled areas after displacement, including 119 refugees returning from abroad, mostly from Lebanon, and 37 IDPs. The arrests were primarily concentrated at Lebanese and Turkish border crossings and the Damascus International Airport. Some of those released were rearrested or forcibly conscripted into the military.

NGOs reported the regime's confiscation of property from citizens it perceived as threats impeded the return of IDPs and of Syrians from abroad. According to the COI, security clearances were a precondition for access to basic property and housing rights, a challenge for some IDPs. Former detainees who could not obtain a security clearance were denied lease agreements in their former areas of residence. Those residing outside regime-held areas needed a security clearance to obtain a power-of-attorney, which was needed to be represented by a lawyer in property matters.

Humanitarian actors noted access remained a key obstacle to assisting vulnerable persons in areas controlled by both the regime and nonstate actors. The regime and the Russian government routinely refused to approve UN requests for assistance delivery to the Rukban camp for Syrian IDPs, and Jordan restricted cross-border movements.

Armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as HTS also impeded humanitarian assistance to IDPs. Humanitarian actors reported HTS and the HTS-affiliated Syrian Salvation Government attempted to regulate, benefit from, or interfere with the delivery of aid and services in areas of the northwest. This included attempts to impose "taxes" and fees on humanitarian organizations, impose licensing and registration protocols, and interfere with beneficiary selection and aid distribution. On November 12, local media reported the SNA faction Suleiman Shah Brigade

opened fire on a displaced persons camp in Afrin, injuring three civilians. The shooters reportedly aimed to seize residential blocks for faction members.

The SDF and DAANES generally facilitated the safe and voluntary return of IDPs during the year, particularly to Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa. On June 17, however, the SDF attacked a group of residential units housing IDPs in the suburbs of Afrin, according to the SNHR. The shelling reportedly injured four civilians, including two women and a girl.

UNHCR continued to assess the conditions in the country were not yet in place for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of Syrian refugees from abroad on a large scale. According to UNHCR, 37,561 Syrian refugees returned during the year. The COI and various NGOs, including Amnesty International and HRW, reported cases of the regime subjecting citizens returning from abroad to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture, at times accusing them of treason and support for terrorism, even in cases where reconciliation agreements were in place. The COI reported in February some returnees had to pay bribes to members of the local administration to regain access to their residential properties or were prevented from accessing their homes.

Human rights organizations reported an additional obstacle for Syrians considering returning to the country was the military conscription law, which allowed for the seizure of assets of men who evaded military conscription and failed to pay military exemption fees.

In July, HRW reported the Syrian military arbitrarily detained, tortured, and forcibly conscripted into its reserve force a man whom Lebanon had forcibly deported in April.

Throughout the year, the regime, Russia, and Turkey all encouraged the return of refugees to the country. Russia reportedly sought to use Syrian refugee returns to secure international donations for reconstruction efforts. Press reports and some NGOs claimed hundreds, and possibly thousands, of Syrian refugees were deported from Turkey daily, although UN and NGO partners in Turkey could not confirm these numbers based on field observations at the border.

For further information concerning IDPs in the country, please see the materials of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center at <https://www.internal-displacement.org>.

G. STATELESS PERSONS

The regime contributed to statelessness, including through arbitrary or discriminatory denationalization, discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, and discrimination against women in nationality laws.

Approximately 40,000 stateless Kurds were registered as “foreigners” and an estimated additional 160,000 “unregistered” stateless Kurds remained unable to obtain or regain citizenship lost following the 1962 census. Kurds who lost their citizenship, and their descendants, lacked identity cards and could not access government services, including health care and education. They also faced social and economic discrimination. Stateless Kurds did not have the right to inherit or bequeath assets, and their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricted their travel to and from the country.

Children derived citizenship solely from their father. Because women could not confer nationality on their children, an unknown number of children whose fathers were missing or deceased due to the continuing conflict were at risk of statelessness. Mothers also could not pass citizenship to children born outside the country, including in neighboring countries hosting refugee camps. Children who left the country during the conflict also experienced difficulties obtaining identification necessary to prove citizenship and obtain services.

Section 3.

Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Although the constitution provided for citizens' ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, citizens were not able to exercise that right.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: The most recent national elections, for the presidency in 2021, were widely reported to not be free and fair, with many allegations of abuses and irregularities, including: registration restrictions on potential voters and candidates' ability to be listed on a ballot, lack of candidate access to media, ballot stuffing, campaigning at polling stations, lack of ballot secrecy, and intimidation.

On November 20, local media reported the regime issued a decree to rerun several September 2022 local council elections after results were canceled due to alleged fraud; they were rerun on December 11. There was limited information available on the conduct of these elections.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution allowed for the existence of political parties but imposed serious restrictions on political activities and organizations based on a "religious, sectarian, tribal, regional, class-based, or professional" nature, with exceptions for farmers and labor unions. The Baath Party maintained its control over all government and popular associations, including workers' and women's groups.

Since the 2020 parliamentary elections, the National Progressive Front, an alliance of the Baath Party with nine smaller political parties, held 183 of the 250 assembly seats, with Baathists holding 167.

The regime showed little tolerance for political parties other than the Baath Party and its affiliates. Membership in the Baath Party or close familial relationships with a prominent party member or powerful regime official assisted in economic, social, and educational advancement. Party or regime connections also made it easier to achieve greater advancement and power within the government, military, and security services. Judges and prosecutors were "essentially required to belong to the Baath Party," according to Freedom House. Freedom House reported political access was primarily a function of proximity and loyalty to the regime, noting those Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other religious minorities considered outside the regime's inner circle were "politically disenfranchised along with the rest of the population."

The law prohibited individuals convicted of a felony or misdemeanor that "shakes public trust," as determined by the Ministry of Justice, from voting for 10 years after their conviction, resulting in large numbers of citizens unable to vote, including those arrested on political charges, according to NGOs.

DAANES generally controlled the political and governance landscape in the northeast while allowing for Arab and other ethnic and religious community representation in local governance councils. The DAANES Social Contract limited political participation of IDPs and stipulated that 60 percent of council seats could be elected through popular vote and 40 percent appointed by a nonelected committee. DAANES-affiliated internal security forces at times reportedly detained and disappeared perceived opponents.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: Although there were no formal restrictions, cultural and social barriers largely excluded women from decision-making positions, except for within DAANES, which enforced a minimum of 40 percent women representation in all civilian entities. Alawites, the dominant religious minority in the regime and to which the president and his family belonged, held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities, as well as more authority than the majority Sunni sect.

Section 4.

Corruption in Government

Although the law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, the regime did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of regime corruption.

Corruption: Corruption continued to be a pervasive problem in police forces, security services, migration management agencies, and throughout the regime. There were no reports the regime sought to combat the widespread corruption it helped perpetuate. Freedom House reported foreign allies benefited from opaque government contracts and trade deals. Basic state services and humanitarian aid reportedly were extended or withheld based on a community's demonstrated political loyalty to the regime, providing additional leverage for bribe-seeking officials. Individuals in government-held territory who sought to expose or criticize official corruption faced reprisals including dismissal from employment and detention, according to Freedom House.

Human rights lawyers and family members of detainees stated regime officials in courts and prisons solicited bribes for favorable decisions and provision of basic services. Numerous NGOs reported families of arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared persons faced requests for bribes for information on the whereabouts and fate of their loved ones or to secure their release, assaults and blackmail by individuals claiming to have information on or be able to influence the fate of the missing person, and a black market in fraudulent documentation. In July, after leaks revealed widespread corruption in the Military Intelligence division – including bribery and financial exploitation of individuals seeking information from the regime or detainees seeking their release – the regime replaced at least eight heads of intelligence branches, according to local media.

There were multiple reports regarding corruption in Latakia Governorate during the year. In March, regime-linked media stated preliminary investigations into forgery in the Latakia Customs Secretariat included more than 20 cases valued over 20 billion SYP (\$2.7 million). In September, local media reported the head of the Latakia City Council disclosed five corruption cases involving the misappropriation of billions of SYP in service and local project funds.

Citizens sometimes had to pay bribes to brokers to secure passport appointments. On July 26, local media reported the regime's 40-day lead time for appointments led to passport brokers in Damascus charging high fees for expedited service. Although the regime claimed the reason for the wait was a shortage of passport printing paper, one broker opined the regime implemented the delay to ensure persons applied for an expedited passport, which cost more.

The regime sought to control production and distribution of narcotics, while selectively enforcing relevant laws, to enrich regime officials. Entities with known or suspected links to regime officials and the terrorist organization Lebanese Hizballah reportedly produced and trafficked illicit narcotics in the country, particularly the stimulant known widely as captagon. Media outlets and NGOs reported the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army, headed by President Assad's brother Maher, oversaw much of the production and distribution of captagon. Al Jazeera reported in May the production and smuggling of captagon reportedly brought in billions of dollars for President Assad, his associates, and his allies. Throughout the year, authorities in Europe and the Middle East seized at least 250 million captagon pills originating from regime-controlled areas of the country.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5.

Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The regime restricted attempts to investigate alleged human rights violations, criminalized their publication, and refused to cooperate with any independent attempts to investigate. The regime did not grant permission for formation of any domestic human rights organizations. Nevertheless, hundreds of such groups operated in the country without government registration.

The regime was highly suspicious of and hostile to human rights NGOs and did not allow international human rights groups into the country. The regime normally responded to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by denying the facts of the case or by reporting the case was still under investigation, the prisoner in question had violated national security laws, or, if the case was in criminal court, the executive branch could not interfere with the judiciary. The regime denied organizations access to locations where security force abuses and violations reportedly took place or prisoners were allegedly being detained on political grounds.

The SDF and other opposition groups occasionally imposed restrictions on human rights organizations or harassed individual activists, in some cases detaining them. Terrorist groups, including HTS, violently attacked organizations and individuals seeking to investigate human rights abuses or advocating for improved practices.

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

NGOs continued to report the regime abused the counterterrorism law to arrest and convict HRDs on charges of aiding terrorists in trials that violated basic due process rights. Although authorities reportedly brought charges under the guise of countering violent militancy, allegations included peaceful acts such as distributing humanitarian aid, participating in protests, and documenting human rights abuses. Armed groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly engaged in retribution against HRDs and civil society activists. There continued to be reports of reprisals against HRDs residing outside the country.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The regime continued to deny access for the COI, established by the UN Human Rights Council, to document and report on human rights violations and abuses in the country. The regime did not cooperate fully with numerous UN and other multilateral bodies, resulting in restrictions on access for humanitarian organizations, especially to opposition-controlled areas. In addition, the regime did not allow the OPCW IIT to access the sites under investigation, despite the requirement under UN Security Council Resolution 2118 for full cooperation with the OPCW.

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) continued to request information on reported cases of enforced disappearances, but the regime failed to respond. The regime also did not respond to UNWGEID requests for an invitation to visit the country, dating back to 2011.

A July 11 press statement announced the UN special rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation “was forced to cancel his visit” to the country, set to begin July 9, “due to the lack of full cooperation of the Syrian government.” The statement confirmed the special rapporteur received an invitation from the regime and that his team carried out preparations entirely in accordance with the terms of reference and code of conduct for the special procedures of the

Human Rights Council, but indicated the regime did not ensure and facilitate the special rapporteur's "freedom to choose whom to meet and where to travel."

Section 6.

Discrimination and Societal Abuses

WOMEN

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape and sexual assault of women, men, and children, but the regime did not enforce the law effectively. Rape was punishable by imprisonment and hard labor for at least 15 years (at least nine years in mitigating circumstances), which was aggravated if the perpetrator was a government official, religious official, or had legitimate or actual authority over the victim. Rape of men was punishable by imprisonment for up to three years. The law specifically excluded spousal rape, and it reduced or suspended punishment if the rapist married the survivor. The survivor's family sometimes agreed to this arrangement to avoid the social stigma attached to rape.

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies, NGOs, and media outlets characterized rape and sexual violence as endemic, underreported, and uncontrolled in the country. Women and girls continued to be at risk of sexual violence, including at checkpoints, schools, workplaces, markets, and in the displacement and detention settings. Despite the demands of survivors, safe spaces remained limited.

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

Survivors often feared reporting rape and sexual abuse, according to the UNFPA and the COI, due to the stigma associated with their victimization and threat of retaliation. Security forces consistently treated violence against women as a social rather than a criminal matter. The law did not specifically prohibit domestic violence; it stipulated men could discipline their women relatives in a form permitted by general custom. The UNFPA reported intimate-partner violence was one of the most common types of gender-based violence in the country against women and girls. Observers reported when some abused women tried to file a police report, police did not investigate thoroughly, if at all, and that in other cases police officers responded by abusing the women.

Women and girls subjected to sexual violence lacked access to immediate health care, particularly in regime detention facilities where reports of sexual violence continued to be prevalent, and authorities often denied medical care to prisoners. In March, the COI reported rape and other forms of sexual violence in regime-controlled detention facilities amounted to "crimes against humanity."

In June, the UNFPA reported the lives of women and girls were "marked by mutually reinforcing forms of violence and gender inequality, often exacerbated by discriminatory attitudes based on age, displacement status, disability, and/or marital status," creating an environment in which they were "consistently devalued, controlled, exploited, and then blamed for the violence they face." Women and girls throughout the country told the UNFPA the violence against them had become normalized.

In March, the COI reported members of armed groups such as the SNA and HTS committed the war crime of rape and other forms of sexual violence. In August, the COI reported it continued to receive credible accounts of sexual violence by members of the SNA from both male and female survivors. In the September report, one woman described to the COI how she was raped in a car by

four SNA members. The COI was informed the four alleged perpetrators were among nine SNA members under investigation for sexual violence; the investigations continued at year's end.

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

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

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: The law permitted judges to reduce penalties for murder and assault if the defendant asserted an "honor" defense, which often occurred. The regime kept no official statistics on use of this defense in murder and assault cases and reportedly rarely pursued prosecution of so-called honor crimes. On August 10, Nagham Dhiab al-Nazzal was killed by her brother in their parents' home in Hasakah, according to Syria Direct. Nagham's mother alleged her son "washed his shame" by killing her daughter after neighbors and relatives called her "dirty" and accused her of using drugs and asked her family to kill her.

Families ostracized survivors of violence, sexual exploitation, and forced marriage because of their abuse. The UNFPA reported women and girls who experienced social stigma due to sexual violence risked physical harm or even death by suicide or homicide. As a result, many did not disclose or speak regarding sexual violence, according to the UNFPA.

Sexual harassment was pervasive and uncontrolled. The law prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of gender but did not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment. The regime did not enforce the law effectively. The UNFPA reported sexual harassment and sexual assault were often cited as the reason to restrict the movement of women and girls and to remove adolescent girls from school.

The UNFPA also reported a marked growth in the risks of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, primarily in the forms of online harassment and "sextortion." In most reported cases perpetrators accessed personal media through mobile apps and used some form of deception, such as phishing attacks, to exploit the woman or girl, according to the UNFPA.

Discrimination: Although the constitution provided for equality between men and women, the law did not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Criminal, family, religious, personal status, labor, nationality, inheritance, retirement, and social security laws discriminated against women. For example, if a man and a woman separately committed the same criminal act of adultery, by law the woman's punishment was double that of the man. The law generally permitted women to initiate divorce proceedings against their spouses but did not entitle a divorced woman to alimony in some cases. Under the law a divorced mother lost the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reached age 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transferred to the paternal side of the family.

Personal status laws applied to Muslims were derived from sharia and were discriminatory toward women. Church law governed personal status questions for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Some personal status laws mirrored sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case. The regime's interpretation of sharia was the basis of inheritance law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, courts usually granted Muslim women half the inheritance share of men heirs. In all communities, men heirs had to provide financial support to women relatives who inherited less. If they refused to provide this support, women had the right to sue.

According to local NGOs, opposition-run sharia councils discriminated against women, not allowing them to serve as judges or lawyers or to visit detainees.

While the constitution provided the “right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work,” the law did not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work.

The law provided women and men equal rights in owning or managing land or other property, but cultural and religious norms impeded women’s property rights, especially in rural areas. Discriminatory inheritance practices meant property documents were often registered in the name of men family members, thereby posing challenges to women attempting to claim inheritance rights. Women whose spouses were detained or forcibly disappeared had difficulty accessing family properties.

Numerous NGOs reported lack of access to government-issued civil documentation remained a significant problem for the population in northern Aleppo, Raqqa, Hasakah, Deir Ez-Zour, and Idlib, limiting access to assistance, basic services, and freedom of movement. This situation posed specific challenges for widowed or divorced women, limiting their ability to register and obtain custody of children, inherit property, and legally remarry.

Women could not pass citizenship to their children.

Governmental involvement in civil rights claims, including cases against sexual discrimination, was stagnant and most claims went unanswered.

According to the COI’s June report on the gendered impact of the conflict, civil society activities, including those focusing on women’s rights, remained under strict control and scrutiny by regime agencies and required multiple levels of approval to support projects related to women’s rights and sexual and gender-based violence. The regime reportedly often rejected humanitarian organizations’ proposals for unclear reasons; only the Syria Trust for Development, an organization led by Asma Assad, the president’s wife, and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent were formally authorized to offer services.

HTS reportedly placed discriminatory restrictions on women and girls, including imposing a dress code and forbidding women from initiating divorce or voting, in the areas it held. HTS also banned women and girls from wearing makeup, forbade women from living alone, and required that they be accompanied by a *mahram* (a man in their immediate family) in public.

The COI’s June report noted HTS and some SNA factions on occasion intimidated and restricted certain outreach and awareness-raising activities related to violence against women, or activities addressing topics such as child and early marriage. Some women’s rights activists reportedly faced harassment and negative speech from local religious authorities.

Reproductive Rights: There were no known reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization by the regime.

In its June report, the COI reported 7.3 million women and girls in the country needed critical sexual and reproductive health services, as well as support for gender-based violence, as vulnerabilities to forms of physical and sexual violence and child marriage continued to increase. The regime did not provide access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence, and emergency contraception and postexposure prophylaxis were not available as part of the clinical management of rape.

Violence throughout the country made accessing medical care and reproductive services both costly and dangerous. Syrian activists reported the regime and armed extremists sometimes denied pregnant women passage through checkpoints, forcing them to give birth in unsterile and often dangerous conditions, without pain medication or adequate medical treatment. In a March report, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) stated women in the northwest feared or experienced bombings, kidnapping, or exploitation, all of which undermined their ability to access health clinics, left them without care, or made them reliant on informal health service provision. PHR assessed attacks on humanitarian actors by the regime, Russia, and, to a lesser degree, armed groups caused medical providers to operate in secret or in some cases to leave the country.

According to PHR, attacks on health-care facilities were frequent enough that a high number of pregnant women in the northwest preferred to undergo a caesarean section instead of vaginal birth, partly to reduce the time spent inside a health-care facility. They also reportedly avoided prenatal care visits.

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

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

SYSTEMIC RACIAL OR ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

The regime actively restricted members of national and ethnic minority groups from conducting traditional, religious, and cultural activities. The regime continued to limit the use of the Kurdish language, restricting publication in Kurdish of books and other materials and Kurdish cultural expression. The Kurdish population faced official and societal discrimination and repression, as well as regime-sponsored violence. Regime and proregime forces, as well as ISIS and armed opposition forces such as the Turkish-backed SNA, reportedly arrested, detained, tortured, killed, or otherwise abused numerous Kurdish activists and individuals, as well as members of the SDF during the year. NGO reporting suggested SNA members continued detaining, beating, and kidnapping Kurdish women in Afrin and Ra's al-Ayn. Kurdish women activists were particularly affected, with some ceasing all engagement in public life as they feared detention by the SNA.

The minority Alawite community to which President Assad belonged enjoyed privileged status throughout the regime and dominated the state security apparatus and military leadership. Nevertheless, the regime reportedly also targeted Alawite opposition activists for arbitrary arrest, torture, detention, and extrajudicial killing. Violent extremist opposition groups targeted Alawite communities on several occasions for their perceived proregime stance.

ISIS members targeted members of ethnic and religious minorities in attacks.

HTS violently oppressed and discriminated against members of all non-Sunni Arab ethnic minorities in the territories it held.

Starting August 28, weekslong fighting between Arab tribal militias and members of the Kurdish-led SDF in the northeast killed dozens and caused displacement among civilians, according to media reports. According to a September 7 Al Jazeera report, Arab tribal leaders blamed the violence on “years-long discrimination” by the SDF in Deir Ez-Zour and other parts of the northeast. SDF leadership denied discrimination against the predominantly Arab population in the area under its influence.

CHILDREN

Birth Registration: Birth registration was provided on a discriminatory basis. In large areas of the country where civil registries were not functioning, authorities often did not register births. The regime did not register the births of Kurdish noncitizen residents, including stateless Kurds. Failure to register resulted in deprivation of services, such as diplomas for high school-level studies, access to universities, access to formal employment, and civil documentation and protection.

Education: Approximately 2.4 million children were out of school, representing nearly half of the 5.5 million school-age children in the country, according to UNICEF.

The regime provided free public education to citizen children from primary school through university. Enrollment, attendance, and completion rates for boys and girls generally were comparable. Noncitizen children could also attend public schools at no cost but required permission

from the Ministry of Education. While Palestinians and other noncitizens, including stateless Kurds, could generally send their children to school and universities, stateless Kurds were ineligible to receive a degree documenting their academic achievement. The regime continued to limit the teaching of the Kurdish language.

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

Combatants on all sides of the conflict attacked or commandeered schools. Repeated attacks impacting schools; economic factors, including children working to support the household; recruitment of boys for military roles; and the detention of children continued to hamper the ability of children to receive an education. The White Helmets reported attacks on schools killed and injured children and adults, damaged buildings, and interrupted education services. Many school buildings required extensive repairs, sometimes including clearance of explosive remnants of the war, and administrators required assistance to obtain basic supplies for learning.

On August 26, regime and Russian forces shelled schools where summer clubs for children and supplementary courses took place in southern Idlib, according to the White Helmets. The shelling reportedly killed two children and injured three children and two women.

HTS reportedly imposed its interpretation of sharia on schools and discriminated against girls in the territories it held. HTS imposed dress codes on women teachers and pupils where it allowed girls to remain in school, while preventing large numbers of girls from attending school at all, according to the COI.

The SDF reportedly imposed penalties on school administration staff members who did not use their curriculum.

Child Abuse: The law did not specifically prohibit child abuse, but it stipulated parents could discipline their children in a form permitted by general custom. The regime did not take steps to combat child abuse.

NGOs reported extensively on reports of regime and proregime forces, as well as HTS and ISIS, sexually assaulting, torturing, detaining, killing, and otherwise abusing children. HTS subjected children to extremely harsh punishment, including execution, in the territories it held. The SNHR reported at least 181 children were killed, and at least 129 children were arrested, by conflict parties during the year. The majority of the deaths were attributed to the regime.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal age for marriage was 18 for men and 17 for women. A boy as young as 15 or a girl as young as 13 could marry if a judge deemed both parties willing and “physically mature” and if the fathers or grandfathers of both parties consented. Many families reportedly arranged marriages for girls, including at younger ages than typically occurred prior to the start of the conflict, believing it would protect them and ease the financial burden on the family. Deteriorating economic conditions and the death or disappearance of men heads of household, at the hands of the regime and other armed groups, negatively affected children, for example, increasing rates of child labor and child marriage, and limiting access to education. The UNFP reported increasing situations of sexual exploitation and abuse compelled some girls to adopt negative coping mechanisms such as serial or temporary marriages. According to the COI, parents were forced to take children out of school and child marriage continued to increase in the country.

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

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

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law stipulated penalties of up to three years in prison for certain forms of child abuse associated with trafficking crimes, including forced “prostitution.” The law considered child pornography a trafficking crime, but the punishment for child pornography was set at the local level with “appropriate penalties.” There were no known prosecutions for child pornography.

The age of sexual consent by law was 15 with no close-in-age exemption. Premarital sex was illegal, but observers reported authorities did not enforce the law. Rape of a child younger than 15 was punishable by not less than 21 years’ imprisonment and hard labor. There were no reports of regime prosecution of child rape cases.

ANTISEMITISM

The small Jewish populations from Aleppo and Damascus left the country before the start of the conflict. The national school curriculum did not include materials on tolerance education or the Holocaust. The law maintained no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards except for Jews. Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate antisemitic news articles and cartoons. The regime-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency frequently reported on the “Zionist enemy” and accused the Syrian opposition of serving “the Zionist project.”

For further information on incidents in the country of antisemitism, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, please see the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

ACTS OF VIOLENCE, CRIMINALIZATION, AND OTHER ABUSES BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION, OR SEX CHARACTERISTICS

Criminalization: The law criminalized consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, defined as “carnal relations against the order of nature,” and stipulated imprisonment of up to three years. The Human Dignity Trust reported some evidence the regime enforced this law in recent years against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals. There were no reports of prosecutions under the law during the year; however, the Human Dignity Trust reported an Interior Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, revealed some 200 Syrians were in prison “convicted of gay sex” during the year. The lack of protections in the legal framework created an environment of impunity for targeted threats and violence against LGBTQI+ persons and those perceived to be such. NGO reports indicated the regime arrested dozens of LGBTQI+ persons since 2011 on charges such as abusing social values, selling, buying, or consuming illegal drugs, and organizing and promoting “obscene” parties.

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

suggest the regime or armed nonstate actors took any official action to investigate, prosecute, and punish those complicit in violence and abuses against LGBTQI+ persons.

HTS and other armed groups used unauthorized “courts” to impose draconian social restrictions, particularly against LGBTQI+ individuals.

Discrimination: The law did not protect against discrimination by state or nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, nor did it actively protect the rights of LGBTQI+ persons. The law did not recognize LGBTQI+ couples and their families. Human rights activists reported overt societal discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in all aspects of society and in all territories, regardless of the governing authority.

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

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: The law did not provide for protections against involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices specifically targeting LGBTQI+ persons. So-called conversion therapy was not banned, but there was limited reporting on the use of such practices. Information on medically unnecessary and irreversible “normalization” surgeries being performed on children or nonconsenting adult intersex persons also was not available.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: There was no reporting to suggest LGBTQI+ persons publicly expressed themselves, peacefully demonstrated, or publicly associated themselves with issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, likely due to fear of reprisal by the regime or other nonstate actors.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

While the law provided some protections for persons with disabilities, the regime did not make serious attempts to enforce applicable laws effectively during the year.

Persons with disabilities did not have access to education, employment, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The destruction of schools and hospitals, most often by regime and proregime forces, further limited access to education and health services for persons with disabilities. Government and nongovernment social care institutes reportedly existed for blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, and physical and intellectual disabilities. The regime did not effectively work to provide access for persons with disabilities to information, communications, buildings, or transportation. UN reporting noted the difficulties experienced by children with disabilities caused by the conflict. In February, HRW reported children with disabilities experienced greater risks during attacks and lacked access to basic services. It also found international and local humanitarian organizations providing services to children with disabilities “either do so in so-called special settings or separated from other children” and that sometimes only disability-focused organizations provided such services.

There were reports during the year of the regime and armed opposition groups detaining, mistreating, and killing persons with disabilities.

On March 13, the SNHR reported regime forces arrested without a warrant a child with disabilities, age 14, in Rif Dimashq Governorate March 9. None of the boy’s relatives were reportedly informed of his arrest and he was prevented from communicating with his family or a lawyer. Information on his status was unavailable at year’s end.

On April 1, local media reported the SDF handcuffed and killed a child with Down Syndrome, age 13, who was present at a demonstration in Deir Ez-Zour that called for the release of detainees in

SDF facilities.

On August 19, local media reported SNA police officers dragged a man with disabilities, Ahmed Badie al-Suf, in a Ras al-Ain market and brutally beat him, causing bleeding from his eyes, nose and mouth, after accusing him of verbally harassing a girl.

OTHER SOCIETAL VIOLENCE OR DISCRIMINATION

Yezidis, Druze, Christians, Shia, and members of other religious minority groups were subject to violence and discrimination by ISIS, HTS, the SNA, and other groups. There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons with HIV or AIDS, but human rights activists believed such cases were underreported.

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

Section 7.

Worker Rights

A. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

While the law provided for the right to form and join unions, conduct legal labor strikes, and bargain collectively, there were excessive restrictions on these rights. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination but also allowed employers to fire workers at will.

The law required all unions to belong to the regime-affiliated General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). The law prohibited strikes involving more than 20 workers in certain sectors, including transportation and telecommunications, or strikes resembling public demonstrations. Restrictions on freedom of association also included fines and prison sentences for illegal strikes. The regime did not make any serious attempt to effectively enforce applicable laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers during the year. It was unclear whether penalties for violating such laws were commensurate with or less than those for analogous crimes. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

The law required that government representatives be part of the bargaining process in the public sector, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor could object to and refuse to register any agreements concluded. The law and relevant labor protections did not apply to workers covered under civil service provisions, under which employees were considered to need collective bargaining rights. The law did not apply to foreign domestic servants, agricultural workers, NGO employees, or informal sector workers. There were no legal protections for self-employed workers although they constituted a significant proportion of the total workforce.

Foreign workers could join the syndicate representing their profession but could not run for elected positions, except for Palestinians who could serve as elected officials in unions.

The Baath Party dominated the GFTU, whose quasi-official constituent unions, according to Baath Party doctrine, were to protect worker rights. The GFTU president was a senior member of the Baath Party and he and his deputy could attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. The GFTU controlled most aspects of union activity, including which sectors or industries could have unions. It also had the power to disband union governing bodies. Union elections were generally free of direct

GFTU interference, but successful campaigns usually required membership in the Baath Party. Because of the GFTU's close ties to the regime, the right to bargain collectively did not exist in practical terms. Although the law provided for collective bargaining in the private sector, regime repression dissuaded most workers from exercising this right.

There was little information available on employer practices regarding antiunion discrimination. The dire economic situation gave employers the stronger hand in disputes.

B. PROHIBITION OF FORCED OR COMPULSORY LABOR

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

C. PROHIBITION OF CHILD LABOR AND MINIMUM AGE FOR EMPLOYMENT

The law provided for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace and prohibited all the worst forms of child labor, including limitations on working hours, occupational safety, and health restrictions for children. Child labor, including its worst forms, occurred in the country in both formal and informal sectors, including begging, domestic work, and agriculture. Organized begging rings continued to subject children displaced within the country to forced labor. Conflict-related work such as lookouts, spies, and informants subjected children to significant dangers of retaliation and violence. Various forces, particularly terrorist groups and regime-aligned groups, continued to recruit and use child soldiers.

The law specified that authorities were to apply "appropriate penalties" to violators; however, it was unclear whether such penalties were commensurate with those for analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping. There was little publicly available information on enforcement of the child labor law. Restrictions on child labor did not apply to those who worked in family businesses and did not receive a salary.

The minimum age for most types of nonagricultural labor was 15 or the completion of elementary schooling, whichever occurred first, and the minimum age for employment in industries with heavy work was 17. Parental permission was required for children younger than 16 to work. Children younger than 18 could work no more than six hours a day and could not work overtime or during night shifts, weekends, or on official holidays.

D. DISCRIMINATION (SEE SECTION 6)

E. ACCEPTABLE CONDITIONS OF WORK

Wage and Hour Laws: The law provided for a national minimum wage for all sectors of the economy. The law divided the public-sector monthly minimum wage into five levels based on job type or level of education, almost all of which fell below the World Bank's poverty indicator. Benefits included compensation for meals, uniforms, and transportation. The law stated the minimum wage should rise gradually to meet the cost of living, but the regime took no action in this regard.

The public-sector workweek was 35 hours, and the standard private-sector workweek was 40 hours, excluding meals and rest breaks. Hours of work could be adjusted based on the industry and associated health hazards. The law provided for at least one meal or rest break totaling no less than one hour per day. Employers were required to schedule hours of work and rest such that workers did not work more than five consecutive hours or 10 hours per day in total, and to provide premium

pay for overtime work. There was little information available on the sectors in which alleged violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common.

Occupational Safety and Health: It was unclear whether occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were generally appropriate for the main industries in the country. Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remained with experts and not the worker. The law did not protect workers who removed themselves from situations endangering their health or safety from losing their employment. There was little information available on the sectors in which alleged violations of OSH standards were common.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The government did not effectively enforce laws related to the minimum wage and overtime. There was no employer liability for late payment of wages, allowances, or other social benefits. Many public-sector employees relied on bribery to supplement their income. Private-sector companies usually paid much higher wages, with lower-end wage rates semiofficially set by the regime and employer organizations. Many workers in the public and private sectors took additional manual jobs or relied on their extended families to support them.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor was responsible for enforcing the minimum wage and other regulations pertaining to acceptable conditions of work. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws or standards as set by the regime. Penalties for violations of labor-related laws were less than other laws and were rarely enforced. The Ministries of Health and of Social Affairs and Labor designated officials to inspect worksites for compliance with health and safety standards. Workers could lodge complaints regarding health and safety conditions with special committees established to adjudicate such cases. There was little information on regime enforcement of labor law or working conditions during the year. There were no health and safety inspections reported. Enforcement of labor law was lax in both rural and urban areas, since many inspector positions were vacant due to the conflict, and their number was insufficient to cover more than 10,000 workplaces.

There was little information on the size of the informal sector in the country, but many refugees found work in the informal sector as guards, construction workers, or street vendors and in other manual jobs. The scope of enforcement of labor laws for the informal sector was unclear.