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# 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conflict parties in Syria, most notably the Assad regime, committed serious and widespread human rights violations and abuses. The Assad regime fell on December 8 and much of its leadership fled the country. By the end of December, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a designated terrorist organization by the United Nations and others, was in control of Damascus and was leading an interim authority seeking to govern the country. It was unclear which Assad regime-era laws were still enforced through year's end.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention; instances of transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious abuses in a conflict; unlawful recruitment or use of children in armed conflict; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and serious restrictions on internet freedom; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

Before its fall, the Assad regime did not take credible steps or government action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses. The post-Assad regime transitional justice process had yet to take shape prior to the end of the year.

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 designated terrorist groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, reportedly caused civilian deaths and destroyed civilian infrastructure and property. Israeli strikes in the country against regime and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps targets reportedly caused civilian deaths and damaged some civilian infrastructure. Turkish strikes in the north reportedly caused civilian deaths and significantly damaged civilian infrastructure.

Armed terrorist groups, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, reportedly carried out arbitrary detentions and subjected some detainees to torture. ISIS reportedly carried out killings, attacks, and kidnappings, including against civilians. Abuses by armed groups opposed to the Assad regime and supported by Turkey (Türkiye) in the northern part 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; and recruitment or use of child soldiers. Internationally recognized entities that administered parts of northwest Syria prior to the fall of the Assad regime, including the Syrian Interim Government's "Ministry of Defense" and Military Judiciary Department, investigated some claims of abuses committed by the armed groups that made up the Turkish-supported Syrian National Army, and conducted some judicial proceedings. Elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces reportedly engaged in abuses, including recruitment or use of child soldiers. The Syrian Democratic Forces investigated some allegations against its forces and imposed punishments on some members for abuses, but statistics were unavailable.

Section 1.

# Life

## **a. Extrajudicial Killings**

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

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), at least 1,264 civilians, including 242 children and 118 women, were killed by conflict parties between January and September. The regime was responsible for 356 of these documented killings, including 92 children and 40 women, 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. The SNHR reported in February that the regime often did not return bodies of those who died in its custody to their families and disposed of bodies through “deliberate burning operations.” The Association of Detainees and Missing Persons from Sednaya Prison (ADMSP) in a February report claimed the regime bulldozed and leveled the ground of a mass grave in Damascus reportedly containing the remains of several thousand political detainees executed or tortured to death. The ADMSP’s executive director alleged the regime, in doing so, was systematically erasing evidence of its crimes. According to the SNHR, at least 86 individuals, including four children and one woman, died during the year from torture inflicted by parties to the conflict. The regime was responsible for 52 of these deaths.

On March 21, regime Air Force Intelligence members executed by gunfire four young men in a field in Dara’a and dumped their bodies in front of a shop in the town of Mahaja, according to local media.

## **b. Coercion in Population Control**

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

## **c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-Related Abuses**

Regime and proregime forces reportedly conducted aerial bombardments and shelling of civilian areas, launching attacks against or impacting civilians in hospitals, ambulances, residential areas, schools, parks, markets, places of worship, and internally displaced person settlements throughout the year. In its September report, the COI stated it had reasonable grounds to believe regime forces carried out indiscriminate attacks that killed or injured civilians, in violation of international humanitarian law. Per the COI, the regime often deployed imprecise weapons such as cluster munitions in densely populated urban centers, killing and injuring civilians. The regime also reportedly targeted civilians with guided weapons including while they were harvesting crops.

The SNHR reported parties to the conflict killed 1,264 civilians, including at least 242 children and 118 women, during the year. According to the SNHR, the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies killed 385 civilians, including 101 children and 42 women during the year. The SNHR recorded at least 33 massacres, which they defined as any incident in which a party killed five or more noncombatants, resulting in the deaths of at least 349 civilians, including 99 children and 48 women during the year. The regime, Russian forces, or aligned militias were responsible for four of the massacres, killing 28 persons, including 21 children and eight women.

The COI reported that on April 7 more than 100 proregime fighters raided at least three houses in Sanamayn targeting the leader of a group engaged in armed opposition against the Assad regime; the attack killed 10 civilians, including children, with attackers desecrating and mutilating bodies and attempting to rape women. The COI stated it had reasonable grounds to believe this attack amounted to a war crime.

The Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict reported in June it had verified 1,574 grave violations against 1,549 children in 2023, including the killing and maiming of at least 475 children, attributing the plurality of cases to the regime and proregime forces.

In cities where the regime briefly regained control during the year, the regime reportedly 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.

The SNHR documented the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) killed 166 civilians, including 23 children and six women, during the year. On August 9, the SNHR reported an SDF artillery detachment fired multiple shells at the village of al-Boulayl in eastern Deir Ezzor Governorate, killing one woman and one girl and injuring other civilians, including five children and one woman.

The SNHR documented Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) killed 21 civilians, including one child and two women, during the year. In February, the COI reported HTS carried out executions based on summary trials, and that detainees in HTS custody died following beatings and lack of medical attention. HTS claimed responsibility for launching multiple rockets in response to regime attacks on January 1, striking towns in western rural Aleppo Governorate and killing four civilians, including one child and one woman.

The SNHR documented ISIS killed four civilians, including one child, during the year. On January 3, gunmen affiliated with ISIS attacked a group of shepherds in Jab al-Jarrah east of Homs, killing three civilians and injuring others, according to local media, which also reported Jab al-Jarrah had experienced a noticeable increase in ISIS operations.

The SNHR documented the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) killed 25 civilians, including four children and three women, during the year. On March 7, SNA forces targeted three children in a village in rural Idlib Governorate, using projectiles and machine guns, killing Omar Hamid al-Rahmoun, age 14, and injuring two others, according to the SNHR. On January 16, the Syrian Interim Government's Military Court in al-Ra'i sentenced four individuals to death for killing four Kurdish men celebrating *Nowruz* (New Year's) in March 2023 outside their home in Jinderes, and sentenced four other individuals to time in prison for aiding and abetting the murders.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported in February that Kurdish women detained by the SNA were subjected to sexual violence, including rape. In September, the COI reported a case in which an SNA faction member and other men gang-raped a Kurdish woman attempting to travel to Turkey in 2022. Her former husband reportedly prevented her from seeing her daughter after he learned of the rape. The COI found the SNA's commission of rape could amount to war crimes.

HRW also reported in February that Turkish authorities and the SNA often arrested and illegally transferred Syrian nationals to Turkey to face trial, an act HRW claimed was prohibited under the law of occupation "regardless of its motive." On March 19, Turkish forces transferred from the SNA's al-Rai'i prison 16 Syrian detainees, including three children, to Turkey via the Bab al-Salama crossing, marking the eighth transfer of its kind that month totaling 68 detainees (including 19 women and seven children), according to local media.

Turkey launched airstrikes in the northeast in January, reportedly causing civilian deaths and damage to civilian infrastructure including homes; oil, electricity, and water facilities; grain warehouses; and a dialysis center in Qamishli.

From October 23 to 28, Turkey launched airstrikes in northern areas of the country, including Tal Rifaat, Manbij, Kobani, Tal Abyad, Qamishli, and Hasakah. According to media reports, the strikes killed at least 14 civilians (including two children), injured at least 56 civilians, and caused severe damage to civilian infrastructure including grain silos, fuel stations, oil and gas facilities, communication towers, bakeries, a fire station, and a train station. The attacks were reportedly in retaliation for the October 23 Kurdistan Workers' Party terror attack in Ankara, Turkey, whose perpetrators Turkish President Erdogan claimed infiltrated his country from Syria.

During the year, the COI, human rights organizations, and local media reported numerous attacks by Israel against Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets in densely populated residential areas in the country resulted in civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. The SNHR attributed to Israeli attacks the deaths of 26 civilians, including four children and eight women, during the year through November 1. On March 26, an airstrike attributed to Israel killed a UN aid worker as a missile hit a building allegedly occupied by the IRGC adjacent to his house in Deir Ezzor city, according to the COI's September report.

The COI reported in September that the Royal Jordanian Air Force carried out operations in several border areas in Suwayda Governorate in January, purportedly to counter increased drug and weapons smuggling, resulting in collateral damage that reportedly included civilian casualties and displacement. The COI, HRW, and the SNHR reported that on January 18, Jordanian airstrikes on houses of alleged drug smugglers in two villages in Suwayda Governorate killed 10 civilians, including two children and five women.

Nongovernmental organizations (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 the World Health Organization, nearly a quarter of all hospitals and one third of all primary health-care centers in the country and across the then lines of control remained nonfunctional as of June.

On February 22, the Investigation and Identification Team of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons released a report concluding there were reasonable grounds to believe that on September 1, 2015, units of ISIS conducted a chemical weapons attack in Marea exposing at least 11 individuals to sulfur mustard.

Section 2.

## **Liberty**

### **a. Freedom of the Press**

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.

Laws enforced by the Assad regime included provisions criminalizing publication of so-called false news and content affecting "national unity and national security"; prohibiting 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; imposing a one- to three-year sentence on anyone who criticized or insulted the president, a minimum six-month prison sentence and fine for broadcasting or spreading disinformation that undermined the state's

reputation or financial standing or improved the reputation of unnamed enemy states; and a prison sentence of at least one year for calling for the relinquishing of Syrian territory.

On April 23, the regime established a new Ministry of Media and reportedly granted it far-reaching powers to control all aspects of the media sector, including television production, digital media, and social media, according to a June report by the SNHR. The new media law that established the ministry reportedly further consolidated the regime's own draconian control over media outlets, per the SNHR.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

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

On February 25, regime forces arrested Mahmoud Abdullatif Ibrahim, a journalist working at a state-run newspaper, in his home in Tartus after he voiced support for the protests in Suwayda on his personal Facebook page, according to the SNHR. Ibrahim was reportedly taken to an undisclosed location and his whereabouts remained unknown through at least September. He was reportedly dismissed from his position months after his arrest, barred from government employment, and charged under the cybercrime law.

Reporters Without Borders reported 24 journalists and one media worker remained in detention as of November and stated the risk of arrest, abduction, torture, or death had caused journalists to flee the country.

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

On March 15, HTS physically and verbally assaulted five journalists and media workers in Idlib while they were participating in and filming a rally held in the city to mark the 13th anniversary of the Syrian uprising, according to the SNHR. On March 27, HTS warned Arab and foreign media against covering anti-HTS protests in Idlib, using official communications to threaten correspondents, according to local media.

The SNA reportedly arrested journalists and individuals who expressed opposing or critical views. On August 26, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported SNA military police arrested Bakr Qassem and his wife, both journalists, in Aleppo Governorate. Qassem's wife was released shortly after, but he was detained under several charges, including reporting to benefit other parties, for 45 days before being released.

The COI and local media reported the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), a nonstate actor, and the SDF imposed restrictions on freedom of expression, including for journalists. They reportedly subjected journalists to arrest, suspension from work, and nonrenewal of journalistic assignments under the pretext of their violating various laws or supporting media outlets the SDF considered prohibited. Activists alleged that although DAANES's "media law" only stipulated penalties ranging from a warning to a fine and a one-week suspension, DAANES regularly suspended journalists for longer periods and permanently withdrew the licenses of channels. On January 9, the SDF suspended several journalists for allegedly working with media outlets and channels affiliated with the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition to the Assad regime, according to local media.

## **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

Forms of official censorship included intimidation, banning individuals from the country, dismissing journalists from their positions, and ignoring requests for continued accreditation. 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. Local journalists reported they engaged in extensive self-censorship on subjects such as criticism of Bashar al-Assad and his family, the regime's security services, and Alawite religious groups due to fear of reprisal, including arrest, torture, and death.

### **b. Worker Rights**

#### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

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

Laws enforced by the Assad regime required all unions to belong to the regime-affiliated General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). Laws enforced by the Assad regime 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.

Under the Assad regime, the Baath Party dominated the GFTU, whose quasi-official constituent unions, according to Baath Party doctrine, were to protect worker rights. In August, the SNHR reported the Baath Party interfered in the operations of all trade unions and similar associations, including candidate selection, approving the outcomes of members' votes, and exerting absolute power over the appointment and dismissal of union heads and members.

On July 17, the regime's Central Command of the Baath Party dismissed the head of the Agricultural Engineers' Union and appointed a replacement, which violated the constitution, according to the SNHR.

#### **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

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

#### **Acceptable Work Conditions**

##### **Wage and Hour Laws**

Laws enforced by the Assad regime provided for a national minimum wage for all sectors of the economy. On February 5, according to local media, the regime issued decrees increasing public and private sector salaries as well as military and civilian pensions by 50 percent, but these did not offset a 100-percent increase in bread prices and significant fuel price increases.

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 under the Assad regime. Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remained with experts and not the worker.

### **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The Assad regime did not effectively enforce laws related to the minimum wage, overtime, or OSH standards. 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, street vendors, or in other manual jobs. The scope of enforcement of labor laws for the informal sector was unclear.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **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 systematically used enforced disappearance to consolidate control as well as terrorize and collectively punish the populace. The SNHR documented that at least 113,218 individuals, including 3,129 children and 6,712 women, remained forcibly disappeared by parties to the conflict through August. According to the SNHR, the Assad regime was responsible for approximately 87 percent of those disappearances (96,321), 2,329 of which were children and 5,742 were women. The SNHR documented that parties to the conflict forcibly disappeared 1,083 persons during the year, with the regime responsible for 123 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 numerous prominent political prisoners disappeared in previous years remained missing. NGOs and UN entities reported families of the disappeared often feared reprisals, extortion, and requests for bribes when reporting cases, and authorities harassed and verbally abused women who inquired regarding the fate of their detained or disappeared spouse or attempted to obtain a death certificate.

A substantial number of enforced disappearances by the regime during the year targeted returning refugees deported from Lebanon. The SNHR's August report documented 156 such cases. Regime forces reportedly targeted and disappeared returning refugees at border checkpoints with Lebanon and Jordan as well as at Damascus International Airport.

According to 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.



According to the SNHR, the regime often withheld death certificates, which did not accurately characterize the cause of death, until victims' families signed false statements validating the regime's actions. The regime often did not announce publication of death notifications on state registers, return bodies to families, or disclose locations of remains.

According to the SNHR, the regime's civil registry recorded 13 deaths of disappeared persons as of August. The SNHR documented the death of writer, poet, and Arab Institution for Media employee Nasser Saber Bunduq, who was detained and forcibly disappeared in 2014 by the regime's Military Security Intelligence Directorate in rural Damascus. Bunduq's family obtained a death notification through the civil registry on February 5 confirming he had died 17 days after his arrest. The SNHR noted Bunduq was in good health at the time of his arrest, indicating a strong possibility he died due to torture and medical negligence. The regime reportedly did not return Bunduq's body to his family.

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.

Although ISIS no longer controlled territory, the fate of 8,684 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 exploited them in sex trafficking, forced them into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave them as "gifts" to ISIS commanders. On March 2, the NGO Yazidi House announced a Yezidi woman, age 24, kidnapped by ISIS 10 years earlier, was rescued from al-Hol camp a month prior and returned to her family in 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 groups opposed to the Assad regime, or unidentified armed groups at the earlier stages of the conflict.

### **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

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. As of August, the SNHR reported at least 157,634 persons, including 5,274 children and 10,221 women, remained detained or forcibly disappeared by parties to the conflict; it attributed approximately 87 percent of these cases to the regime. In most cases regime authorities 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 prolonged detention of health-care sector workers during the year, such as Ahmad Methar al-Sufi, age 80, whom the Military Security Intelligence branch in Latakia detained without a warrant on September 9 and held incommunicado at least through the Assad regime's fall in December.

In March and September, the COI reported that the regime, the SDF, HTS, and the SNA routinely subjected detainees to incommunicado detention.

The COI reported in September 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 581 civilians, including 79 children and eight women, through the end of the year. The COI, SNHR, and local media reported instances of SDF fighters detaining civilians, including journalists, human rights activists, opposition party members, and political activists perceived as opposed to the SDF and DAANES. 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 arbitrarily deprive individuals of their liberty, including some who are detained incommunicado

and others in a manner tantamount to enforced disappearance.” On April 25, the SDF arbitrarily detained Khirou Ra’fat al-Shlash in a village in eastern rural Aleppo Governorate, accusing him of working with the regime, according to the SNHR. Al-Shlash was reportedly severely beaten, shot, and taken to the SDF’s al-Maliya Prison in Manbij. On April 27, his family was notified he had died in prison. The SNHR suggested his death resulted from injuries sustained under torture.

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 257 individuals, including three children and 10 women, during the year, including during widespread peaceful protests beginning in February in response to HTS arrest campaigns against their own members and reports of torture and mistreatment of detainees. On February 1, HTS members raided Deir Hassan camp north of Idlib and arrested 55 persons, including eight women, on charges of inciting opposition to HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Muhammed al-Jolani) and threatening local security, according to local media.

The COI and the SNHR reported kidnappings and unjust detentions by SNA factions and police forces continued. According to the SNHR, SNA factions detained at least 423 individuals, including 10 children and 16 women, through the end of the year. According to COI reporting in September, individual members of the SNA and its factions, notably the Sultan Murad and al-Jabhat al-Shamiya factions, arbitrarily deprived individuals of liberty and held detainees incommunicado. 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. Kurdish detainees were reportedly routinely questioned on their alleged ties to these entities. On January 1, the SNA arrested 15 individuals from various areas in Afrin on charges of dealing with “foreign parties,” meaning the DAANES, according to local media. Detainees were reportedly included on a list of individuals wanted by the Afrin Security Directorate in cooperation with Turkish intelligence.

The COI and the SNHR 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.

#### **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

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

#### **e. Trafficking in Persons**

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

Section 3.

## **Security of the Person**

## **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

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.

The SNHR reported regime forces made broad use of torture as a matter of policy to control, retaliate against, and eliminate opponents. The COI reported in September it had "reasonable grounds to believe" the regime committed crimes against humanity and war crimes through use of torture and ill treatment against persons in its custody. 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. Through the end of the year, the SNHR attributed 52 deaths due to torture to the regime.

NGOs and the COI continued to report the regime employed torture by 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, among other methods. There were also reports military hospitals routinely denied medical care or aggravated existing injuries as a method of interrogation or coercion.

In its September report on torture, the COI reported on the torture and mistreatment of detainees, including forcibly deported refugees from other countries and individuals known to have evaded conscription or deserted from the military. It also reported regular sexual violence, including rape, committed by regime personnel against men, women, and children in detention. The COI documented a case of Military Intelligence Directorate personnel reportedly repeatedly raping one detainee with a stick and applying electric shocks to his genitals during interrogation. Directorate officials reportedly suspended another detainee by his arms for prolonged periods in addition to beating and burning him with cigarettes, including on his genitals, during interrogation.

There were 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 groups opposed to the Assad regime, and activist groups, and to compel family members to surrender.

NGOs assessed the regime's abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law included the detention and torture of medical workers. NGOs reported the regime and other armed groups tortured and abused individuals based on their perceived sexual orientation in detention centers, including rape, forced nudity, and forced 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 such violence and abuse.

Impunity was pervasive for regime security and intelligence forces. Numerous NGOs concluded regime forces inflicted systematic, officially sanctioned torture on civilians in detention with impunity. According to the SNHR's reporting in April, the law effectively granted impunity for torture by making prosecution of the crime contingent on the approval of the accused's superior. Civil society organizations reported there was no oversight for the secret and unofficial prisons operated by regime security branches and regime-supported militias where torture was allegedly carried out. 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.

Following the fall of the Assad regime, international organizations and civil society groups working on human rights, accountability, and humanitarian issues extended their operations to formerly regime-held territory. They thereby gained access to numerous records documenting atrocities committed by the regime, as well as mass gravesites used to bury deceased prisoners in the vicinity of detention facilities.

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

Through the end of the year, the SNHR attributed 10 deaths due to torture, including children and one woman, to the SDF. In its September report, the COI documented a June raid on a house in Dhiban, Deir Ezzor Governorate, in which SDF forces beat a man in the head with a gun and detained him. According to the COI, his body was returned to his family the same day bearing wounds suggestive of torture.

Through the end of the year, the SNHR attributed six deaths due to torture to the SNA. In September, the COI reported SNA members “arbitrarily deprived individuals of liberty and committed torture, cruel treatment and rape, which may amount to war crimes.” 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 beatings with iron pipes and cables, and hanging in a stress position by the limbs 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 March 9, members of SNA faction al-Jabhat al-Shamiya severely beat a traffic police officer at a roundabout in Azaz after he asked them to abide by the traffic light regulations recently placed in the city, according to local media. Following the incident, the faction issued a statement regretting and condemning the incident. The COI noted investigations took place into two cases of sexual violence against Kurdish women – a gang rape in 2022 and a sexual assault in 2023 – both attributed to SNA members.

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 its September report, the COI documented the presence of a Turkish official during the interrogation in the Sultan Murad-operated facility in Bulbul, Afrin district, of a detainee whose body was later brought to Afrin Military Hospital. His family, learning his whereabouts only then, reported their relative died as a result of torture and mistreatment.

Through the year, the SNHR attributed 17 deaths in Idlib due to torture to HTS. In its September report, the COI stated it had reasonable grounds to believe HTS committed acts of torture and cruel treatment and suggested these acts could amount to war crimes. NGOs reported HTS carried out the acts to force confessions and punish individuals. On October 8, HTS tortured to death a young man from Idlib who was arrested on charges related to disturbing neighbors with loud music, according to local media. The report stated HTS subsequently raided the victim’s home and arrested his brothers, who had published audio clips accusing HTS of killing their brother under torture and falsifying medical reports. HTS reportedly refused to open an investigation into the matter.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

Laws enforced by the Assad regime 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. Restrictions on child labor did not apply to those who worked in family businesses and did not receive a salary.

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 labor trafficking. Conflict-related work such as serving 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 or use child soldiers.

Under the Assad regime 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.

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 against violators.

## **Child Soldiers**

The Secretary of State determined Syria had governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces under the control of the Assad regime, along with pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias, that forcibly recruited and used child soldiers during the period of April 2023 to March 2024. See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Various forces, particularly terrorist groups and regime-aligned groups, continued to recruit or use child soldiers. The *UN Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, published in June, reported the recruitment and use of 1,073 children (1,059 boys and 14 girls) in the conflict between January and December 2023. According to the report, 1,062 of these children served in combat roles. The report attributed 231 verified cases to the SDF (203 to the YPG and YPG-affiliated Women’s Protection Units and 28 to other components of the SDF), 282 verified cases to the SNA, 477 verified cases to HTS, and 73 verified cases to Syrian government forces under the control of the Assad regime and proregime militias, among other actors.

The UN secretary-general noted concern at increased numbers of verified cases of recruitment and use of child soldiers by the SDF and called on the SDF to fully implement its 2019 action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children. The UN secretary-general also welcomed the SNA’s signature of an action plan on June 3 to end and prevent grave violations against children, urging its swift implementation. Statistics on implementation were unavailable at year’s end.

## **Child Marriage**

Under the Assad regime 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 by increasing rates of child labor and child marriage and limiting access to education. Most recent data reported that 13 percent of Syrian girls married before age 18. The UN Population Fund reported increasing situations of sexual exploitation and abuse compelled some girls to adopt negative coping mechanisms such as serial or temporary marriages.

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

Early and forced marriages were reportedly also 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.

### **c. Protection to Refugees**

The regime inconsistently cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (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). On October 30, Human Rights Watch reported Syrians fleeing conflict in Lebanon faced risks of persecution by the regime upon return, including enforced disappearance, torture, and death in detention.

#### **Provision of First Asylum**

Laws enforced by the Assad regime 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.

### **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

The country had no resident Jewish population. Under the Assad regime, the national school curriculum did not include materials on tolerance education or the Holocaust. Laws enforced by the Assad regime maintained no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards except for Jews.

Under the Assad regime, government-controlled radio and television programming regularly disseminated antisemitic news articles and cartoons. Until the Assad regime's fall on December 8, 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 annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

### **e. Instances of Transnational Repression**

The Assad regime 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.

#### **Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion**

Regime and regime-affiliated groups reportedly threatened and harassed witnesses in trials against regime officials in national courts in Europe, as well as their families in Syria. Intimidation reportedly continued even after the fall of the Assad regime.

The regime reportedly threatened in-country family members of diaspora activists and witnesses to exert additional pressure on them and their work abroad. The regime also engaged 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**

The regime for politically motivated purposes reportedly attempted to exert bilateral pressure on other countries aimed at having them take adverse action against specific Syrian activists and refugees.