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The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in February 2021

Continuing Violations Amid
a Paralyzed Political Process

Thursday 4 March 2021

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

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I. Introduction and Methodology:

Syria has seen an unprecedented number of violations since the start of the popular uprising for democracy in March 2011. Extrajudicial killings, arrests, torture and enforced disappearances are the violations most frequently perpetrated against Syrian citizens. While the Syrian regime and its affiliated militias were the sole perpetrators of these violations for the first seven months or so of the uprising, other parties subsequently joined in, also violating the rights of Syrian citizens. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has continued to document every incident that its team members are able to verify, with these violations escalating very dramatically in 2012 and 2013, prompting us to expand our publication of periodic monthly reports recording and highlighting the continued suffering of the Syrian people, which subsequently grew to eight reports on different issues issued at the beginning of each month. In the course of our work, SNHR has compiled a massive database cataloguing hundreds of thousands of incidents, each of which involves a pattern of violations that we have been able to document.

By the end of 2018, with a reduction in the level of violence compared to previous years, we changed our previous strategy and now compile our reports into a single monthly report featuring the most prominent violations in Syria which we have been able to document in the preceding month.

This month's report focuses on the human rights situation in Syria in February 2021, and catalogues the death toll of civilian victims whom we documented killed by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces during this period, as well as the record of cases of arrests and enforced disappearance. The report also highlights the attacks on civilian objects, which SNHR's team was able to document during this period. To find out more about our working [methodology](#) in documenting and archiving data, please visit the following link that explains this in detail.

This report only represents the bare minimum of the actual severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

II. Summary of the Most Notable Events in February:

In regard to bombardment and military operations:

February saw the Syrian regime's forces and allies continuing their artillery and missile bombardment of cities and towns in [the southern suburbs of Idlib](#), the western suburbs of Hama and the eastern suburbs of Aleppo near the front lines. Syrian regime forces and allies also bombed areas far from the front lines, such as Ariha city in Idlib suburbs and [al Bab city](#) in Aleppo suburbs, resulting in casualties. These forces also used [anti-armor weapons](#), targeting many civilian cars and any movements near civilian houses at distances of up to approximately 5 km from the front lines, in the western suburbs of Hama for the third consecutive month, resulting in casualties.

The areas under the control of the Syrian National Army forces in the Afrin region and [the eastern suburbs of Aleppo](#) also saw missile and artillery shelling by Syrian Democratic Forces, concentrating on the city center of Afrin, the outskirts of Izaz city, and the suburbs of al Bab city.

In February, the Badiya of the southern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour saw intermittent battles launched by the Syrian regime, backed by Russian warplanes, against ISIS-affiliated elements.

On February 25, the US-led coalition warplanes launched a number of raids targeting Iraqi militia sites in al Boukamal area in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour.

The villages of Ein Aisa district in the northern suburbs of Raqqa, which are under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces, were bombed by Syrian National Army forces stationed in the Tal Abyad area, where the Ein Aisa - Tal Abyad front has witnessed mutual back-and-forth battles between Syrian National Army and Syrian Democratic Forces without resulting in any change in the distribution of areas of control.

Areas outside the control of Syrian regime forces in the north and east of Syria saw continuing attacks using explosives, primarily concentrated in Afrin region in Aleppo suburbs, Ras al Ein city in the northwestern suburbs of Hasaka governorate and Tal Abyad city in the northern suburbs of Raqqa governorate, with these explosions causing casualties. On February 16, SNHR documented the death of [a volunteer](#) with a humanitarian organization as a result of an IED explosion in al Bab city in Aleppo suburbs. Mark Cutts, the UN Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, [denounced](#) the killing of the volunteer in a press statement issued on February 17, in which he also indicated that one humanitarian worker is killed every thirty days, on average, in northwest Syria, making northwest Syria one of the most dangerous places in the world for humanitarian workers.

Assassinations continued throughout Syria, particularly in the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, Daraa and Deir Ez-Zour, killing and injuring dozens of civilians. Meanwhile, the assassinations in Daraa governorate targeted personnel from Syrian regime forces, regime collaborators and former regime opponents.

Mines continue to claim civilian lives throughout Syria, particularly in the suburbs of Aleppo, Hama and Raqqa, with SNHR documenting the deaths of 16 civilians, including six children, in February; among the victims was [a man and his child grandson](#), who died on February 15 as a result of a landmine explosion in the Badiya of Khanaser town in the southern suburbs of Aleppo, which is under the control of Syrian regime forces, while they were collecting truffles with other family members.

On February 17, the Civil Defense announced the discovery of a mass grave during rubble removal operations in the Tareeq al Sadd area on the outskirts of al Bab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo, with the Civil Defense teams managing to retrieve 19 bodies, which are likely date back to the period of ISIS's control over the city and battles in the area between the ISIS organization and the Syrian National Army factions.

In regard to arrests and enforced disappearances:

Syrian regime forces in February continued to persecute and arrest individuals who had concluded settlements of their security status with the regime in areas that had previously concluded related settlement agreements with the regime; these arrests have been concentrated in Damascus Suburbs and Daraa governorates, with most occurring during campaigns of mass raids and arrests and at checkpoints. We also recorded arrests carried out by the Criminal Security Branch targeting pro-Syrian regime media workers, government employees and civilians against the background of their criticism of the difficult living conditions in the areas controlled by the regime, with a general charge brought against them, namely: 'Weakening the nation's psyche', along with a series of other charges related to the Anti-Cybercrime Law.

Meanwhile, Syrian Democratic Forces continued enforcing the group's policies of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in February, with the number increasing this month, meaning that the rate of arrests documented as taking place at the hands of the Syrian Democratic Forces during this period was the highest amongst all the parties to the conflict. Syrian Democratic Forces also carried out campaigns of mass raids and arrests, targeting many civilians, including children, on the pretext of fighting ISIS cells, with some of these campaigns backed by US-led coalition helicopters. We also documented arrests of media activists and politicians. All these arrests were concentrated in the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Hasaka. We also recorded arrests/ detentions of women and children by SDF personnel on the grounds of their kinship relationships with persons wanted by Syrian Democratic Forces.

We have recorded the SDF targeting teachers in connection with their teaching educational curricula other than those imposed by SDF or against the background of forced conscription; we recently issued a detailed [report](#) on this issue on February 19, in which we mentioned that Syrian Democratic Forces have arrested/ detained at least 61 teachers over educational curricula and for forced conscription since the beginning of 2021, in addition to persecuting nearly 550 teachers arbitrarily dismissed from their jobs for refusing forced conscription in the governorates of Raqqqa, Deir Ez-Zour and Hasaka. On February 26, the Education Authority of the Syrian Democratic Forces' Self-Management body [published](#) a [statement](#) in response to the SNHR's report. The statement contained pre-prepared, unsubstantiated accusations which were clearly not based on any evidence, rather than discussing the contents of SNHR's report and conducting investigations to verify the statements and cases mentioned in the report. The statement stressed the group's complete denial of all the details in the report, accusing SNHR of great hostility to 'the experiment of democracy'.

February also saw Hay'at Tahrir al Sham detaining civilians, with these arrests, which were concentrated in Idlib governorate, including media activists; most of these arrests occurred due to the detainees expressing opinions critical of the HTS's management of areas under its control. These detentions were carried out arbitrarily in the form of raids in which HTS members stormed their victims' homes, often breaking down the doors, or by kidnapping their victims while they were traveling or passing through temporary checkpoints.

The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army also continued carrying out arbitrary detentions and kidnappings in February, most of which were carried out on a mass scale, targeting IDP civilians and activists, under the pretext of being present in areas where explosions had occurred, before releasing some of them later after being tortured; we also recorded mass arrests targeting those coming from areas under the control of the Syrian regime. In addition, we recorded detentions carried out under an ethnic pretext, with these incidents being concentrated in areas under the Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army's control in Aleppo governorate.

In regard to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Although the infections with the COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed a significant decrease in all regions of Syria according to the statistics issued by the competent authorities, we believe that the figures publicly announced, specifically by the Syrian regime, are inaccurate and that the actual number of deaths is far higher due to the lack of adequate medical services, with no medical examinations provided to detect cases of COVID-19 coronavirus infection, confirming a far larger number of deaths from the virus than acknowledged without the cause being disclosed; this is further exacerbated by the absence of any transparency in the

various government ministries, with the regime's security services completely controlling all data issued by these ministries, regardless of the reality, as is usually the case with totalitarian regimes. If the Syrian regime cared at all about the lives of Syrian citizens, it would have released at least [3,329 health care personnel](#) who are still arrested or forcibly disappeared in the regime's detention centers, despite the many calls for the urgent immediate release of all medical personnel due to Syrian society's desperate need for their expertise, a year since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in Syria, with new strains emerging since then.

The Syrian regime's Ministry of Health in February officially announced 1,540 cases of infection and 106 deaths, bringing the official total announced numbers to [15,588 cases of infection with 1,027 deaths, as of February 28](#).

On February 23, the Syrian regime's [Ministry of Tourism announced](#) the [resumption of religious tourism](#) from Iraq to Syria, despite the spread of the pandemic in the two countries; although Issam al Amin, General Director of al Mouwasat Hospital, claimed that this decision would not increase the rate of spread of the coronavirus in the country due to the precautionary measures that would be followed, we at the Syrian Network for Human Rights emphasize the [almost complete absence](#) of any precautionary measures in Syria.

On February 25, Dr. Hasan al Ghabbash, the Syrian regime's Minister of Health, announced that his ministry [had received](#) a batch of COVID-19 vaccine from a 'friendly country', stating that medical personnel would be vaccinated the following week.

In northwestern Syria, more infections and deaths due to coronavirus were recorded in February, with the Early Warning Alert and Response Network (EWARN) announcing the documentation of 178 infections and 19 deaths for the month; this brought the total number of infections and deaths announced by EWARN [as of February 28](#), to 21,175 cases of infection and 459 deaths.

In northeastern Syria, [as of February 28](#), a total of 8,608 coronavirus infection cases, including 321 deaths, had been announced by the Health Authority in the Self-Management Authority of Northern and Eastern Syria. We note that 132 cases of infection and 25 deaths were recorded in February.

On February 2, Human Rights Watch issued a statement, in which it said, "[Ensuring Covid-19 vaccine access to the northeast solely through the government has several significant problems. In January and July 2020, three of four border crossings that had been authorized by the UN Security Council for aid distribution were closed for this purpose. While northwest Syria still has one border crossing open, UN agencies providing aid to northeast Syria are now reliant on Damascus for delivery and services across areas of control.](#)"

Sara Kayyali, Syria researcher at Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division, said, "Those supplying vaccines for Syria should do everything in their power to ensure that Covid-19 vaccines reach those most vulnerable no matter where they are in the country. The Syrian government has never been shy about withholding health care as a weapon of war but playing this game with the vaccine undermines the global effort to control the pandemic."

In regard to living conditions:

The suffering of Syrian citizens continued to worsen in February due to the repercussions of the economic collapse, with manifestations of poverty and hunger becoming the norm in light of the inability of a large segment of society to secure the simplest types of food; there has been an increase in the phenomenon of begging and of whole families sleeping on the streets after losing their homes because they were unable to secure their rent, with many foraging in garbage skips for food scraps to survive. Citizens we spoke with revealed that most of them are burdened with debts that they cannot repay, with some augmenting their income with money sent to them by relatives abroad, despite the restrictions imposed by the Syrian regime on transfer offices. We've also received reports, which we were unable to verify, indicating an increase in the phenomenon of parents selling their children due to an inability to secure adequate food for them, in addition to a rise in the numbers of babies being abandoned across all regions of Syria, which seems to be caused by the economic deterioration, threatening a steady increase in the number of abandoned children of unknown parentage, which will affect the country's societal structure in the future.

In February, the suicide rate continued to rise in all regions of Syria, including incidents of child suicide, in addition to rising numbers of robberies and murders. In 2021, according to NUMBEO, Syria [ranked ninth](#) in crime rates globally.

On February 2, the pro-Syrian regime al Watan newspaper [published](#) a statement by Yousef Qasem, director of the state Grain Corporation, who said that the reduction of wheat allocations in some bakeries by about 16% had been corrected by reducing the weight of the bundle to 1100 grams. He further claimed that there some citizens still buy bread as livestock fodder, due to the low price of a loaf. SNHR can confirm, however, that Syrian citizens in the areas controlled by Syrian regime forces have been suffering for months in order to obtain bread, in quantities that are barely adequate.

The crisis of bread shortages continues to afflict most areas under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces, with the main reason behind the crisis in those areas being the high prices charged for bags of flour; one 50-kilogram bag of flour currently costs 45-60 thousand Syrian pounds (around 20 US dollars) on the black market. The SDF's Self-Management Authority provides some of its bakeries with bags of subsidized flour, whose price is about 25-35 thousand Syrian pounds (about 10 US dollars). Some local residents told us that the bakery owners in the area use only half the amount they're provided with, with the daily bread allocations for each family (consisting of 6 members) being 10-15 loaves at a price of 300-400 Syrian pounds (about 12 US cents).

On February 3, the pro-Syrian regime al Watan newspaper [published a report stating](#) that Bassam Tohme, Minister of Oil in the Syrian regime government, had responded to interventions of members of the regime's People's Assembly, saying that more than 2.2 million Syrian families, or 60% of all families in Syria, had not received their allocations of heating fuel, and that the fuel deficit amounted to more than 429.000 tons, due to the blockade and the economic sanctions imposed on Syria.

On February 13, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) [announced](#) that 12.4 million people in Syria were classified as being food insecure at the end of 2020 (60% of the total population), a sharp and alarming increase of 3.1 million people compared to the WFP's statistics in May 2020.

On February 18, Save the Children, [in a statement](#), expressed its concern about the steep rise in the numbers of the population suffering from hunger across Syria, adding, "It is estimated that 6.2 million of the country's children are going without food, a rise by of 35% in just four months".

On February 23, [the New York Times](#) published an article about the meeting between the Syrian regime's president and some pro-Syrian regime journalists in January 2021, without it being announced in advance. The newspaper reported that when the Syrian regime's president was asked about the economic collapse in Syria, he replied, "I know", but he offered no concrete steps to stem the crisis beyond suggesting that TV cookery shows be cancelled, saying: "Television channels should cancel cooking shows so as not to taunt Syrians with images of unattainable food." We note that this wasn't the first time that the Syrian regime has dealt with critical issues in such a callous, indifferent and irresponsible manner.

Meanwhile, the Syrian Network for Human Rights continues to monitor the Syrian regime's forces and militias continuing their looting of civilian and [public property](#), seizing vital civilian facilities and turning them into military headquarters in the areas where it seized control in the Idlib region in northwest Syria. In [a report](#) we issued in February, we discussed the Syrian regime's following the method of public auctions of forcibly displaced persons' lands, through which it managed to seize about 440 dunums of the properties of its opponents in Hama and Idlib suburbs, contributing to the additional suffering of thousands of Syrian farmers and their families.

In regard to displacement and forced displacement:

The camps in north and east Syria continue to suffer from deteriorating humanitarian conditions, which are exacerbated by the harsh climatic conditions; with the low temperatures, children and the elderly suffer from the severe cold. In recent months, humanitarian organizations in northwest Syria have constructed a number of buildings to house the IDPs instead of tents. However, the limited capabilities of these organizations in the face of such massive need mean they are still unable to secure the necessary number of these buildings.

In al Hawl Camp¹, we documented in February the deaths of eight civilians, including two women, at the hands of unknown gunmen believed to be affiliated with ISIS cells. Meanwhile, on February 21, Syrian Democratic Forces allowed nearly 350 IDPs from Manbej city, in the northern suburbs of Aleppo, to leave al Hawl Camp and return to their villages and towns. This was [the twelfth group](#) to leave the camp since the SDF [issued a decision to empty it](#) on October 10 2020.

On February 1, Save the Children, in a statement, [called on](#) all states with nationals trapped in the camps in northeast Syria to step up efforts to repatriate them, saying that 27,500 children from foreign and Iraqi citizens are now awaiting repatriation.

On February 8, UN human rights experts said, [in a statement](#), that they issued official letters to 57 governments who are believed to have nationals in al Hawl and Rouj² Camps in northeast Syria, urging them to repatriate their citizens in light of the continuing reports of increased violence in these camps since the beginning of the current year, 2021.

On February 27, [a fire broke](#) out in Section Four of al Hawl IDP Camp when a heater fell over inside one of the rooms in the shelter constructed from mud, resulting in the deaths by burning of seven civilians (six children and a woman).

¹ A camp located east of Hasaka city, near the Iraqi-Syrian border, which houses nearly 60,000 people

² It is located in al Malikiya area in the eastern suburbs of Hasaka, housing nearly 3,000 people.

On February 28, the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Mr. Imran Riza, and the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, Mr. Muhannad Hadi, issued [a joint statement](#) expressing their sorrow over a deadly fire in the camp which resulted in deaths among the camp residents, as well as voicing their concern about the possibility of such incidents recurring, and urging all relevant parties to work to find durable solutions for every person living in the camp.

Residents of al Rukban Camp, located east of Homs near the Syrian-Jordanian border, including children and people with special needs in particular, continue to suffer from the spread of diseases, especially chest flu, in light of a complete siege, and the absence of medical centers. On February 12, we documented the death of a 4-day-old Syrian infant, as a result of poor health care provided to her after her birth.

On February 15, [Russian media](#) published a press statement by Major General Vyacheslav Sitnik, deputy head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of the Warring Parties in Syria, in which he said that three crossings would be opened for those wishing to leave the Idlib region to travel to the areas controlled by the Syrian regime due to the deteriorating economic situation there.

On the 22nd of the month, [the Syrian regime announced](#) the opening of the Tranba crossing near Saraqeb city to allow the citizens to leave for their towns, over which the regime had regained control over. We monitored no passage of civilians through this crossing. Two days later, Major General Sitnik announced in [a press statement](#) that the crossing had been attacked by Jabhat al Nusra, and accordingly, the staff working there would be withdrawn.

In regard to political and human rights issues:

On February 2, Brigadier General Elias al Bitar, head of the Syrian regime's Exemption and Reserves Branch, [told](#) the Syrian regime's Ministry of Information that the General Recruitment Directorate will confiscate the money and property of anyone who did not perform the military service or pay for their missed service, whether inside or outside Syria, and reached the age of 42; in the event that those failing to perform the military service does not own any properties, the precautionary seizure will be carried out on his relatives' property.

On February 18, SANA published [a statement](#) by Hasan Khaddour, Director of the Consular Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, in which he denied the validity of what was being circulated on the matter. We at the SNHR believe that the conflict between two statements by two official figures of the very central Syrian regime is a deliberate and intended conflict that aims to cause confusion and fear among its opponents, driving them to rush to pay this allowance.

On February 3, Izumi Nakamitsu, UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, briefing the UN Security Council, [urged](#) Syria to cooperate fully with the OPCW secretariat, and noted that there are 19 outstanding issues related to chemical weapons.

On February 8, the European Union Commission issued [a statement](#) confirming that the European Union will host the fifth Brussels conference on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” on March 29-30, 2021.

On February 9, Geir O. Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, expressed in a [press statement](#) following his closed briefing to the Security Council, the importance of changing the way of dealing in the Constitutional Committee, in addition to bridging the gap in international divisions that impede the Syrian file.

On February 10, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy published [a study](#) that stated that the Syrian regime currently controls about 15% of the land borders with neighboring countries, while Hezbollah and Shiite militias control 20% of the borders.

On February 16 and 17, the Astana 15 meetings were held in the Russian city of Sochi, in the presence of Geir O. Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, after a break of nearly a year. [The statement of the 15th Astana Round](#) emphasized the necessity to maintain calm on the ground by fully implementing all agreements on Idlib, and the importance of the Constitutional Committee’s role in preparing and drafting a constitutional reform document, the need to increase humanitarian assistance in Syria, and the need to facilitate safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria.

On February 18, [the Independent International Commission of Inquiry](#) on the Syrian Arab Republic issued its thirty third report on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria, which emphasized the displacement of more than half of Syria’s population internally or externally during these years and the reduction of dozens of cities to rubble by relentless bombardment; the report indicated that: “The initial phases of the crisis and conflict involved massive arrest and detention campaigns, particularly those undertaken by government security forces, which are addressed in detail in the report of the Commission dedicated to arbitrary imprisonment and detention,” which will be issued on March 1, and which we will address in our next report.

On February 18, [a prisoner exchange](#) took place between the Syrian regime and Israel under Russian auspices (two Syrian captives in exchange for an Israeli captive). We at the SNHR believe that this exchange is ‘formal’ for purposes that have not been disclosed. While an Is-

raeli captive is usually exchanged for a number of captives, the number this time was limited to two Syrian captives, and it became clear that the first (Nihal al Maqt) was subject to house arrest, while the second (Ziab Qahmouz) refused to be handed over to the Syrian authorities, so the exchange took place with two other captives ([Muhammad Hussein and Tariq al Obeidan](#)), both of whom work as shepherds.

On February 19, UN Watch³ [said](#) that the United Nations would appoint Bassam al Sabbagh, the Syrian regime's new envoy to the United Nations, to a high position in the "Committee on Decolonization", which is in charge of upholding fundamental human rights in opposing the "subjugation, domination and exploitation" of peoples. The Syrian Network for Human Rights indicates that Bassam al Sabbagh will assume this position to succeed Bashar al Jaafari, the former Syrian envoy to the United Nations, and expresses its condemnation of giving the Syrian regime this position despite its involvement in crimes against humanity against the Syrian people.

With the approaching date of the presidential elections in Syria and in implementation of the recommendations of the [Ba'ath Vanguard Conference](#), which took place under the slogan 'Our hope is Bashar, to Continue the Journey,' on January 17th, the Ba'ath Vanguard Organization organized several activities in February bearing the same slogan, such as a [graphics exhibition](#) in Damascus and a [Child Parliament](#) in the governorates of Latakia and Hama. We at the Syrian Network for Human Rights condemn the Syrian regime's exploitation of children in this exercise in indoctrination promoting the permanence of this regime in power, and withholding children's freedom of expression, despite this being guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is ratified by the Syrian regime.

Meanwhile, on another issue, Muhammad al Rahmoun, the Syrian regime government's Minister of Interior, issued [a circular](#) to the Civil Registry departments whereby documents and statements of civil status are to be granted to all Syrian citizens (even those wanted by the security services), in their presence in person or through their families or lawyers assigned exclusively by them. We believe that this circular is an initiative used in promoting the re-election of the current president of the Syrian regime.

On the course of the pursuit of accountability:

On February 5, Stef Blok, the Netherlands' Minister for Foreign Affairs, [announced](#) that the country's Cabinet had approved an investigation into the Dutch government's provision of material aid to 22 armed groups in Syria between 2015 and 2018.

³ UN Watch, an independent non-governmental human rights organization based in Geneva, dedicated to holding the United Nations accountable to its founding principles.

On February 11, US Congressman Joe Wilson and Congressman Ted Deutch reintroduced the [Bassam Barabandi](#)⁴ Rewards for Justice Act; Wilson said, "I am grateful for Bassam, who inspired this bill, and has advocated expanding the U.S. State Department Rewards for Justice program, incentivizing people around the world to provide information on sanctions violators to improve enforcement."

On February 21, Stephen Rapp, Chair of the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, [revealed](#) to the US CBS News 60 Minutes program that more than 900,000 Syrian government documents have been smuggled out and archived by the Commission, containing strong evidence of the involvement of the president of the Syrian regime in committing war crimes.

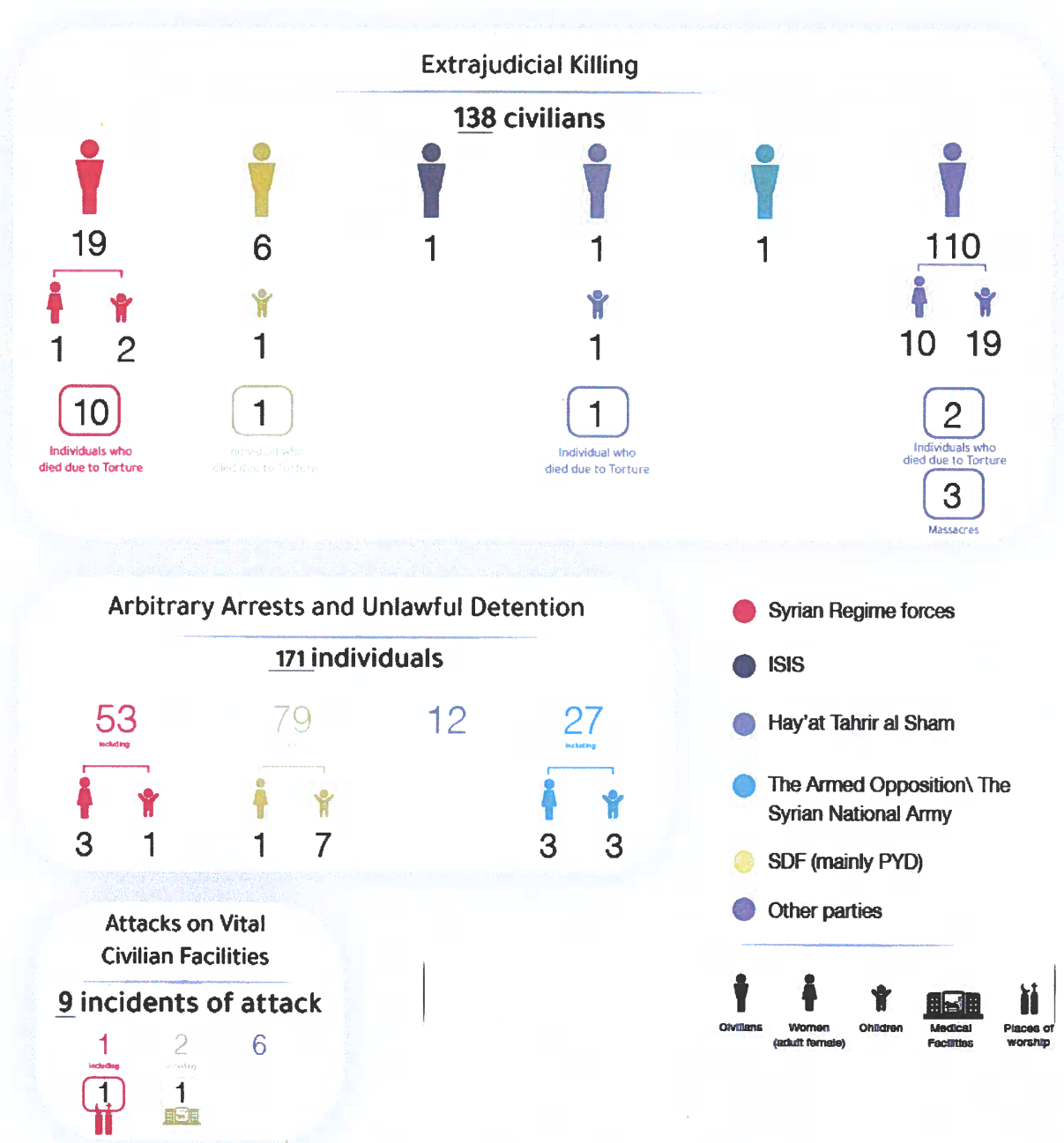
On February 22, the Supreme Court in Düsseldorf, Germany, [announced](#) that the Public Prosecutor had filed a lawsuit against two Syrian men on suspicion of their participation in the execution of an officer in the Syrian opposition factions in 2012, and that their trial will begin on March 4, with the two men being arrested in July 2020.

On February 24, [a court in Koblenz in Germany](#) issued a ruling, subject to appeal, sentencing a former regime official, named as Eyad Gh. to four-and-a-half years in prison for being an accomplice to and facilitating the commission of crimes of torture against nearly thirty detainees. Eyad. Gh is a former Chief Warrant Officer at the al Khatib Branch, who defected from the Syrian regime in early 2012, arriving in Germany in April 2018, and being arrested in February 2019. His trial began in April 2020, with several factors contributing to the commutation of the sentence issued against him; among the most prominent of these were his defection from the Syrian regime, his confession to committing violations, his cooperation with the prosecution, his provision of important information about the methods of torture and the brutal system in the regime's security branches, and his status as a relatively low-ranking official in the hierarchy at the al Khatib Branch, known as 'Branch 251'.

⁴ A former Syrian diplomat at the Syrian embassy in the US capital, Washington

III. The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in February:

This report outlines the most notable human rights violations that were documented by the SNHR in February 2021 at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria.



A. Extrajudicial killing:

In February 2021, SNHR documented the deaths of 138 civilians, including 23 children and 11 women (adult female), the largest percentage of whom were killed at the hands of other parties; among the victims were 14 individuals who died due to torture. We issued a report on the first of this month detailing the civilian victims documented killed in February at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria.

The death toll of civilian victims was distributed according to the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria as follows:

A. The main parties:

- **Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias)⁵** : 19 civilians, including two children and one woman.
- **ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State')**: One civilian.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham⁶** : One child.
- **The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army**: One civilian.
- **Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party)**: Six civilians, including one child.

B. Other parties:

We documented the deaths of 110 civilians, including 19 children and 10 women, at the hands of other parties, distributed as follows:

- Landmines of unknown source: 16 civilians, including six children and one woman.
- Gunfire of unknown source: 29 civilians, including two children and one woman.
- Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified: 22 civilians, including seven children and two women.
- Killings by unknown persons: 38 civilians, including two children and five women.
- Turkish border guards: Four civilians, including two children and one woman.
- Lebanese forces: One civilian.

⁵ We generally use the term 'the Syrian regime' rather than 'the Syrian government', because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is a totalitarian dictatorship based on ruling the nation in an authoritarian fashion through a very limited group of individuals, primarily the President of the Republic and his selected leaders of the security services, while the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, without any decision-making power or active role; this means that the government's role is wholly subordinate and limited to serving the regime, with all the main powers being concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic and the security services. Governance in Syria is wholly decided by the autocratic authority of the ruling family and there is no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade there for show; the Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he nominally presides which are in turn under the command of the President, while the Minister of Justice cannot summon a civilian-level security agent other than the head of a security branch; the security branches, along with the president, are the true power and the governing regime in Syria.

Although we acknowledge that the United Nations and its agencies use the term 'the Syrian government' in general, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

⁶ The United Nations has designated it as a terrorist organization

B. Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance:

In February 2021, SNHR documented at least 171 cases of arbitrary arrests/ detentions, including 11 children and seven women (adult female), at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria. The largest number of arrests was carried out by Syrian Democratic Forces in the governorate of Hasaka, then Deir Ez-Zour governorate. We issued a report on the second of this month detailing the record of cases of arrests and enforced disappearances which we documented in February at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria

The record of cases of arbitrary arrests was distributed according to the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 53, including one child and three women.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:** 12.
- **The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army:** 27, including three children and three women.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** 79, including seven children and one woman.

C. Attacks on vital civilian facilities:

In February 2021, SNHR documented at least nine incidents of attacks on vital civilian facilities, six of which were bombings whose perpetrators we have not been able to identify, with most of these incidents taking place in Aleppo governorate.

Among these attacks, we documented one attack on a medical facility, one on a place of worship and four on markets.

These attacks were distributed according to the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces as follows:

A. The main parties:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** One.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Two.

B. Other parties:

- Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified: six.

The record of attacks documented in February 2021 on vital civilian facilities was distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:

Attacked Facility	Perpetrator Party		
	Syrian Regime forces	Syrian Democratic Forces	Other parties Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified
Places of Worship			
Mosques	1		
Vital Medical Facilities			
Medical facilities		1	
Communal Facilities			
Markets			4
Infrastructure			
Industrial facilities			2
Civil Society Organizations		1	
Total	1	2	6

The most notable attacks on vital civilian facilities in February:

On Tuesday, February 2, 2021, [a car bomb](#) of unknown source exploded near the industrial zone in Awlan village located in the north of al Bab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, resulting in [casualties](#), [as well](#) as [partially destroying](#) a [number](#) of [industrial warehouses](#). SNHR is still trying to contact witnesses and survivors to obtain more details of the incident. The area was under the control of the Syrian National Army forces at the time of the incident.

On Monday, February 8, 2021, Syrian regime forces used a missile launcher to shell al Bab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, with a number of missiles landing near the city's [al Kabir Mosque](#), causing minor material damage to the mosque's structure and furniture. Al Bab city was under the control of the Syrian National Army forces at the time of the incident.

On Saturday, February 13, 2021, a car bomb of unknown source exploded in the main market in [al Ra'ee](#) town in the northeastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, resulting in casualties, [as well as causing severe](#) destruction to [a number of shops](#), and [inflicting significant](#) material damage on the market facilities. SNHR is still trying to contact witnesses and survivors to obtain more details of the incident. The town was under the control of the Syrian National Army forces at the time of the incident.

On Wednesday, February 17, 2021, Syrian Democratic Forces used a missile launcher to shell Villas Street in the center of Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. One of the missiles landed near the back entrance to the city's [al Shefaa Hospital](#), injuring a number of civilians, and causing minor [material damage](#) to the hospital's structure and furniture. Afrin city was under the control of Syrian National Army forces at the time of the incident.

On Saturday, February 20, 2021, an IED of unknown origin exploded in the center of a popular market in al Bseira city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, resulting in casualties, as well as causing minor material damage to a [number of shops](#) and the market facilities. SNHR is still trying to contact witnesses and survivors to obtain more details of the incident. The city was under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces at the time of the incident

On Thursday, February 25, 2021, a car bomb of unknown source exploded in the poultry market in Ras al Ein city in the northwestern suburbs of Hasaka governorate, causing a massacre, as well as causing moderate material damage to a number of shops. SNHR is still trying to contact witnesses and survivors to obtain more details of the incident. The city was under the control of Syrian National Army forces at the time of the incident.

D. Record of indiscriminate attacks and attacks using outlawed weapons:

The Syrian Network for Human Rights was unable to document any indiscriminate attacks or attacks using outlawed weapons in February.

IV. The Syrian Regime Bears Primary Responsibility for the Spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic:

The COVID-19 pandemic has swept across most of the world, and caused massive numbers of infections and deaths, with most of the world's stable countries worldwide dealing with it seriously and taking exceptional measures to protect the population; many countries have announced their desire to attract and employ more medical personnel, and some governments have released large numbers of imprisoned people and detainees as a precautionary measure to stop the disease from spreading.

By contrast, since the beginning of the global pandemic outbreak, the Syrian regime has dealt with it with callous, total and extreme disregard and absolute negligence, with several countries announcing the arrival of infected cases from Syria since the beginning of March 2020. Despite this, the Syrian regime continued to deny the existence of any infections in Syria until March 22.

The COVID-19 coronavirus does not distinguish between one person or another or between one region and another, and all the regions of Syria, particularly Idlib and surrounding areas, that have witnessed bombings, destruction and forced displacement are suffering from further challenges in addition to the usual ones, which cannot be compared to those in any other location; at the forefront of these challenges are the nearly 3 million Syrian IDPs, who have been unable to return to their homes. A number of factors make them more vulnerable than others to infection with COVID-19, most notably:

- The Idlib region and the northwestern suburbs of Aleppo and its environs are already experiencing massive overcrowding due to the earlier displacement of tens of thousands of Syrians to these places from several areas such as the Eastern Ghouta, the northern suburbs of Homs, southern Syria, and recently the suburbs of Idlib and Hama, which has caused a drastic increase in the existing overcrowding, making the process of social physical distancing virtually impossible.
- Most of these people live in hastily constructed camps or structures which are wholly inadequate and unsuitable for housing (such as schools, shops, unfinished apartments, demolished buildings, caves, etc.), which lack the most basic sanitary infrastructure such as toilets, functioning sewage networks, or clean water, which makes the available water allocations necessary for periodic personal hygiene for each person far less than would be available in normal conditions or in other areas in Syria. The IDPs are struggling to obtain enough tents, and are sometimes forced to live in a tent collectively, which particularly negatively affects women due to their special needs.
- The healthcare system in and around Idlib continues to suffer from the repercussions of violent and focused targeting by the Syrian and Russian regimes' forces, which has contributed to a large number of health centers being put out of service.

The Syrian Jazira region (Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, Raqqqa), which is controlled by the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces, suffers from a similar situation, and also includes large numbers of IDPs living in camps. Russia's use of its United Nations veto has caused the cancellation of three of the four crossings, with al Ya'rubiya crossing with Iraq being one of the crossings canceled; this caused the region to be denied direct UN aid, which is now provided exclusively through the Syrian regime that deliberately creates obstacles to aid provision and systematically carries out large-scale extortion, which we addressed extensively in our report: [Sanctions Are Linked to the Syrian Regime's Continuing Violations and Don't Include Medical Supplies and Food, Which Shouldn't Be Delivered Through the Regime](#), with the United Nations Secretary-General speaking about this in [his report issued on February 21, 2020](#). [Human Rights Watch also issued a report](#) on the crisis facing the medical sector in that region and the complex difficulties it faces due to the closure of al Ya'rubiya crossing.

As for the areas under the control of the Syrian regime, whilst these are better off than the Idlib region, its environs, and the Syrian Jazira region, they suffer mainly from the exodus of medical personnel, and from the massive corruption in all the regime's organs, as well as from the depletion of the Syrian state's monetary reserves, which are spent on bombings, military operations, and security services at the expense of supporting the medical sector and services. SNHR has also demanded that Russia, a massively wealthy country, help its ally, the Syrian regime, given the circumstances of the spread of the COVID-19, as this would be far better and less costly than air strikes on medical facilities, cities and towns in and around Idlib.

V. Attachments:

[\(1\) Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 138 Civilians, Including 23 Children, 11 Women, and 14 Victims Due to Torture, Including a Child, in February 2021](#)

[\(2\) At least 171 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest/ Detention Documented in Syria in February 2021, Including 11 Children and Seven Women](#)

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations:

Conclusions:

- The evidence we have gathered indicates that attacks continue to be directed against civilians and civilian objects. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have committed various crimes, including extrajudicial killings, arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance. In addition, the indiscriminate bombardment and other attacks carried out caused the destruction of facilities and buildings. There are reasonable grounds to believe that the war crime of attacking civilians has been committed in many cases.
- The Syrian government has not only violated international humanitarian law and customary law, but has also breached a number of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 2139, resolution 2042 on the release of detainees, and resolution 2254, all without any accountability.
- We could find no record of any warnings being issued by the Syrian Regime or Russian forces prior to any attack under the requirements of international humanitarian law. This has been the case since the beginning of the popular uprising for freedom, providing another blatant demonstration of these forces' total disregard for the lives of civilians in Syria.
- The magnitude and frequency of the violations, the disproportionate use of military force, the indiscriminate manner of the bombing, and the coordinated approach of these attacks lead to the inescapable conclusion that these acts are wholly deliberate and based on high-level orders, and as such constitute a part of state policy.

- The indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardment carried out by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces is considered to be a clear violation of international humanitarian law, with indiscriminate killings amounting to war crimes.
- Hay'at Tahrir al Sham has violated international humanitarian law, causing the death of many civilians, as well as damage to vital civilian facilities.
- The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army violated UN Security Council Resolution 2139 through carrying out attacks that are considered to violate customary international humanitarian law, causing civilian casualties or accidental injuries.
- All the attacks documented in this report, particularly bombings, caused massive collateral damage that involved loss of lives, injuries, or significant damage to civilian objects. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.
- The use of explosive arms to target densely populated areas reflects a criminal and wholly deliberate mindset, with the perpetrators clearly intending to inflict the greatest possible number of deaths, which is a clear contravention of international human rights law and a flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention (arts. 27, 31, 32).

Recommendations:

UN Security Council

- The Security Council must take additional steps following its adoption of Resolution 2254, which clearly insists that "all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such."
- The Syrian issue should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible for violations should be held accountable, while Russia must stop using the veto, as it is a party to the Syrian conflict, and the UNSC states' veto power should be withheld when crimes against humanity and war crimes are committed.
- Ensure peace and security and implement the principle of responsibility to protect civilians' lives and to save the Syrian people's heritage and historical artifacts from destruction, looting and vandalism.
- The Security Council should adopt a resolution banning the use of cluster munitions and landmines in Syria, similar to the existing prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and include advice on how to safely remove the remnants of such dangerous weapons.
- The four other permanent member states should put pressure on the Russian government to end its support for the Syrian regime, which uses chemical weapons, and to expose its involvement in this regard.
- Request that all relevant United Nations agencies make greater efforts to provide food, medical and humanitarian assistance in areas where fighting has ceased, and in internally displaced person camps, and to follow-up with those States that have pledged voluntary contributions.

International Community

- In light of the split within the Security Council and its utter inability to take any effective action, action should be taken on the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people by protecting them from daily killing and by lifting sieges, as well as by increasing support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be enacted in local courts regarding these crimes in order to conduct fair trials for all those who were involved.
- SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 'Responsibility to Protect' in dozens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) after all political channels through the Arab League's plan and then Mr. Kofi Annan's plan have proved fruitless, along with the Cessation of Hostilities statements and Astana agreements that followed. Therefore, steps should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, while the norm of the 'Responsibility to Protect', which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.
- Renew pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- Work on fulfilling justice and achieving accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and to activate the principle of universal jurisdiction.

OHCHR

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the incidents mentioned in this report and previous reports since these attacks were perpetrated by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

- Launch investigations into the cases included in this report and previous reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide further evidence and data.
- Focus on the issue of landmines and cluster munitions within the next report.

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

- Collect further evidence about the crimes documented in this report.

The United Nations Special Envoy to Syria

- Condemn the perpetrators of crimes and massacres, and those who were primarily responsible for dooming the de-escalation agreements.
- Re-sequence the peace process so that it can resume its natural course despite Russia's attempts to divert and distort it, empowering the Constitutional Committee prior to the establishment of a transitional governing body.

The Syrian regime

- Stop indiscriminate shelling and targeting of residential areas, hospitals, schools and markets, and end the use of outlawed weapons and barrel bombs.
- Ensure compliance with UN Security Council resolutions and customary humanitarian law.

The Russian regime

- Launch investigations into the incidents included in this report, make the findings of these investigations public for the Syrian people, and hold those responsible accountable.
- Compensate all the damaged centers and facilities, rebuild and rehabilitate them, and compensate all the families of victims who were killed by the current Russian regime, as well as all the wounded.
- Completely cease the bombing of hospitals, protected objects, and civilian areas, and respect customary international law.
- As a guarantor party in Astana talks, the Russian regime must stop thwarting de-escalation agreements, and apply pressure on the Syrian regime in order to end all indiscriminate attacks and to allow unconditional passage of humanitarian aid to besieged areas.

The Coalition (US-led coalition and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces)

- The states supporting the SDF should apply pressure on these forces in order to compel them to cease all of their violations in all the areas and towns under their control.
- Syrian Democratic Forces must immediately stop conscripting children, hold the officers involved in such violations accountable, and pledge to return all children who have been arrested for conscription immediately.

The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army

- The Armed Opposition/ the Syrian National Army must ensure the protection of civilians in all areas under their control. These forces should also take care to distinguish between civilians and military targets and cease any indiscriminate attacks.
- Take punitive action against those who commit violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

Humanitarian Organizations

- Develop urgent operational plans to secure decent shelter for internally displaced persons.
- Provide protected facilities and vehicles, such as medical facilities, schools, and ambulances, with distinctive signs that can be distinguished from long distances.

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