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On World Press Freedom Day

The Annual Report **on the Most Notable Violations** **Against Media Workers in Syria**

The death of

715

**Journalists and Media Workers
Killed in Syria Since March
2011, Including 52 Who Died
due to Torture at the Hands
of the Parties to the Conflict
and Controlling Forces**



Wednesday 03 May 2023

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 analyzes in Syria.

Contents:

I. Syria is One of the World's Worst Countries in Terms of the Freedom of Press, Opinion, and Expression	1
II. Twelve Years of Continuing Violations Against Journalists, Media Workers, and the Freedom of Press and Expression	5
III. Conclusions and Recommendations	21
Acknowledgment.....	22

I. Syria is One of the World's Worst Countries in Terms of the Freedom of Press, Opinion, and Expression

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the initial proclamation of May 3 as World Press Freedom Day, in accordance with the [resolutions](#) of the 26th session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference held in 1991. In proclaiming May 3 as the annual celebration of press freedom, UNESCO emphasized that¹ “a free, pluralist and independent press is an essential component of any democratic society”. On December 18, 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted [a resolution](#) on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. On May 27, 2015, the Security Council adopted [resolution 2222](#) condemning attacks and violence against journalists, media workers, and personnel associated with media outlets in situations of armed conflict. These are just a few of the numerous texts championing freedom of opinion and expression in international human rights law.

Meanwhile in Syria, the Syrian regime has ruled the country with an iron fist for half a century since the reign of Hafez Assad. This totalitarian rule barely changed when Bashar, following in his father's footsteps, became president with the ruling dynasty's ruthless oppression continuing to this day. The Syrian regime's oppressive policies include banning all political parties, and with them any expression of dissident or even independent media outlets. In fact, in the past 60 years, Syria has never experienced freedom of the press and media. There has never been even one free, independent media outlet, whether newspaper or website, since the Baath party seized power in March 1963. Even before Hafez Assad took over absolute control, the Baathist regime made its intentions known by banning all the existing independent newspapers,² allowing only the existence of newspapers that served as regime mouthpieces.³ Hafez Assad, subsequently, only advanced those totalitarian policies further.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) stresses that, as long as dictatorship and despotism continue to exist in Syria, the country will never enjoy freedom of press, opinion, and expression. The only way to change this terrible reality in which fundamental freedoms are denied and absolutely crushed is to bring about a political transition to democracy in Syria, which has been the people's fundamental demand since the popular uprising first began in March 2011.

As noted above, the current Syrian regime has imposed oppressive policies on journalism and journalists in the country ever since it first seized power. However, it notably further intensified its oppression of journalists and media workers following the breakout of the popular uprising in Syria, in March 2011. Indeed, the regime didn't only crush domestic press freedom, but even expelled all the Arabic and international media outlets that had been operating in Syria, except for regime-affiliated Iranian, Russian, and Lebanese media outlets, which, unsurprisingly, broadcast and publish pro-regime rhetoric justifying or even flatly denying the regime's crimes. This ban has been in place for 12 years now, with only a very few conditional and insignificant exceptions.

1. Was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1993.

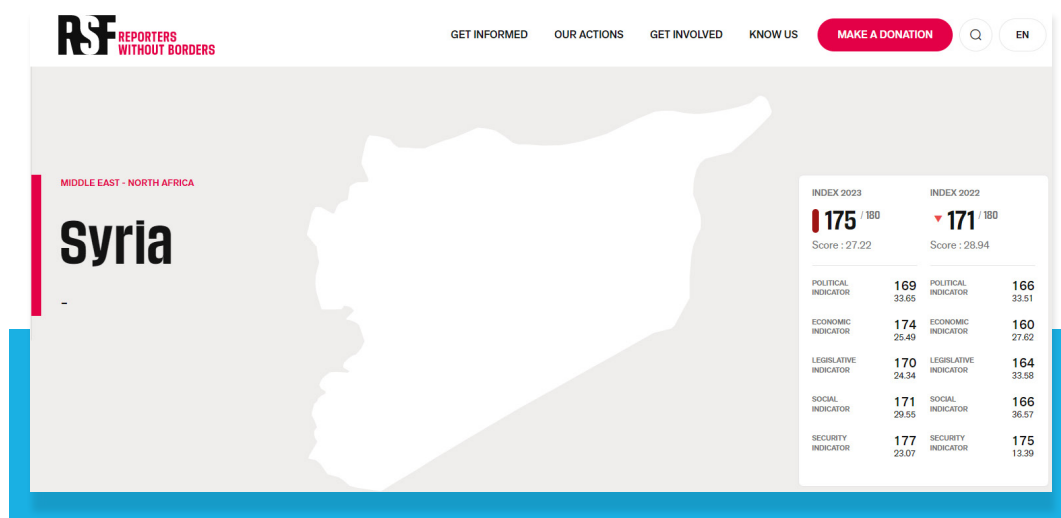
2. People's Assembly of Syria, Legislative Decree No. 4 of 1963 on Cancelling Newspapers and Periodical Publications and Sealing and Shutting Down Their Place of Print <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=16478&RID=1&Last=6&First=0&CurrentPage=0&Vld=1&Mode=1&Service=1&Loc1=0&Key1=&SDate=&EDate=&Year=1963&Country=&Num=&Dep=-1&>

3. The Baath Newspaper that debuted in 1948, the Thawra Newspaper launched after the coup by the Baath Party in 1963 (at the time, Hafez Assad called the coup the 8 March Revolution, inaugurating that newspaper to perpetuate this narrative), and the Tishreen Newspaper that debuted in 1975.

Naturally, this created a glaring chasm in media coverage, with the great and noble journalistic duty of reporting the reality of the historical events transpiring in the country falling, as a result, on the shoulders of activists, giving rise to what became known as “citizen journalists”. These activists risked their lives to document and report news events, with many having great success that enabled them to work with reputable international media outlets.

While the Syrian regime was and still is the main party responsible for the crimes against journalists and media workers, the regime is not the only party perpetrating them, with all parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria having been guilty of such violations, especially against those journalists and media workers exposing the acts of the de facto authorities that emerged in Syria. Sadly, the areas that broke free of the Syrian regime’s control routinely failed to present a democratic example of respect for the freedom of the press, opinion, and expression. All parties to the conflict have resorted to policies of silencing dissent, and, thus, Syria has become one of the world’s worst countries in terms of press freedom in light of 12 years of compounded and accumulated violations against the media sector as confirmed by many international organizations involved in assessing press freedom worldwide, **such as:**

- Syria is currently ranked as 171 (out of 180) countries on the Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) [2022 World Press Freedom Index](#). In other words, Syria is the world’s ninth worst country in terms of press freedom. “In this country, at war for more than a decade,” the RSF’s index notes, “reporters are denied access to entire swathes of the territory. The regime treats the media as a tool for disseminating Baathist ideology and excludes any form of pluralism, driving many journalists into self-imposed exile.”



- Syria received a score of 1/100⁴ in Freedom House’s [annual report](#) released in March 2023, which evaluates the levels of freedoms and civil and political rights in 210 states and territories.⁵ “Political rights and civil liberties in Syria are severely compromised by one of the world’s most repressive regimes and by other belligerent forces in an ongoing civil war,” the report reads. “The regime prohibits genuine political opposition and harshly suppresses freedoms of speech and assembly. Corruption, enforced disappearances, military trials, and torture are rampant in government-controlled areas.”

4. The scale goes from 1 to 100, with the score 0 being the least free, and 100 the freest.

5. Non-independent state.

- On December 14, the [RSF](#) organization released its annual round-up report for the year 2022 on violence and abuses against journalists. The report named Syria as one of the world's six most dangerous countries for journalists, accounting for the highest number of journalists being held hostage globally, with 42 of the 65 journalists currently held hostage worldwide being held hostage in Syria. On December 30, the same organization released a report on [the toll of journalists killed in the last two decades](#). The report notes that the annual global death toll reached its height in 2012 and 2013 when 144 and 142 journalists respectively were killed. This death toll, the report added, was largely due to the conflict in Syria, with 80 percent of media fatalities in the past two decades occurring in only 15 countries. Overall, Syria accounted for the second-highest number of journalists killed in the past two decades as the report reveals.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, executive director of SNHR, says:

“On World Press Freedom Day, we acknowledge and remember the sacrifices of hundreds of Syrian journalists and Syrian media activists, particularly since the start of the popular uprising in March 2011, since when they've been specifically targeted. These brave journalists are still awaiting justice and accountability for the perpetrators of violations in Syria, most importantly the Syrian regime because dictatorship and despotism are the stark opposite of press freedom. As long as the current Syrian regime remains in power, Syria will never have any genuine form of freedom of the press.”

Methodology

Since its establishment, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has given priority to documenting and publishing reports on violations against the media sector, including killing, arrest, injury, or persecution, through issuing daily news, [monthly reports](#), and [special reports](#). Additionally, we publish an annual report on World Press Freedom in which we attempt to summarize the most notable violations by all parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria against journalists and media workers in the previous year.

According to the [methodology](#) incorporated by SNHR, a citizen journalist is “any individual who has played an important role in reporting and disseminating news. This is not necessarily a neutral person, as is supposed to be the case with a journalist in normal circumstances. However, when an individual takes up arms and participates directly in offensive combat operations, he or she is no longer categorized as a citizen journalist; this categorization can be restored, however, if the individual abstains completely from any involvement in military action.”

This report summarizes the most notable violations suffered by journalists and media workers between March 2011 and May 2023, with particular focus on the most notable violations recorded in the last year (May 2022-May 2023), including the most notable incidents recorded in this period.

SNHR's database allows us to categorize the victims who have been killed and the cases of arrest by the governorate where the incident took place and by the victim's governorate of origin. In this report, we've chosen to categorize incidents according to their location, rather than the victims' governorate or origin, in order to give a sense of the loss and violence experienced by media workers in every Syrian governorate.

In compiling this report, we relied on researchers on the ground, and obtained accounts by talking directly with the victims, their families, or eyewitnesses. These accounts are not taken from any second-hand sources. This report includes one account as a qualitative sample. We have explained the purpose of the interviews to the witnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in service of this report without giving or offering them any inducements or compensation. We also gave assurances that, as always, we would not reveal the identity of any witness who chose to conceal their identity. All of these procedures are in line with SNHR's internal protocols that we abide by and strive constantly to improve through our experience so as to maintain the highest standards of care and reliability.

Furthermore, SNHR has analyzed video footages and photos published online, and others sent to us by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or our social media channels in service of this report. We maintain copies of all the videos and photos included in this report in a secret database, in addition to keeping backup copies on hard drives. Still, we cannot claim that we have documented all cases in light of the ban and persecution imposed by the Syrian regime, as well as by other armed groups, against our staff members.

This report only covers the bare minimum, which we have been able to document, of the full magnitude and scope of the violations that occurred. It also does not reflect the social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

II. Twelve Years of Continuing Violations Against Journalists, Media Workers, and the Freedom of Press and Expression

Since the beginning of the popular uprising, the various parties to the conflict have unapologetically carried out practices that violate the freedom of press, opinion, and expression. We have documented numerous types of serious violations, including extrajudicial killings, arrest/enforced disappearance, torture, assaults on facilities, and imposing laws that restrict the freedom of press, opinion, and expression. The Syrian regime, which controls the Syrian state, bears the primary responsibility for Syria's disastrous rankings worldwide in terms of freedom of press and media work, and through this of defaming the image of Syria and Syrians. Indeed, the Syrian regime is the primary perpetrator of violations against journalists and media workers, vastly surpassing the other parties to the conflict individually or collectively. Meanwhile, Russia is practically a supporter and backer of the Syrian regime's violations, which necessarily entails that it bears joint responsibility with the Syrian regime for 85 percent of all violations against journalist and media workers in Syria.

We have documented further horrific violations [since our last annual report](#), released in May 2022. We noticed no tangible difference in the practices of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces against journalists and media workers in the last year compared to previous years. Overall, press freedom in Syria continues to be notable only by its absence.

A. Syrian regime forces

As noted above, the Syrian regime, which controls the Syrian state, bears the primary responsibility for Syria's disastrous rankings worldwide in terms of freedom of the press and media work, defaming the image of Syria and Syrians. The types of violations perpetrated by the Syrian regime against journalists and media workers are varied. The regime still maintains its ban on all independent media outlets, imposing full and absolute control over state media, and quashing any freedom of opinion and expression for media workers and citizens through restrictive laws⁶ and decrees⁷ (or the People's Assembly of Syria, which is also completely subservient to the regime) that explicitly violate international human rights law, and

6. For example, Article 12 of the [Media Law](#) has five paragraphs detailing what cannot be published, including "any and all content that would be deemed a threat to the national unity and security, or an insult to Abrahamic religions, religious beliefs, or instigating sectarian or creed grudges." Paragraph 5 also bans "any and all slight to the symbols of the state". All those terms are undefined and can be used to ban almost everything.

The law also gives the regime's National Council for Media the right to regulate the media sector. The Council, according to Article 20 of the same law, is composed of "nine members, including the head of the Council and their deputy, and must be Syrian nationals. And they shall be appointed through a decree issued by the Head of the Syrian Regime for a term of three years renewable once."

7. On May 7, 2012, [Legislative Decree No. 17](#) on Implementing the Rules of Social Media and Counter-Cybercrime Law was issued. According to Article 28, the minimum sentence specified in the applicable criminal laws is doubled in the event the internet, a PC, or an information system was used. Paragraph C of the same Article names multiple forms of the crime punishable by law, including "promoting terrorism using information technology." It is well known that the Syrian regime describes all of its dissidents, and anyone who publishes any information exposing its practices and violations as a "terrorist".

alarmingly limit the freedom of the press, opinion, and expression.⁸ The most recent laws passed by the regime that imposes further restrictions on the freedom of press, opinion, and expression is Law No. 20 of 2022⁹ regarding cybercrime, which was passed by the head of the Syrian regime Bashar Assad on April 18, 2022. The law provided for an overhaul of the punitive legal rules regarding cybercrime, as specified by Legislative Decree 17/2012.¹⁰ The new law contains vague articles with no clear definitions. We believe that the law violates the right to freedom of the press, opinion, and expression, and threatens digital rights and online privacy. The 50-article law also imposes harsher punishments in regard to publishing content online should the authorities find it dissident in nature. Furthermore, the law imposes a fine and prison sentence on anyone found to be publishing digital content online with the aim of “toppling or changing the ruling regime in the state”, or “undermining the prestige of the state or affecting national unity.” We, at SNHR, stress that the law is simply a perpetuation of the Syrian regime’s policies of restricting freedom of opinion and expression by only expanding the scope of the vague and broad charges devised and used by the Syrian regime as a pretext since March 2011 to legitimize the widespread arrests and give reins to the member of its security agencies. [Our last report on the most notable violations against media workers in Syria](#), released on last year’s World Press Freedom Day (May 3, 2022), contained a brief analysis of the law.¹¹

Since the Syrian regime promulgated the Media Law, we have documented continued widespread arrests by the regime’s criminal security branches across Syria of people voicing their criticism on social media of the worsening living condition and corruption in regime-held areas. Those arrests targeted pro-regime media figures and civilians from other groups within society (including women, university students, government employees, and lawyers), and faced other strong charges related to the Counter-Cybercrime Law. SNHR documented that the Syrian regime arrested 128 individuals, including 19 women, on the grounds of the [Counter-Cybercrime Law](#) between April 18, 2022, when the Counter-Cybercrime Law was promulgated, and May 2023. Of these, 17 were journalists/citizen journalists and media workers.

Examples of such cases include:

Rami Raul Fetali, a blogger and social activist born in 1977, from Latakia city, was arrested in March 2023 by members of the Syrian regime’s Criminal Security division after being summoned to its local branch in Latakia city over voicing demands to implement the law criminalizing torture in regime-controlled areas on his Facebook page. He was taken to an undisclosed location. Rami faces a list of charges including “undermining the spirit of the nation”, as well as other charges related to the Counter-Cybercrime Law. Rami’s fate remains unknown to SNHR.

8. “Media outlets are prohibited from publishing... 1. Any and all content that would be deemed a threat to the national unity and security, or an insult to Abrahamic religions, religious beliefs, or instigating sectarian or creed grudges... 5. Any and all slight to the symbols of the state.” People’s Assembly of Syria, Article 12 of Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011, known as the Media Law. <https://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5578&nid=4387&First=0&Last=14&CurrentPage=0>

“A. The council shall be composed of nine members, including the head of the Council and its deputy. The members shall be chosen based on their experience in the fields of media, communication, intellect, culture, and the technical specialties related to the media, and must be fully naturalized Syrian nationals...”

C. The head of the Council and its deputy shall be appointed through a council, which also specifies their compensation, for a term of three years, renewable once.” People’s Assembly of Syria, Article 20 of Legislative Decree No. 108 of 2011, known as Media Law. <https://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5578&nid=4387&First=0&Last=14&CurrentPage=0>

9. For the full text of the Cybercrime Law (Law No. 20 of 2022), see: <https://moct.gov.sy/news-0015>

10. People’s Assembly of Syria, Legislative Decree No. 17 on Implementing the Rules of Social Media and Counter-Cybercrime Law. <https://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=4337&RID=1&Last=118&First=0&CurrentPage=0>

11. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (2022). The Annual Report on the Most Notable Violations against Media Workers in Syria on World Press Freedom Day. Retrieved May 3, 2023, from <https://snhr.org/?p=57794>

On April 27, 2023, Syrian regime forces arrested [Omar Abdullah, known as 'Omar Deir Mama'](#), the head of the Misyaf News Network, from Deir Mama village (administratively a part of Misyaf city) in the western suburbs of Hama governorate. Omar faces charges under the Counter-Cybercrime Law, which is, as explained earlier, used by the Syrian regime to justify the arrest of citizens, including citizen journalists or media workers, as well as state employees and other citizens for expressing criticism of the poor living conditions in regime-controlled areas.

B. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has become well known for adopting practices that restrict all sorts of freedom of opinion in the areas under its control, with journalism work being no exception to this rule; indeed, the group has placed severe restrictions on the work of journalists/citizen journalists in areas under its control, going as far to killing and arresting those whom the group feels might pose a threat to its extremist views and practices. SNHR has recorded the arrests of dozens of citizen journalists for expressing views that oppose HTS' policies or practicing journalism without obtaining a 'permit' from the group. We also documented dozens of journalists sustaining injuries due to being shot by HTS members while they were covering anti-HTS demonstrations, which drove many to give up media work or to flee areas under HTS' control.

In addition to the incidents mentioned above, we observed certain practices that are unique to HTS' restrictive and censorious policies against journalists and media workers in areas under its control, all of which aim, in our view, to assert its control over journalists' activities. Those practices include:

- HTS forced journalists and media workers in areas under its control wishing to work in the media field to obtain a 'journalist card', which requires them to submit applications to the media relations office in the HTS' Salvation Government which include detailed personal information about the applicants and their work. Upon receiving the card (a process that can take up to as long as two months), the journalist has to pledge to comply with certain conditions, including the prohibition of filming using drones in HTS-controlled areas without a permit, clarifying the nature of the piece/report they are working on and for which media outlet they intend to send such materials.
- We documented a number of cases of journalists and media workers being summoned by the Salvation Government's media directorate over posts they published on their personal Facebook pages on World Press Freedom Day.
- Journalists in areas under HTS' control were particularly targeted in the form of the HTS' media relations office filing lawsuits against them in coordination with the Salvation Government's journalist affairs office. In cases where a certain media worker failed to comply with the procedures set out in the lawsuit, the security forces operating in the area where the media worker in question lives would force them to appear at an HTS office. We, at SNHR, have recorded dozens of cases of such summonses and threats by HTS, in which we discovered that there had been coordination between the group's different security apparatuses and civilian/judicial institutions (even though HTS denies any ties to these) to act on those summons/threats. We expanded on these practices in [our report](#) released on January 31, 2022.

Over the course of the last year, meanwhile, the HTS' Salvation Government's media directorate summoned media activists over posts they published on social media or in relation to their participation in discussions, which were held in virtual group on social media, that involved criticism of HTS' policies; many activists told us that they were forced to sign pledges to not repeat their criticism or any accusations against the HTS under the threat of being prosecuted and tried if they did so.

Furthermore, through our monitoring of the implementation of the [amnesty decree](#) issued by the Salvation Government's Ministry of Justice on April 2, 2022,¹² we concluded that those affected by the amnesty decree did not include prisoners of conscience, as releases were limited solely to criminal convicts that the rules of the decree applied to.

C. All armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army

The areas under the control of armed opposition factions/the Syrian National Army (SNA) have also failed to give a positive example of freedom of press, opinion, and expression. On the contrary, journalists and media workers have faced policies that involved persecution, extortion, intimidation, arrest, and torture. Many media workers we interviewed expressed their desire to flee the areas under the control of the SNA in fear of potentially being arrested again or after facing threats due to their media activism. Some factions also demonstrated gender-based discrimination against female media workers. Indeed, the armed opposition/SNA has failed to provide a safe and stable environment for media work in areas under their control. Many [incidents of assault](#) against media workers took place in the armed opposition's territories with no serious investigations being launched, nor were the findings of any investigations which were conducted made public to the Syrian public.

D. Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has massively restricted freedom of press, particularly of any media exposing its practices or opposing its policies. In some cases, the SDF has restricted the movement of media workers, with some being pursued, arrested, and persecuted to the point that they decided to flee SDF-held areas. Similar to the HTS, SDF requests all media workers to obtain a media permit. In some cases, media workers applying for this permit have been subjected to interrogation and arrest. Also, some media workers told us that the issuing of their permit was deliberately delayed, which seems to be related to the organization that submits the request and the degree of its compliance with SDF policies. On June 29, 2022, the RSF released [a statement](#) condemning the increasing restrictions imposed by the Self-Administration on journalists in northern and eastern Syria. The statement noted that the goal of those restrictions is to tighten the group's control over news coverage in their areas.

12. On April 2, 2022, the Ministry of Justice in the HTS' Salvation Government [issued](#) an amnesty decree that granted a full pardon for the prison sentence served on the grounds of the public interest for those who received such sentences, and granted pardon for half the sentence for those who have yet to receive a judicial ruling and other rulings.

On July 30, 2022, we recorded that no fewer than 16 journalists and media workers, including two women, being detained/arrested by an SDF patrol who raided their place of residence in Raqqa city. According to information we received, the detainees were working with different media outlets and institutions. The arrests were carried out by the SDF intelligence apparatus, with the detainees facing charges of “espionage”. We also documented that some of the detainees were accused and brutally beaten during the process of their arrests. We documented that the two women were released on July 31, 2023, while the fate of the other 14 media workers remains unknown.

Below is a summary of the most notable violations against journalists and media workers according to SNHR’s database (in the context of the armed conflict or in violation of international human rights law) between March 2011 and May 2023 and between May 2022, when our last report was released, and May 2023.

First: Since March 2011

A. Extrajudicial killing

The various parties to the conflict have targeted media cadres in Syria in extrajudicial killing operations. On the other hand, incidents of bombardment, both indiscriminate and deliberate, as well as clashes in populated areas have led to deaths among media workers. In fact, Syria is one of the world’s most dangerous countries for journalists. [According to the UNECSO’s Global Report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2021/2022](#), a total of 400 journalists were killed worldwide from the beginning of 2016 until the end of 2020, including 34 journalists who were killed in Syria which came third in terms of deaths among journalists after Mexico (61 deaths) and Afghanistan (51). Moreover, [the Global Impunity Index 2022](#) released by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on November 1, 2022, shows that Syria is the second-worst country worldwide in terms of killing journalist with impunity, topped only by Somalia. The Index covers the period between September 1, 2012, and August 31, 2022.

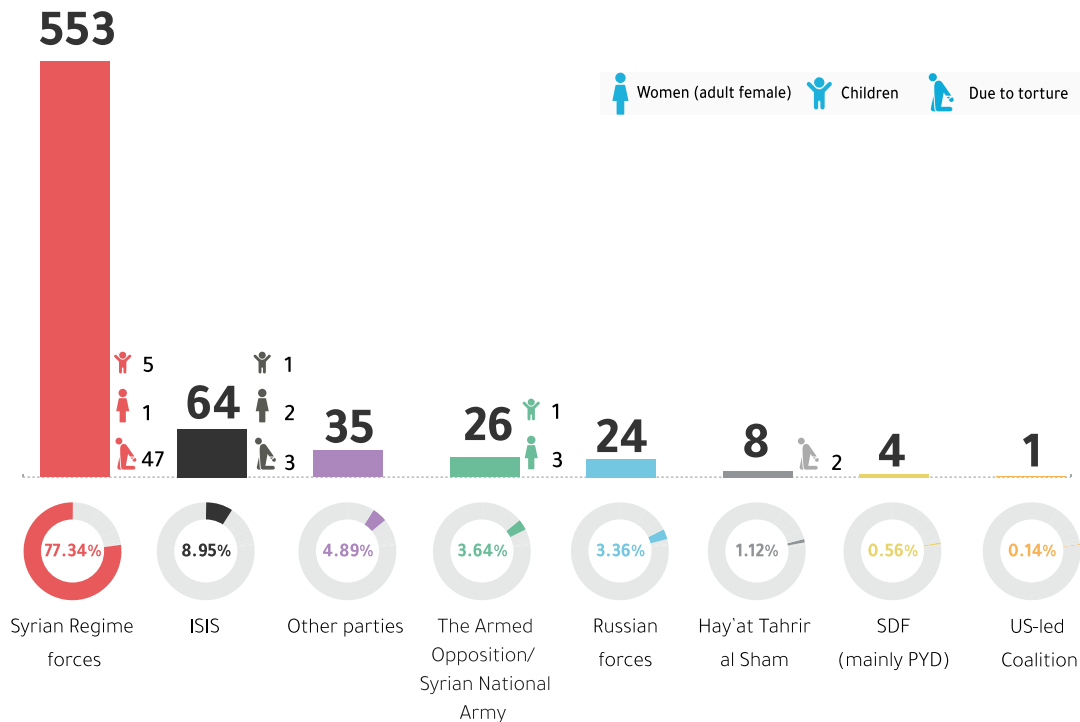
According to SNHR’s database, the Syrian regime vastly surpasses all parties to the conflict, with 80 percent of all documented journalist deaths since March 2011 occurring at the hands of the regime, followed by ISIS with nine percent. Below is some of the most notable patterns of extrajudicial killing of journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria since March 2011:

- Killing resulting from deliberate and indiscriminate bombardment. In this context, we cannot overlook the blatant and shameful targeting of media personnel by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, especially in aerial bombardment attacks, and particularly through use of the double-strike method.¹³ One example of such a killing is the media worker [Wasim al-Adl](#) who was killed on October 23, 2015, in an attack by warplanes believed to be Russian that targeted Wasim while he was observing and filming airstrikes carried out by warplanes on Beneen village in Idlib governorate.
- Summary executions, and executions shown in produced videos. It is safe to say that ISIS was almost the sole party that showed executions of journalists in cinematic and highly edited videos, particularly with journalists and media workers. The video production 'Wahi al-Shaitan' (Revelation by the Devil) is a prominent example of such videos. Released by ISIS media office in Deir Ez-Zour governorate on Saturday, June 25, 2016, the video shows four media workers being executed in a horrific, brutal and deliberately sensationalist manner. We have somewhat expanded upon such practices in our report released on February 10, 2022, entitled, ['The Most Notable ISIS Violations against Syrian Society and ISIS' Contribution to Distorting the Popular Uprising Calling for Freedom and Dignity'](#).
- Assassinations that take place under the rampant state of insecurity either through suicide/remote suicide bombings or via direct targeting by parties we have been unable to identify. A prominent example of such cases is the assassination of the well-known and widely respected activist Raed Fares who was killed by masked assailants in an area under HTS' control. The assassination took place on November 23, 2018, when the assailants opened fire on Raed's car, in which he and another media activist, Hammoud Jneid, were traveling. On November 28, 2018, [we released a report documenting the details of the attack](#).
- There are also deaths due to torture and medical negligence. According to our database, approximately 91 percent of all deaths among media workers caused by torture since March 2011 have been at the hands of the Syrian regime.

Between March 2011 and May 2023, SNHR documented the killing of 715 journalists and media workers, including seven children and six women (adult females), as well as nine foreign journalists and 52 journalists who died due to torture, and the injury of no fewer than 1,603 others at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria. Those deaths are distributed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces as follows:

13. A double-strike is when Syrian/Russian warplanes target a certain site, and then, after people and medical teams and media workers gather to cover the attack, the same warplanes return to conduct a second airstrike on the same site in a deliberate way as to target the rescue workers who gathered and increase the number of casualties as much as possible.

The death of 715 journalists and media workers, including 7 children and 6 women, and 52 who died due to torture at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria from March 2011 to May 2022



1. Main parties:

- **Syrian regime forces (army, security, local militias, Shiite foreign militias):¹⁴** 53 journalists, including five children, one woman, five foreign journalists, and 47 journalists who died due to torture in detention centers.
- **Russian forces:** 24 journalists.
- **ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'):** 64 journalists, including one child, two women, three foreign journalists, and three journalists who died due to torture.
- **HTS:¹⁵** Eight journalists, including two who died due to torture.
- **All armed opposition factions/SNA:¹⁶** 26 journalists, including one child and three women.
- **SDF:** Four journalists.
- **International coalition forces:** One journalist.

2. Other parties:

- **35 journalists, including one journalist who was killed at the hands of the forces of Operation Peace Spring (Joint operation by Turkish forces and the SNA).**

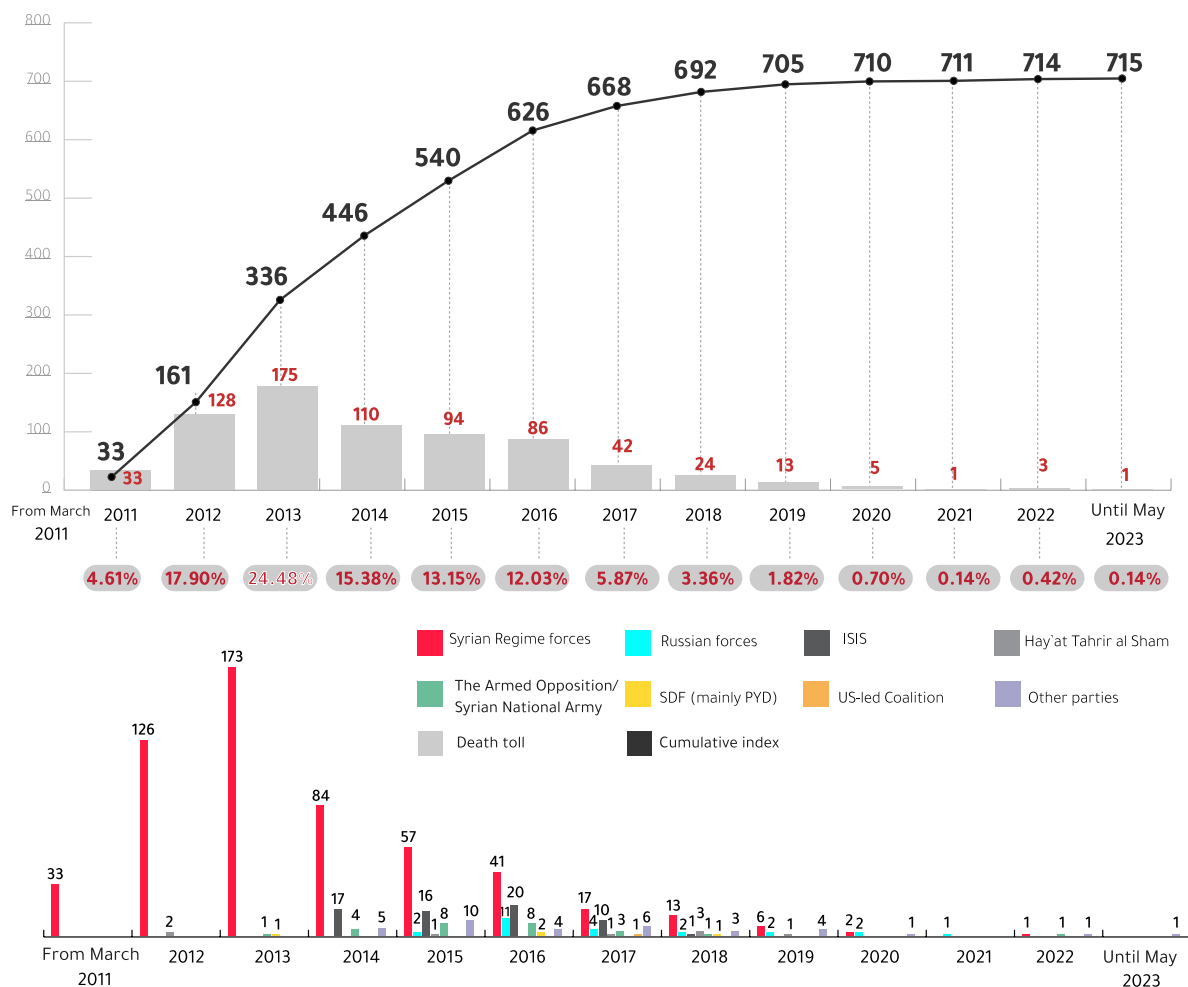
14. We generally use the term 'the Syrian regime' rather than 'the Syrian government', because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is that of a totalitarian dictatorship where power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of individuals, namely the President of the Republic and the heads of the security apparatus. Conversely, 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, with no real decision-making power or active role of their own. Syria is under autocratic/family rule, with no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade merely for show. The Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he supposedly presides. The Minister of Justice cannot even summon a low-ranking security office, let alone a security branch head. Syria is ruled by the president assisted by the heads of the security branches.

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

15. Was designated a terrorist group by the UN.

16. All the armed opposition factions/SNA since 2011 in all the areas they had taken control of.

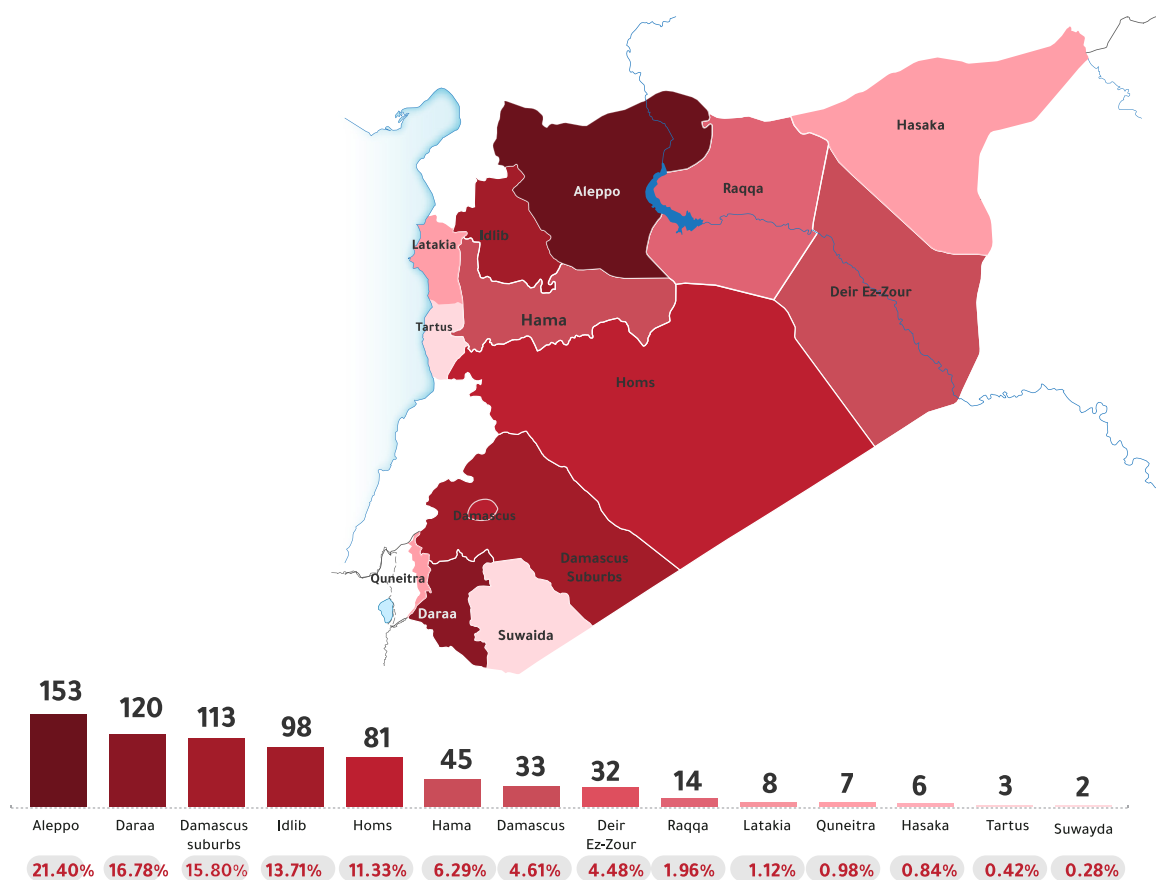
Deaths among media workers are distributed by year and by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria as follows:



As shown on the graphs above, the Syrian regime and its ally Russia are responsible for approximately 81 percent of all deaths among journalists and media workers since 2011. Additionally, the Syrian regime has been responsible for 91 percent of all deaths of journalists and media workers due to torture inside its official and non-official detention centers.

Analysis of the data also shows that 2013 saw the highest number of documented deaths among journalists and media workers in Syria (approximately 25 percent of all deaths journalists and media workers), followed by 2012 (approximately 18 percent), and then 2014 (approximately 16 percent).

Deaths among journalists and media workers are distributed by governorate as follows:



Aleppo governorate saw the highest documented number of deaths among journalists and media workers with 22 percent of all deaths, followed by Daraa governorate with 17 percent, and Damascus suburbs with 16 percent.

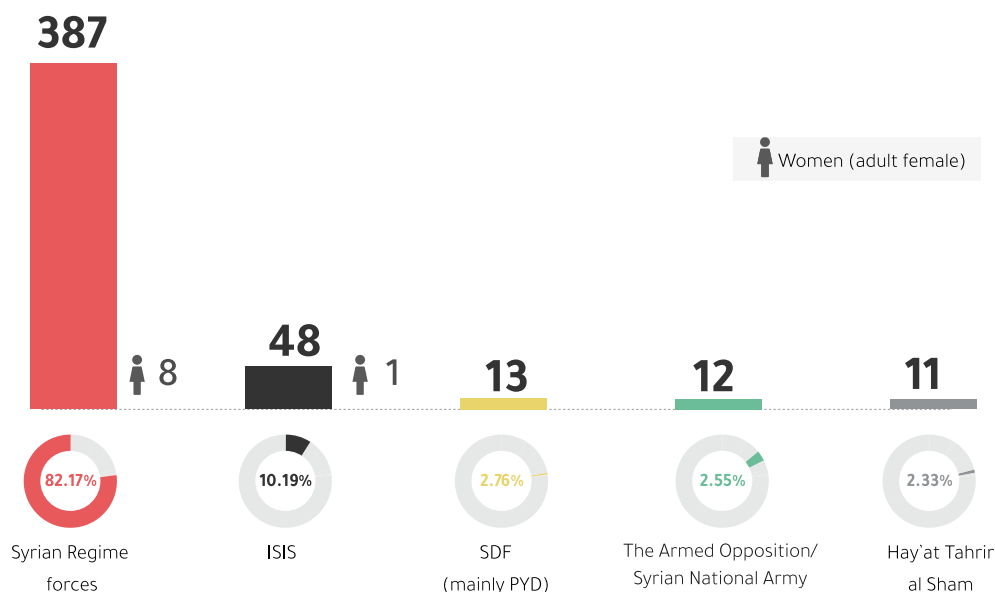
B. Arbitrary arrest/detention/abduction or enforced disappearance:

Some of the most prominent types of arrest/detention/abduction or enforced disappearance exhibited by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces against journalists and media workers:

- The arbitrary arrest of citizen journalists during anti-regime demonstrations. This was one of the first violations documented by SNHR since the early days of the popular uprising; the same practice was then copied by other parties to the conflict. We documented cases where journalists/citizen journalists/media workers were arrested while they were covering demonstrations protesting the different de facto authorities, or over their publication of journalistic reports critiquing the policies or practices of those authorities.
- The arrest/abduction and enforced disappearance of foreign journalists. This has been a common practice particularly by ISIS, followed by all armed opposition factions, as well as by the Syrian regime. A prominent example of such cases is the US journalist Austin Tice. On August 10, 2013, the US President Joe Biden released a statement on the 10th anniversary of Austin's disappearance in Damascus city on August 13, 2013, explicitly holding the Syrian regime responsible for his disappearance, according to [the statement](#) published by the White House: "We know with certainty that he has been held by the Government of Syria." On August 17, the Syrian regime government's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by releasing [a statement of its own](#), describing the White House's statement as "misguiding and far from reason", further claiming that the US "had violated the rules of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations when it turned a blind eye, and even encouraged, dozens of its citizens to travel to Syria and enter its territory illegally and travel to areas where armed terror groups are present".
- We documented abductions carried out for the purpose of extorting ransom money.
- We documented widespread arrests/detention/abductions of journalists/citizen journalists and media workers over their activism on social media. This practice has been carried out by the different parties to the conflict.
- We have documented abductions and detentions of female media personnel that clearly exhibited a gender-based discriminatory nature.

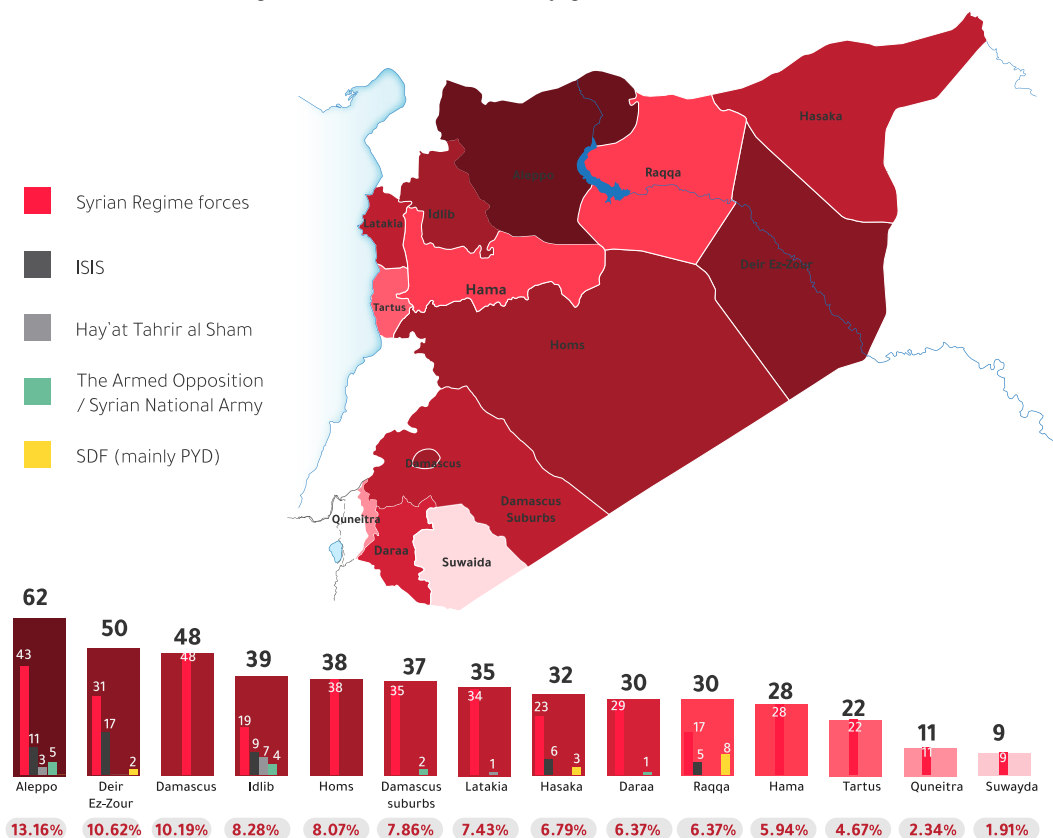
SNHR documented no fewer than 1,309 cases of arrest and abduction involving journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and May 2023. Of this total, 471 journalists, including nine women and 17 foreign journalists, are still under arrest and/or forcibly disappeared in the detention centers operated by the various parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria.

The **471** cases are distributed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria as follows:



- **Syrian regime forces:** 387 journalists, including eight women and four foreign journalists.
- **ISIS:** 48 journalists, including one woman and eight foreign journalists.
- **HTS:** 11 journalists.
- **All armed opposition factions/SNA:** 12 journalists, including five foreign journalists.
- **SDF:** 13 journalists.

Journalists and media workers who are still arrested and/or forcibly disappeared at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces are distributed by governorate as follows:



As shown in the graph above, the Syrian regime has been responsible for approximately 83 percent of all cases of journalists and media workers who are still under arrest and/or forcibly disappeared.

According to our documentation, the highest percentage of journalists and media workers who are still under arrest/forcibly disappeared were arrested in Aleppo governorate (approximately 14 percent), followed by the two governorates of Deir Ez-Zour and Damascus (11 percent each), and then Idlib (nine percent).

No fewer than 13 journalists and media workers have been registered as dead in the civil registry or identified in the Caesar photographs that were leaked from the Syrian regime detention centers.

Between the beginning of 2018 and May 2023, SNHR recorded no fewer than 10 journalists and media workers who are forcibly disappeared in regime detention centers and recorded as dead in civil registry offices across Syria. The causes of death in these cases were not disclosed, and the Syrian regime has failed to return the victims' bodies to their families or even to inform them of where their loved ones were buried. The Syrian regime also failed to disclose the deaths at the time of their occurrence.

Between the beginning of 2015 and May 2023, we recorded no fewer than three media personnel who we have been able to identify from the photographs leaked by the defected regime officer known as Caesar showing the bodies of regime victims from detention centers and military hospitals operated by the Syrian regime.

Second: From May 2022 until May 2023

A. Extrajudicial killing

We documented the killing of four journalists and media workers at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between May 2022 and May 2023. They are distributed by the perpetrator party as follows:

1. Main parties:

- **Syrian regime forces:** One journalist.
- **All armed opposition factions/SNA:** One journalist.

2. Other parties: Two journalists.

- **Gunfire whose source we have been unable to identify:** One journalist.
- **Turkish forces:** One journalist.

B. Arbitrary arrest or enforced disappearance

We documented no fewer than 59 cases of arrest and abduction involving journalists and media workers, including six women, at the hands of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces in Syria between May 2022 and May 2023. Of these, 31 were released, while the remaining 28 are now categorized as forcibly disappeared.

The 59 cases are distributed by the perpetrator party as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces:** 24 journalists, including four women. Of these, five have been released, while 19 of the 24 have subsequently been categorized as forcibly disappeared.
- **HTS:** 12 journalists. Of these, nine have been released, while three of the 12 have subsequently been categorized as forcibly disappeared.
- **All Armed Opposition factions/SNA:** Six journalists, all of whom have subsequently been released.
- **SDF:** 17 journalists, including two women. Of these, 11 have been released, while six of the 17 have subsequently been categorized as forcibly disappeared.

Prominent cases that illustrate the violations committed by the parties to the conflict and controlling forces against journalists and media workers between May 2022 and May 2023:

A. Extrajudicial killing

Syrian regime forces

[Ahmad Taysir al-Eisa al-Khatib](#), a media activist and university student at the Department of Media in Damascus University, from al-Jiza town in the eastern suburbs of Daraa governorate, was aged 27 when he was arrested in late-2018 by Syrian regime forces at a checkpoint while he was heading from Damascus to Daraa, despite having previously agreed to a security settlement. He has been classified as forcibly disappeared ever since, with the Syrian regime denying having detained him and not allowing anyone to visit him, even a lawyer. On Tuesday, August 16, 2022, his family learned of his death in Sednaya Military Prison in Damascus suburbs governorate. We can confirm he was in good health at the time of his arrest, which makes it extremely likely that he died due to torture and medical negligence. SNHR can also confirm that Syrian regime forces have yet to return his dead body to his family.



Ahmad Taysir al-Eisa al-Khatib

SNHR spoke to Mr. Alaa Zreiq,¹⁷ a friend of the victim Ahmad al-Khatib. He told us:

17. Via the phone on December 9, 2022.

“Ahmad was arrested following a malicious report that was written and submitted to the authorities by one of the residents in his university dorm in al-Mazza area, where he was taking care of paperwork related to his university and military service. Syrian regime forces arrested him in Damascus city, after which we heard nothing about him. In 2020, Ahmad’s father was released; he had been arrested two months before his son. Ahmad’s father met Ahmad in Branch 248 in Damascus. That was two weeks before his release. Ahmad’s family spared no effort to reach Ahmad’s place of detention and in trying to set him free, to no avail. Subsequently, they received news that he had died in Sednaya Military Prison through a lawyer that his father hired.”

All armed opposition factions/SNA

On Friday, October 7, 2022, several gunmen opened fire on the media activist [“Mohammad Abdul Latif”](#), known as Abu Ghannoum, and his pregnant wife as they rode a motorbike past an area known as Dawwar Furn al-Majles/al-Marouha Roundabout on the eastern outskirts of al-Bab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo, killing them both instantly. Mohammad, who was originally from Bza’a city in eastern Aleppo suburbs, had been living in al-Bab city, where he was a well-known and popular activist.

On Monday, October 10, 2022, security officials affiliated with the SNA’s al-Failaq al-Tha’leth (3rd Legion) pursued and captured individuals suspected to have been involved in the assassination of Mohammad Abu Ghanoum. Subsequently, Ferqat al-Hamza, another SNA faction, confirmed, in [a statement](#) released on October 10, 2022, that the cell which carried out the assassination of Mohammad Abu Ghanoum and his wife was affiliated with the faction. Ferqat al-Hamza vowed in the same statement that it would sever ties with anyone who should be proven to be involved in this crime.



Mohammad Abdul Latif Abu Ghannoum

B. Arbitrary arrest/enforced disappearance

Syrian regime forces

On Thursday, July 21, 2022, [Alaa al-Din Muhi al-Din Hazbar](#) was arrested by Syrian regime forces at the Passport and Immigration Department in Damascus city, where he was trying to obtain a passport. He was taken to the State Security branch in Damascus city. His fate remains unknown to SNHR.

Born in 1987, Alaa al-Din is from Deir al-Asafeer town in Damascus city. He previously served as director of the media office of the local council in Deir al-Asafeer town when it was under the control of armed opposition factions.



Alaa al-Din Muhi al-Din Hazbar

HTS

On Friday, March 10, 2023, [Ahmad Mohammad Sharif al-Omar](#), from Zardana village in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, was arrested by HTS members over publishing photos of his uncle Abdul Wadoud Zaki al-Omar who has been forcibly disappeared in HTS detention centers. Abdul Wadoud was shown in a video published by the HTS's public security on Wednesday, December 22, 2021, which claimed he was one of the regime agents who had been captured and was proven to be collaborating with the Syrian regime. We released that Ahmad was released on March 29, 2023.

Ahmad Mohammad Sharif al-Omar, from Zardana village, is a photographer with the emergency response team.



Ahmad Mohammad Sharif al-Omar

On Tuesday, April 4, 2023, [Mohammad Saeed Takkou](#), a reporter with Turkey's Anadolu Agency, from Msaibin village to the east of Ariha city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, was arrested by personnel from the Ariha Police Station, affiliated with the HTS' Salvation Government, from a restaurant in Jabal al-Araba'in area in southern Ariha city. He was taken to the Police Station in Ariha city. His fate remains unknown to SNHR.

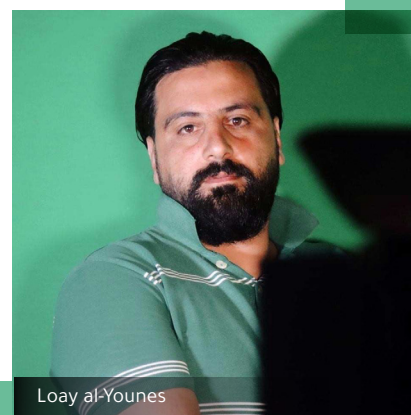


Mohammad Saeed Takkou

All armed opposition factions/SNA

On Friday, August 5, 2022, [Loay al-Younes](#), born in 1989 from Deir Ba'laba neighborhood in Homs city, who now lives in Jendeires town (administratively a part of Afrin city) in the northwestern suburbs of Aleppo, was arrested by members of the SNA's Military Police, who raided his home and took him to the Military Police center in the city. He was released on August 8, 2022.

Loay is a media activist and member of 'Rabetat Nushata al-Thawra fe Homs' (the Homs's Revolutionary Activist Association). He previously worked with al-Jesr News Channel, and was formerly a university student at Baath University in Homs where he was studying architecture.



Loay al-Younes

On Monday, December 5, 2022, [Faris Zain al-Abdin](#), a media activist from Inkhil city in the suburbs of Daraa governorate who was displaced to northern Syria, was arrested by members of the Military Police, affiliated with the SNA's General Staff, at a checkpoint in Kafrjana town in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate following a verbal dispute between him and one of the checkpoint officers. He was released later the same day.

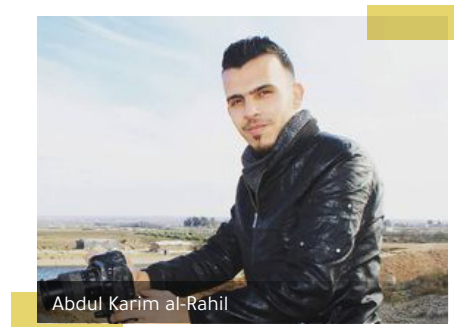


SDF

On Sunday, September 18, 2022, [Ammar Mohammad Abdul Latif](#), a reporter with the North Press News Agency in Raqqa city, was arrested by members of the SDF who raided his home in the city. He was taken to an undisclosed location. His fate remains unknown to SNHR.



On Saturday, July 30, 2022, [Abdul Karim al-Rahil](#), media activist born in 1994 from al-Ferdous neighborhood in Raqqa city, was arrested by members of the SDF's intelligence apparatus over charges of spying for the SNA. He was taken to an undisclosed location. His fate remains unknown to SNHR.



III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- All the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces have violated many of the rules and laws of international human rights law in the areas under their control, especially those related to freedom of opinion and expression, such as Article 19¹⁸ of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 19(2)¹⁹ of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- These parties have also violated many rules and articles of international humanitarian law, foremost among which is Rule 34²⁰ of customary law, which requires that civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities.

Recommendations

All the parties to the conflict/controlling forces

- Immediately release journalists and media workers who have been arbitrarily detained, and reveal the fate of the forcibly disappeared.
- Allow access to all media outlets and cease to proscribe the work of journalists according to the extent of their loyalty to the controlling party.
- Repeal all 'security laws' which absolutely suppress and deny freedom of opinion and expression, especially those issued by the Syrian regime.
- Not use media as organs to serve the controlling forces and to justify their violations or falsify the truth.
- Stop direct or indirect harassment and threats to press institutions and their employees.

UN Security Council and International Community

- Make clear efforts to end the conflict in Syria through a political process that advances Syria from being a totalitarian state to a stable, democratic and civilized state that respects press freedom.
- Denounce the violations practiced by the parties to the conflict against journalists, and support press institutions operating on Syrian territory in order to continue their work in reporting facts and events.

18. OHCHR, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19, https://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/documents/udhr_translations/eng.pdf

19. OHCHR, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19 (2), <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/professionalinterest/ccpr.pdf>

20. ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, rule 34, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule34

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

- Condemn the targeting of journalists and media workers in Syria, and highlight their sacrifices and suffering.
- Demand the disclosure of the fate of the detained and forcibly disappeared journalists and media workers.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)

- Launch special investigations on the targeting of journalists and media workers in particular, especially in light of their vital role in documenting events in Syria.

Arab and international media institutions

- Advocate on behalf of fellow journalists and media workers in Syria through the publication of periodic reports highlighting their daily suffering and commemorating their sacrifices, as well as communicating with their families, and providing relief and reassurance to them.

Acknowledgment

We extend our most sincere gratitude to all journalists and media workers for their significant and valued contribution to this report, and to every journalist and media worker everywhere who is risking their lives to transmit the truth to the world.



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