

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1517
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Syrian Network for Human Rights
Titel:	The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in April 2021. The Syrian Regime's President, Implicated in Committing Crimes against Humanity, Is Running for the Presidential Elections, with This Being the Most Prominent Reason for Its Illegitimacy
Udgivet:	5. maj 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. september 2021

The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in April 2021

The Syrian Regime's President, Implicated in Committing Crimes against Humanity, Is Running for the Presidential Elections, with This Being the Most Prominent Reason for Its Illegitimacy

Wednesday 5 May 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 April 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 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 April:

In regard to bombardment and military operations:

April saw a reduction in the rate of artillery and missile bombardment by Syrian regime forces and their allies on the cities and towns of the southern suburbs of Idlib, the western suburbs of Hama, and the eastern suburbs of Aleppo close to the front lines, while al Ruwaiha fronts near Sarja village in the southern suburbs of Idlib saw intermittent clashes between Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and the opposition factions on one side, and Syrian regime forces on the other on April 21, followed by violent missile bombardment by Syrian regime forces on the villages of Sarja and Bazabour and around Ariha city in Idlib suburbs.

On April 8, an anti-tank missile fired by Syrian regime forces, stationed in Shellef Castle in the suburbs of Latakia, targeting a civilian car at the intersection of al Najeyya village in the western suburbs of Idlib, resulted [in a massacre](#), killing seven civilians (two men, two women and three children), as well as injuring other children, and causing the burning of the car.

In terms of Russian attacks, Russian warplanes launched several airstrikes in northwest Syria, most of which were on military sites controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. On April 19, a drone that we believe was Russian fired a missile that hit fishermen at one of al Asi River banks in Kherbet al Naqous area in Sahl al Ghab in the western suburbs of Hama, [killing one of them](#) and injuring another.

Russian warplanes also launched several airstrikes targeting the Badiya (desert area) of al Jabal al Bishri, extending from the eastern suburbs of Raqqa to the western suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour, which we believe targeted locations of ISIS cells in the Syrian Badiya, which ISIS uses as a base to carry out its attacks on Syrian regime forces and affiliated militias in the same area.

On April 16, the [Russian Interfax Agency](#) published a statement by the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, which quoted him as saying that for Russia, Syria is still an arena for testing its military weapons and the capabilities of its soldiers. We note that it was not the first time that the regime has announced that it's using Syria as a field to test its weapons and train its soldiers; the next day, [Russian media outlets](#), including Novosti Agency, revealed that Russian forces had used a suicide drone in Syria several years ago against what they called terrorists.

In April, we monitored mutual artillery shelling between Syrian National Army forces and Syrian Democratic Forces in Afrin area and the northern suburbs of Aleppo, which are under the control of Syrian National Army and Syrian Democratic Forces, respectively.

On April 18, Syrian Democratic Forces stormed Jdaidet Kahit village in the eastern suburbs of Raqqa, in connection with a demonstration against the SDF that had taken place in the village at which protesters demanded the expulsion of SDF members from the village following the killing of [two civilians](#) by SDF gunfire on April 16, with the SDF then arresting 15 civilians who were released on April 23, according to the documentation of the SNHR's Detainees' team; the storming of the village was accompanied by the burning of three houses belonging to civilian villagers.

On the evening of April 20, clashes using light and medium weapons broke out between Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian regime's National Defense Forces militia, which began after an argument between personnel manning one of the Internal Security Forces checkpoints (known as Asayish) affiliated with Syrian Democratic Forces and a National Defense Forces patrol in al Weh-da Street in al Qameshli city, which is under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces. The clashes extended to the Tai neighborhood in al Qameshli city, which is the stronghold of the National Defense Forces there. On April 25, the clashes ceased as a result of Russian mediation, with Syrian Democratic Forces imposing their control over the entire neighborhood. [These clashes](#) resulted in [the deaths of three civilians](#), including a child, and the injury of more than 20 other civilians who sustained moderate wounds, in addition to causing the displacement of dozens of families from the Tai neighborhood to Theybana village, located on the outskirts of al Qameshli city, who returned to their homes after the success of the Russian mediation between the two parties. On April 28, a press [statement](#) was issued by the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, Imran Riza, and Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, Muhannad Hadi, expressing their concern about the hostilities in al Qameshli city and the impact of these hostilities on civilians.

In April, clashes continued between Syrian National Army forces and Syrian Democratic Forces in the villages of Ein Eisa in the northern suburbs of Raqqa, which are under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces, resulting in deaths on both sides without any change in the distribution of zones of control. We note that this area has been witnessing clashes between the two parties since 2019.

In April, bombings continued in all regions in Syria, especially those outside the control of Syrian regime forces in northern and eastern Syria, causing casualties. The bombings were concentrated in the areas of al Bab, Jarablos and Afrin in the suburbs of Aleppo, Ras al Ein city in the northwestern suburbs of Hasaka, and Tal Abyad city in the northern suburbs of Raqqa, causing casualties in these areas.

Assassinations continued throughout Syria, [concentrated in eastern Syria](#) (the governorates of Deir Ez-Zour, Hasaka, and Raqqa) and south in Daraa governorate in addition to eastern Aleppo governorate. Among these incidents was the discovery of the body of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's 'Syrian Salvation Government', Fayez Ahmad al Khleif, on April 7, after he was kidnapped on the third of the same month, while he was on his way to work. The HTS' General Security Apparatus announced on [its Telegram channel](#) on April 10 that it had arrested the killers. We also documented [the deaths of two workers](#) for Al Berr and Al Ihsan charity organization in al Sh-heil city in Deir Ez-Zour suburbs on April 17, who were killed by unidentified gunmen. On April 18, the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Mr. Imran Riza, [condemned](#) their killing.

Mines continue to claim civilian lives across Syria. In April, we documented the deaths of 11 civilians, including seven children, most of whom were killed in the suburbs of Aleppo, Hama and Raqqa. In [a statement](#) issued on the International Day for Mine Awareness, which falls on April 4, the International Committee of the Red Cross said that the Syrian conflict has left an estimated 11.5 million people living with the risk of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW), and that children make up over 25% of these victims.

With regard to the Israeli attacks on Syria, on April 8, the Syrian regime's [SANA agency](#) reported that the vicinity of Damascus city had been subjected to an Israeli air attack at dawn on the same day; on April 22, the Israeli army spokesman, [Avichay Adraee, tweeted](#) that an air-to-surface missile originating from Syrian lands had fallen in the Negev region, resulting in the response from Israel targeting its source, although SANA only [announced](#) an Israeli attack on the vicinity of Damascus at 1:38 pm on the same day.

In regard to arrests and enforced disappearances:

Syrian regime forces have continued to persecute and target Syrian citizens in areas under regime control in connection with their political dissent and expression of opinions, despite the right to both being guaranteed by the constitution and international law. This proves once again the truth of the crucial point which we have reiterated several times previously, namely that no Syrian citizen can feel safe from arrest since these are carried out without any basis in law or any oversight by any independent judiciary, and are perpetrated by the regime's security services with no involvement by the judiciary. Following these arrests, detainees are routinely classified as forcibly disappeared persons, and therefore the areas under the control of the Syrian regime cannot be considered to constitute any sort of safe haven for residents there; all this underlines that regime-controlled areas of Syria are very definitely not a safe haven for the return of refugees or IDPs.

Meanwhile, Syrian Democratic Forces continued enforcing the group's policies of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in April, carrying out campaigns of mass raids and arrests, and targeting many civilians on the pretext of fighting ISIS cells, with some of these campaigns [backed by US-led coalition helicopters](#). The report also documented arrests and the burning of homes in retaliation for anti-SDF demonstrations, with these arrests being concentrated in Raqqa governorate.

April also saw Hay'at Tahrir al Sham detaining civilians, with the targets of these arrests, which were concentrated in Idlib governorate, including media activists and politicians; most of these arrests occurred due to the detainees expressing opinions critical of the HTS's management of areas under its control, or on other charges, such as treason in favor of Syrian Democratic Forces.

The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army also continued carrying out arbitrary detentions and kidnappings in April, most of which were carried out on a mass scale, targeting women under the pretext that they were trying to cross the Turkish border illegally, before releasing them later; we also documented a physical assault on a lawyer working in a court located in an area under the Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army's control, as a result of which the Bar Association suspended hearings in the courts. In addition, we documented 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:

In April, many shipments of the Coronavirus vaccine arrived in various Syrian regions, with UNICEF's Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa Ted Chaiban, WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr. Ahmed al Mandhari, and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance's Director of Country Support Pascal Bijleveld, issuing a joint [statement](#) on April 22 confirming that Syria has received 256,800 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, the first COVAX delivery of vaccines to reach Syria, as 203,000 doses reached Damascus (the areas controlled by the Syrian regime), while another 53,800 doses were delivered to northwest Syria.

On April 24, [SANA announced](#) the arrival of a vaccine shipment from the People's Republic of China, containing 150,000 doses of Sinopharm Vaccine.

Mohammad Hawari, the spokesman in Jordan of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [announced](#) to the Kingdom of Jordan Channel on April 6 that 2,100 Syrian refugees had received the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and 600 of them received the second dose.

The government team set up by the Syrian regime to follow up measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic [decided](#) not to extend the decision to suspend work or reduce the number of workers in public institutions that it had taken at the beginning of the month in reaction to the increase in cases of COVID-19 infection, so that the worker's working hours return to normal in official departments as of April 22. We have warned of the danger of the absence of precautionary measures in the areas under the control of Syrian regime forces, the [continuation of social activities](#) and [gatherings in the markets](#), and the failure to take serious measures to limit them, to reduce the transmission of infection among citizens.

The Syrian regime's Ministry of Health in April officially announced 3,824 cases of COVID-19 infection and 327 deaths in April, the highest monthly record since the announcement of the emergence of COVID-19 in Syria on March 22, 2020, bringing the official total announced to [22,733 cases of infection with 1,592 deaths, as of April 30](#).

In northwest Syria, the Health Directorate in the Idlib region issued [a statement](#) on April 6, warning of a second wave of Coronavirus in northwest Syria, and indicating the imposition of a complete lockdown on one of the villages in Jendeires district in Afrin.

We note the complete absence of precautionary measures in the region; this month, we monitored the [Ramadan Iftar activities](#) and [prayers in mosques](#) that have been overcrowded.

In northwestern Syria, more infections and deaths due to coronavirus were recorded in April, with the Early Warning Alert and Response Network (EWARN) [announcing](#) the documentation of 665 infections and 16 deaths related to COVID-19 for the month; this brought the total number of infections and deaths announced by EWARN as of April 30, to 21,983 cases of infection and 653 deaths.

In northeastern Syria, the Self-Management Authority of Northern and Eastern Syria has taken several successive decisions regarding a set of precautionary measures as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, including both a partial and complete curfew; [the first decision No. 84](#) of April 3, then [decision No. 96](#) of April 11, followed by [decision 105](#) of April 21, followed by [decision 112](#) of April 29.

As of April 30, a total of 15,833 coronavirus infection cases, including 578 deaths, had been announced by [the Health Authority](#) in the Self-Management Authority of Northern and Eastern Syria. We note that 5,774 cases of infection and 200 deaths were recorded in April, the highest monthly record since the announcement of the emergence of the pandemic in the region in March 2020.

The local council of Ras al Ein city, north of Hasaka, [announced](#), on April 21, in a post on its official Facebook page, that it had decided to close schools for a period of three weeks due to the increase in coronavirus infections, from April 25 until May 16, 2021.

Human Rights Watch warned in a [report](#) issued on April 6 that the Lebanese government's Covid-19 vaccination program risks leaving behind marginalized communities, including refugees.

[On World Health Day](#) that falls on April 7, the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, Muhannad Hadi, called on all parties in Syria to ensure access to health for all during the COVID-19 crisis and take clear steps to end attacks on healthcare.

Regarding living conditions:

In April, [the suffering of Syrians](#) in the areas controlled by the Syrian regime increased compared to the previous months, especially with the advent of the month of Ramadan, which is usually accompanied by additional requirements; [the fuel crisis](#) has led to a large number of civilians suffering, with dozens of public transport bodies forced to cease work due to this crisis. The Syrian regime's Ministry of Transport issued [Decision No. 324](#) on April 5, under which it suspended many of its institutions and bodies. On April 15, the Syrian regime's government, through [Decision 1090](#) issued by the Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection, raised the price of octane 95 gasoline from 2,000 Syrian pounds to 2,500 pounds, the second such price increase in a month. In conjunction with that, on April 28, [Russia Today website](#) published a video of a convoy of tankers transporting crude oil at the western entrance to al Qameshli city, in the suburbs of Hasaka, coming from the Syrian regime-controlled areas via the M4 International Road to al Rmeilan oil fields. Meanwhile, on April 10, [Al-Monitor](#) revealed an agreement between Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian regime to open the crossings between their areas of control, with the SDF sending 200 oil tankers per week in exchange for foodstuffs imported from the areas controlled by the Syrian regime. The Syrian Network for Human Rights will soon issue a report on the Syrian Democratic Forces' violation of the Caesar Act, supplying the Syrian regime with gas and oil.

In the context of the steps taken by the Syrian regime's government in regard to the approaching presidential elections, which, as we believe, aim to promote the re-election of its president, the government issued [a decision](#) on April 6 that excludes some Syrians from the requirement to exchange \$ 100 as an official charge at the border-crossing points in order to enter their country. The exemption decision applies to various groups including, "Citizens displaced by terrorism returning to the country, students studying abroad, delegates on official assignments, citizens who have not reached eighteen years of age, flying and sailing passengers, and truck and car drivers operating on transport lines with neighboring countries". The Central Bank of Syria also issued [a statement](#) on April 15, with the regime news agency SANA publishing a copy, announcing that the average exchange rate of the US dollar has been raised to 2,512 Syrian Pounds after its price was 1,256 Syrian Pounds, while the price of buying the dollar for the delivery of incoming remittances to Syria was also raised to 2,500 Syrian Pounds.

In April, pro-Syrian regime accounts [published photos](#) showing closed shops, and roads empty of traffic due to the collapse of the value of the Syrian pound and the fuel crisis.

In northwestern Syria, the impact of the devaluation of the Turkish lira approved for dealing and the accompanying increase in the prices of basic materials with the advent of the month of Ramadan continues to worsen the living conditions of citizens.

The people of the Eastern Region also suffer from difficult humanitarian conditions, especially in securing bread, due to the lack of bakeries in the region, as well as the small quantities of flour available. On April 15, the Self-Management's General Administration for Supply and Consumer Protection [circulated](#) raising the price of a bundle of bread weighing no less than 600 grams consisting of 7 rounds of bread to 800 pounds after its price had been 500 pounds, in addition to the increase in the prices of food and vegetables in light of the depreciation of the Syrian pound against the dollar, the lack of job opportunities and the economic stagnation in the region. With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals and pharmacies in the Eastern Region are all suffering from a shortage of oxygen cylinders, in addition to a shortage of some medicines.

In regard to asylum, displacement and forced displacement:

The camps in north and east Syria continue to suffer from the deterioration of humanitarian and security conditions and with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, in conjunction with the social activities associated with the blessed month of Ramadan, there's concern of the possible spread of the pandemic in the camps.

On April 2, Syrian Democratic Forces' [Internal Security](#) Forces [announced](#) in a statement the end of the first phase of the "Humanity and Security" Campaign in al Hawl camp in Hasaka suburbs, which was launched on March 28 in search of ISIS cells accused of the assassinations that took place inside the camp, which numbered 45 victims, including 11 children and 11 women, in 2021, according to the documentation of Syrian Network for Human Rights.

Meanwhile, one of the camp's administrators told [Hawar News Agency](#) in a statement published on April 7 that the Iraqi government had agreed to repatriate 500 families of Iraqis living in the camp after a hiatus of nearly 3 years, and that the names and information of the families and persons would be checked before they were allowed to leave in batches to their areas. On April 18, Syrian Democratic Forces [delivered](#) 34 children from families associated with ISIS to the Russian government's Children's Rights Commissioner.

In Lebanon, on April 5, a fire broke out in the 034 camp for Syrian refugees in Majdal Anjar in Zahle, according to [the National News Agency](#), which spoke of a number of suffocation cases, in addition to the burning of 4 tents.

On April 9, [the European Asylum Support Office \(EASO\)](#) published a Country of Origin Information (COI) report titled "Syria: Military Service". The report stated that in both January and February 2021, Syrians lodged more than 10,000 applications for international protection in the EU.

The Federal Ministry of the Interior of the German province of Bremen agreed to allow all Syrians in the province to [bring 100 of their relatives](#) as of April 12, after submitting an application to the Immigration Office in Bremen or the Citizen Registration Office in Bremerhaven and proving, among other things, that they can guarantee covering the living costs of their relatives for a period of at least five years. Thus, Bremen is the fifth state to allow sponsorship law, along with Berlin, Hamburg, Thuringia and Schleswig-Holstein.

In regard to political and human rights issues:

On April 2, Russian human rights organizations, including the Memorial Human Rights Center (HRC) and the Civic Assistance Committee, a lawyer of Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg the human rights group; and Youth Human Rights Movement (YHRM), during a press conference on the Zoom platform, [launched](#) a report, the first of its kind in Russia, entitled "[A Devastating Decade](#)." The report, which came in nearly 200 pages, referred to violations of human rights and humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict, mainly violations by the Syrian regime and the broad Russian regime's support for it.

On April 7, [Amnesty International](#) said in its 2020/2021 annual report on the state of the world's human rights, "Parties to the conflict in Syria continued to commit with impunity serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, and gross human rights abuses. Syrian and Russian government forces carried out direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, including hospitals and schools, through aerial bombing of cities in the governorates of Idlib, Hama and Aleppo, displacing close to 1 million people. Government forces continued to impede access to humanitarian aid to civilians."

¹ A leading research institution for independent intellectual research, which, in partnership with experts from the Arab region and beyond, proposes realistic programs emanating from the region in order to seek to achieve democratic change

On April 7, the Arab Reform Initiative issued a [survey](#) on the environmental impacts of Syria's conflict, in which it stated, "A decade of war has left a significant environmental impact as a result of the high usage of explosive weapons, the damage done to oil refineries (with soil contamination, pollution, and the subsequent reliance on highly polluting makeshift oil refineries), and the mismanagement of waste and water, especially in densely populated areas."

On April 8, [Human Rights Watch stated](#) that the Syrian regime authorities are unlawfully confiscating the homes and lands of Syrians who fled Syrian-Russian military attacks in Idlib and Hama governorates.

On April 8, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [issued a statement](#) saying, "UNHCR does not consider the recent improvements in security in parts of Syria to be sufficiently fundamental, stable or durable to justify ending international protection for any group of refugees."

On April 19, Reporters Without Borders issued [the 2021 World Press Freedom Index](#), in which Syria ranked 173rd (out of 180 countries).

On April 26, [Amnesty International](#) said that hundreds of Syrian refugees whose residency permits have been revoked by the Danish authorities could face torture, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention if forced back.

On April 29, Save the Children issued a [report](#) on the rise in suicide incidents among children in northwestern Syria, as the number of suicides in the area increased sharply over the past year, jumping by 86% from the first three months of 2020; the report stated that one in five recorded suicide attempts and deaths are children.

Presidential election:

On April 18, Bassam al Sabbagh, head of the Syrian regime's People's Assembly, [announced](#) the opening of the door for candidacy for the presidential elections in the areas controlled by the Syrian regime as of Monday, April 19, and called on those wishing to run to submit their candidacy applications to the Supreme Constitutional Court within a 10-day period ending at the end of the official working hours as of April 28, as well as setting the date for voting for Syrians who are not residing on Syrian territory at the embassies of the Syrian regime on May 20, and for Syrian citizens residing on Syrian territory on May 26.

The Syrian regime's embassies had announced the start of preparations for the Syrian presidential elections by registering the names of Syrians wishing to participate through their personal presence at the embassies or through an electronic link [no later than April 25](#).

On April 21, Stéphane Dujarric, the Spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General, [stated](#) during his daily briefing that the United Nations is not involved in the presidential elections that will be held by the Syrian regime next May, because they have been called under the auspices of the current Constitution, and they are not part of the political process established under resolution 2254.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights stressed in a [report](#) issued on April 26 that presidential elections which the Syrian regime plans to hold are illegitimate and imposed by the regime's security services, and that they undermine the political process, with SNHR calling for Bashar al Assad to be held accountable for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

On April 28, the People's Assembly announced that the number of presidential candidacy applications sent by the Supreme Constitutional Court [reached 51](#). [The People's Assembly also agreed](#) to invite representatives from some parliaments of 'brother and friendly' countries to act as 'observers' at the election of the President of the Syrian Arab Republic and be informed of its course, namely Algeria, the Sultanate of Oman, Mauritania, Russia, Iran, China, Venezuela, Cuba, Belarus, South Africa, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Armenia and Bolivia. These countries have always supported the Syrian regime, and Russia and China have always supported it through their veto at the Security Council, with the majority of the remaining countries mentioned voting in favor of using chemical weapons and stood against expanding the powers of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which was the issue we discussed in [a report](#) we issued in April.

On the course of advocacy and the pursuit of accountability:

On April 6, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) held a training session for a number of human rights activists working on the Yemeni issue, in regard to documenting violations, database-building and advocacy, within the SNHR's framework of the activities of in advocacy.

On April 9, the SNHR issued [a statement](#) about the annual report for 2020 on the human rights situation for various countries worldwide issued by the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor on March 30, 2021, which outlined the most notable patterns of violations of international human rights law in Syria, with the Syrian Network for Human Rights being the second most cited source of data according to the quotes cited in the report, with 55 citations.

On April 12, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) issued its second report which [confirmed](#) the responsibility of the Syrian regime for the Saraqeb attack, on February 4, 2018, concluding that there are reasonable grounds to believe that at approximately 21:22 on February 4, 2018, a military helicopter from the Syrian regime's Air Force, under the control of the 'Tiger Forces', dropped at least one cylinder on eastern Saraqeb city in Idlib suburbs. This cylinder ruptured and released a toxic gas, chlorine, which dispersed over a large area affecting 12 named individuals.

Many international bodies have welcomed the findings of the report, including [the European Union](#), [the United States of America](#), Germany, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, and many other countries. On April 13, we issued [a statement](#) welcoming the report's findings.

On April 7, the Syrian Network for Human Rights issued [a report](#), on the anniversary of the chemical attacks on the cities of Khan Sheikhoun and Douma, in which we called on the OPCW to take the ultimate possible measures against the Syrian regime at the upcoming meeting of the States Parties, taking place between April 20-22, 2021, given the regime's flagrant violation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of the Use of Chemical Weapons, to refer the issue of the use of chemical weapons in Syria to the Security Council with the recommendation that it takes serious actions under Chapter VII, and urged the OPCW not to yield to Russian pressure that supports the use of chemical weapons of mass destruction against the Syrian people.

On Wednesday, April 21, 2021, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons adopted Decision [C-25/DEC.9](#), under which it suspended some of the rights and privileges of Syria as a member state of the OPCW. This came as part of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). France² submitted the draft decision on behalf of the 46 member states of the CWC. The decision obtained a majority of two-thirds of the votes of the present and voting states, with 87 states voting in favor of the decision, while 15 voted against it³. We at the SNHR issued [a report](#) on April 29 that addressed the two decisions of the OPCW issued on Syria, and the resulting expansion of the OPCW's mandate to include the identification of the perpetrators of the attacks, then suspending the privileges of Syria, and the states that voted against the two decisions, which SNHR called "shameful states", given that their vote defends the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, and thus encourages the use of chemical weapons in the world.

On April 7, Russia's deputy representative to the Security Council, Dmitry Polyanskiy, [stated](#) that the Syrian regime may stop cooperating with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), if the Western nations' proposal to limit its powers in the organization is approved.

On April 21, Dutch media [published](#) a ruling by the Hague Court that sentenced Ahmad Y. to prison. Ahmad, an asylum seeker from Syria, was arrested in 2019 at the application center in Ter Apel, the Netherlands, on suspicion of committing war crimes in 2015 by insulting the bodies of dead Syrian regime forces in the Sahl al Ghab area in Hama governorate at the time of his affiliation with the Ahrar al Sham military group, which is classified as terrorist in the Netherlands, where humiliating corpses is considered a war crime according to Dutch law.

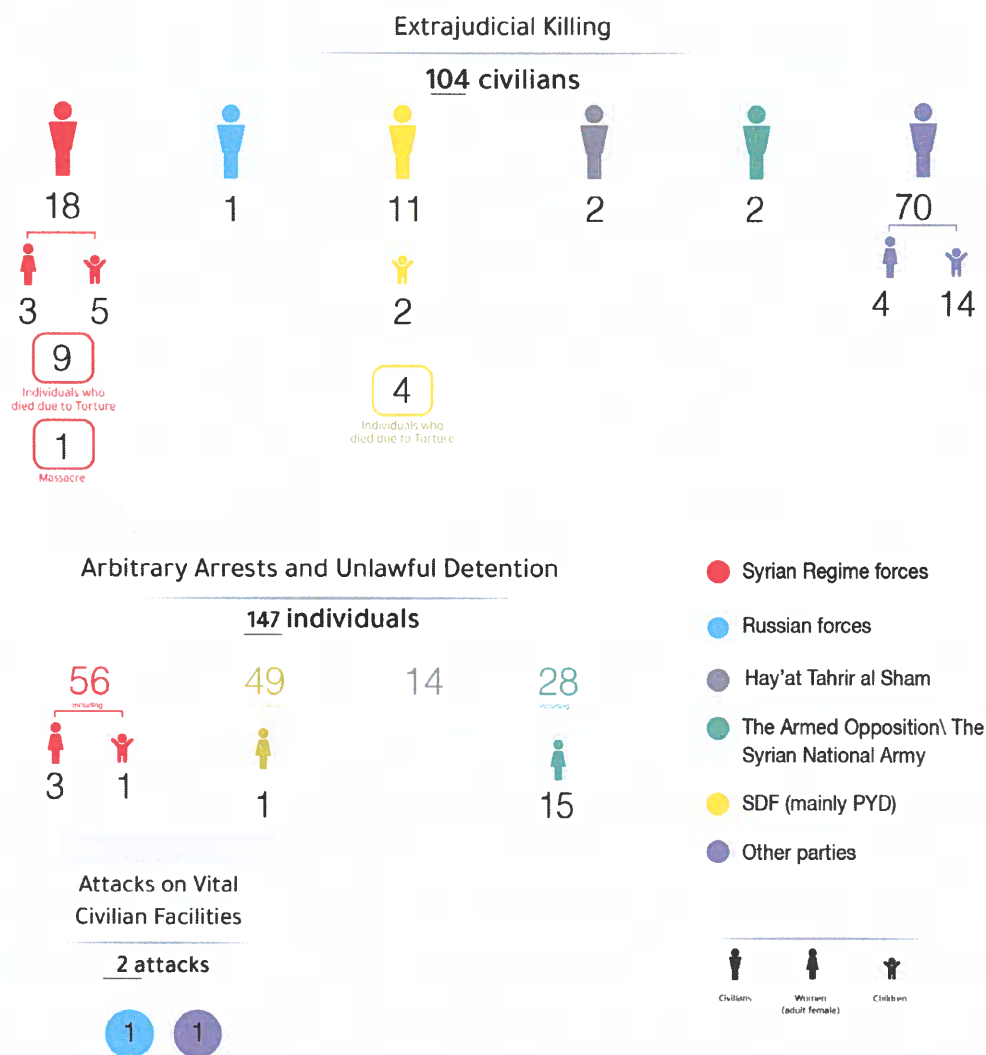
In a joint [statement](#) issued on April 22, 15 Syrian organizations, including the Syrian Network for Human Rights, called for the creation and implementation of new accountability mechanisms as a step in the path of justice in Syria.

² OPCW, the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of States Parties, paragraph 9 (17). <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021/04/c2505%28e%29.pdf>

³ OPCW, the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of States Parties, paragraph 9 (24). <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021/04/c2505%28e%29.pdf>

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

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



A. Extrajudicial killing:

In April 2021, SNHR documented the deaths of 104 civilians, including 21 children and seven women (adult female), the largest percentage of whom were killed at the hands of other parties; among the victims were 13 individuals who died due to torture. We also recorded at least one massacre. We issued a report on the first of this month detailing the civilian victims documented killed in April 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)⁴: 18 civilians, including five children and three women.

Russian forces: One civilian.

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham⁵ : Two civilians.

The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army: Two civilians.

Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party): 11 civilians, including two children.

B. Other parties:

We documented the deaths of 70 civilians, including 14 children and four women, at the hands of other parties, distributed as follows:

- Landmines of unknown source: 13 civilians, including seven children.
- Gunfire of unknown source: 33 civilians, including one child and two women.
- Bombings whose perpetrators have not yet been identified: 10 civilians, including six children.
- Killings by unknown persons: 11 civilians, including one woman.
- Turkish border guards: Two civilians, including one woman.
- Jordanian border guards: One civilian.

B. Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance:

In April 2021, SNHR documented at least 147 cases of arbitrary arrests, including one child and 19 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 regime forces in the governorate of Daraa, then Aleppo 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 April 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:** 56, including one child and three women.
- **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:** 14.
- **The Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army:** 28, including 15 women.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** 49, including one woman.

⁴ 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.

⁵ The United Nations has designated it as a terrorist organization

C. Attacks on vital civilian facilities:

In April 2021, SNHR documented at least two incidents of attacks on vital civilian facilities, one of which was at the hands of Russian forces in Idlib governorate.

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

A. The main parties:

- **Russian forces:** One.

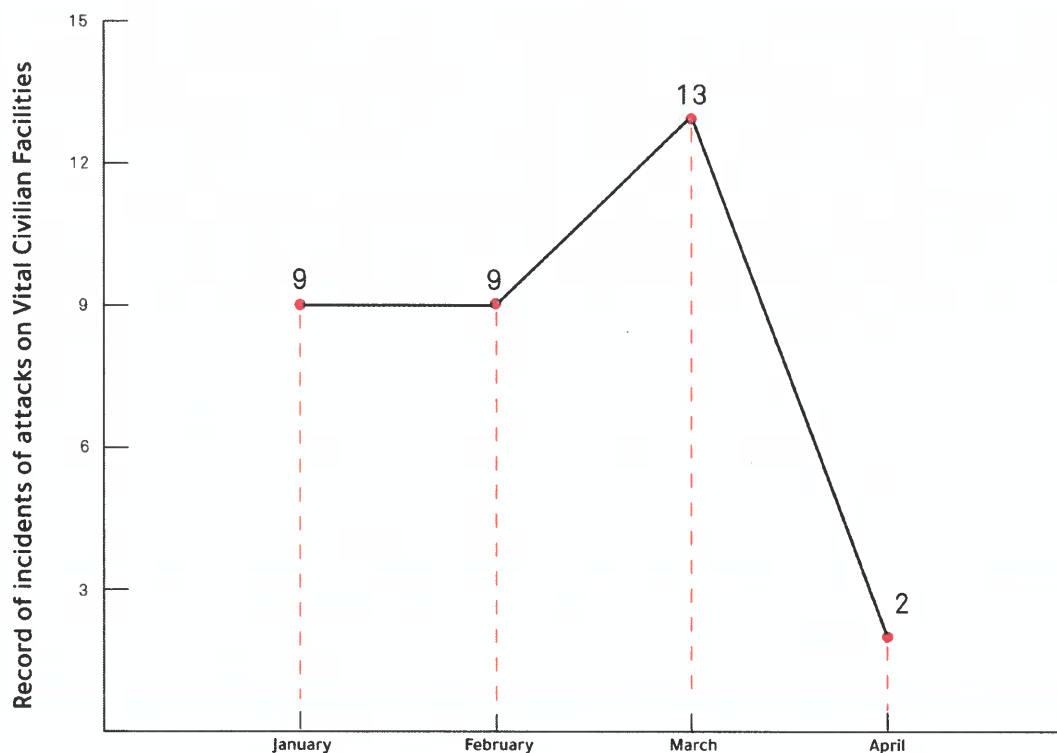
B. Other parties:

- **A bombing whose perpetrators have not yet been identified:** One.

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

Attacked Facility	Perpetrator Party	
	Russian forces	Other parties
Infrastructure		
Official Headquarters		1
Livestock farms	1	
Total	1	1

Thus, the record of attacks on vital civilian facilities documented since the start of 2021 up to May of the same year at the hands of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria has now reached 33 in total, distributed monthly as follows:



The previous chart shows a substantial reduction in the number of incidents of attacks on vital civilian facilities in April, compared to the previous months; this is due to a decrease in the pace of military operations, which we believe is caused by the significant outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during the month.

The most notable attacks on vital civilian facilities documented in April:

On Monday, March 29, 2021, fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, fired a number of missiles at a poultry breeding farm located in the farms area, west of Idlib city, [resulting in the deaths of hundreds of poultry, in addition](#) to causing [great destruction to the poultry house building](#). The area was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

On Monday, April 12, 2021, an IED of unknown [origin exploded](#) near the local [council building](#) in Kafrayya town in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, partially damaging the structure of [the building](#). SNHR is still trying to contact witnesses and survivors to obtain more details of the incident. The town was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham 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 April.

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. Although more than a year has passed since the announcement of the first case of the COVID-19 pandemic in these areas, the Syrian regime has not taken any serious step to support the medical sector, even by releasing health sector workers imprisoned in its detention centers. We issued a [report](#) in this regard.

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. We have also indicated, in a wide range of [news reports](#) issued over the past months, that no serious measures have been taken to prevent overcrowding of civilians or to demonstrate any commitment to impose or follow preventive measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic in various regions of Syria.

V. Attachments:

[\(1\) Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 104 Civilians, Including 21 Children, Seven Women, and 13 Victims Due to Torture, in Syria in April 2021](#)

[\(2\) At least 147 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest/ Detention Documented in Syria in April 2021, Including One Child and 19 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.

Acknowledgments

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to all family members, relatives and friends of the victims, as well as eyewitnesses and local activists whose contributions have enriched this report.



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