

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/syria>

Annual reports

Events of 2020

A man sits with his children at the remains of an ancient church in the village of Babisqa, Syria, which is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Dead Cities, on November 7, 2020. His home was destroyed by the Syrian government shelling.

2020 Anas Alkharboutli/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images

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As More Climate Chaos Looms, Slashing Fossil Fuels Is Key

In 2020, civilians in Syria faced another year confronting stark challenges and abuses, first and foremost at the hands of the Syrian government and other authorities, despite a discernible decrease in violent conflict.

With the unprecedented depreciation of the national currency, the imposition of further international sanctions, and crises in neighboring countries, the Syrian economy went into freefall for much of 2020. For ordinary Syrians, this translated into an inability to procure food, essential drugs, and other basic necessities. As a result, more than 9.3 million Syrians have become food insecure and over 80 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line.

Meanwhile, human rights abuses in government-held territory continued unabated. Authorities brutally suppressed every sign of re-emerging dissent, including through arbitrary arrests and torture. Authorities also continued to unlawfully confiscate property and restrict access to areas of origin for returning Syrians.

The decade-long war has decimated the country's economy and healthcare system, significantly complicating efforts to respond to and mitigate the Covid-19 outbreak, even in areas where active fighting has receded. Despite official numbers being low, doctors and nurses in government-held areas cast doubt upon the accuracy of these official statistics and estimate that hundreds of thousands have been infected with coronavirus. Overwhelmed hospitals turned patients away, and severe shortages of personal protective equipment contributed to large numbers of deaths. The pandemic also exposed existing fissures in the country, including the discriminatory distribution of essential medical supplies.

Until March 2020, when a ceasefire was put in place, the Syrian-Russian military alliance continued its offensive on Idlib governorate, the last anti-government foothold in Syria. Since 2019, the alliance has targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure in the northwest in indiscriminate attacks, resulting in thousands of deaths and at least one million newly displaced people. The offensive also meant that the region was ill-prepared to deal with the pandemic. With over 50 percent of the health infrastructure destroyed, and hundreds of thousands without shelter and unable to practice social distancing, the region is increasingly at risk of a devastating outbreak.

The United Nations Security Council's closure of the sole authorized border crossing from Iraq to northeast Syria in January, due to a veto threat from Russia, and restrictions applied from government-held areas on the delivery of humanitarian aid, resulted in severe shortages of medical supplies and a dwindling number of hospitals capable of responding to the coronavirus pandemic in the region.

The difficulties with cross-border aid grew in July when the council closed one of two authorized crossings for UN aid deliveries from Turkey into northwest Syria. Now there is only one authorized crossing, resulting in bottlenecks and delays.

Meanwhile, the fate of thousands kidnapped by the Islamic State (ISIS), primarily in the northeast, remains uncertain. While the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), announced the creation of a civilian working group to trace and locate those who have been disappeared by ISIS, no significant progress has been made, and the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS remains largely absent on this issue.

The Syrian-Russian military alliance continued to deliberately and indiscriminately attack civilian objects including schools, hospitals, markets, homes, and shelters using what have become trademark tactics over the years, including the use of internationally banned weapons.

Human Rights Watch [documented 18 unlawful attacks](#) in Idlib between January and March 2020. The attacks killed at least 112 people and wounded at least another 359 and destroyed schools and healthcare facilities. Cluster munitions were used in two of the attacks on schools in Idlib City in February.

By March 2020, 84 medical facilities had suspended their operations in the governorates of Idlib and Aleppo according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). Save the Children reported that 217 schools were abandoned or damaged due to the conflict in Idlib from December 2019 to March 2020.

Following the re-taking of specific areas, government ground forces including the 25th Special Forces Division, a Russian-backed elite Syrian government force formerly known as the Tiger Forces retaliated against civilians who chose not to leave the towns of Idlib and Aleppo governorates, shooting at them and despoiling the bodies of the dead. In February, disturbing video footage surfaced of government forces firing at older women in west Aleppo as civilians were packing their belongings to leave the area.

While levels of violence have reduced significantly, over 11.1 million people in Syria still require humanitarian aid. A decade of war beset by violations, including crimes against humanity, has decimated the country's infrastructure, with homes and schools destroyed, lack of clean water and sanitation, and most of the population unable to make ends meet.

Despite this, the Syrian government continued to impose severe restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid in government-held areas of Syria and elsewhere in the country. Purporting to justify its acts according to its laws and policies, the government [restricted humanitarian organizations access](#) to communities that needed aid, selectively approved aid projects to punish civilians in anti-government held areas, and required humanitarian groups to partner with security-vetted local actors. There is a continuing risk that aid and reconstruction funding in the future will be siphoned through the abusive state apparatus and used to underwrite human rights abuses.

In January, following the threat of a Russian veto, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) ended its authorization for moving UN aid supplies from Iraq to northeast Syria. Non-UN aid groups that previously depended heavily on the UN for healthcare supplies have been [unable to deliver enough aid](#) from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to northeast Syria to meet the populations needs. Meanwhile, Syrian authorities in Damascus maintained their longstanding restrictions on aid reaching Kurdish-held areas in [northeast Syria](#). According to UNOCHA, only 30 percent of medical facilities that previously received supplies across the border were being reached from Damascus, resulting in severe shortages of medical supplies and closures of critical care centers, placing the right to health of over 2 million people at risk. In July 2020, the UN Security Council further gutted the cross-border mechanism by removing its authorization for one of the two border crossings to northwest Syria.

The Syrian government also continued to restrict access to residential buildings and to unlawfully demolish homes without adequate compensation. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI), civilians were still being prevented from returning to their houses in Qaboun, Jawbar, Yarmouk camp, and parts of Darayya. The Syrian government is also using Decree 66 of 2012 and its overbroad counterterrorism law to confiscate the property of anti-government individuals and their families, without due process or adequate compensation.

Syrian security forces continue to arbitrarily detain, disappear, and mistreat people across the country, including returnees and individuals in retaken areas. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), at least 100,000 Syrians remain forcibly disappeared. The network also estimates that nearly 15,000 have died due to torture since March 2011, the majority at the hands of Syrian government forces.

In February, a prominent human rights activist Mazen al-Hummad returned to Syria. According to his relatives and lawyer, he was detained upon return to Damascus airport. His whereabouts remain unknown. In June, Sweida residents began to organize mass gatherings to protest against the worsening economic conditions in the country. Syrian security forces and counter-protesters responded with brutal violence, quelling the protests, and arresting several anti-government activists. According to the COI, at least 34 men, one woman, and 10 children were disappeared in Daraa, Homs, Quneitra, Rif Damascus, and Sweida governorates by government security forces, including the Military Intelligence Directorate and the Military Police.

The spread of coronavirus has exacerbated concerns about detainees and the disappeared. Tens of thousands remain in government-detention facilities in horrific humanitarian conditions, where denial of access to healthcare is part of a state policy. On March 22, President Bashar al-Assad expanded the range of crimes included in an amnesty announced in September 2019, largely in response to the pandemic. However, only a few hundred people jailed for common crimes had been released so far, and the fate of thousands remains unknown.

The COI reported that women and girls faced sexual violence, including rape, in government detention facilities and areas under the control of armed groups. Both state and non-state actors continue to [target](#) men, boys, transgender women, gay and bisexual men, and nonbinary people, subjecting them to rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Al-Qaeda affiliate rebranded into its own entity, remains predominantly in control of several regions in Idlib, where it continues a brutal pattern of repression against the civilian population. According to the COI, the groups abuses include arrests, torture of detainees, summary executions, lootings, blackmail, and monopolizing the electrical supply and internet services. The COI has documented four cases of executions of detainees and reviewed 10 additional reports of such cases between November 2019 and

June 2020. According to the COIs report, HTS repeatedly interfered in the delivery of humanitarian aid and disrupted healthcare services.

Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have indiscriminately shelled civilian structures and systematically pillaged private property, arrested hundreds of individuals, and carried out at least seven summary executions in areas they occupy in northeast Syria. According to the COI, Turkish-backed forces have also committed sexual violence against women and men in territories under their control, including at least 30 incidents of rape.

Turkey and Turkish-backed factions have also failed to ensure adequate water supplies to Kurdish-held areas in [northeast Syria](#). Around 460,000 individuals in Kurdish-held areas in northeast Syria depend on the supply of water from the Allouk water station near the town of Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye). The stations supply was interrupted 13 times following its takeover by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces in October 2019.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led armed group, has arbitrarily detained at least eight activists in areas under its control on suspicion of affiliation with ISIS and refused to inform their families of their whereabouts. Kurdish-led authorities, with the support of the US-led military coalition against ISIS, continue to hold around 100,000 ISIS suspects and family members, most of them women and children. Tens of thousands of women and children affiliated with ISIS are held in locked desert camps in degrading and often life-threatening conditions, and at least 12,000 men and boys are in overcrowded prisons. Another 14,000 are from 60 other countries. None of the non-Iraqi foreigners has been brought before a judge to determine the necessity or legality of their detention.

In October, the Kurdish-led authorities announced two general amnesties. One for the 25,000 Syrians affiliated with ISIS in al-Hol camp, and another for low-level Syrian ISIS prisoners who were not charged with violent crimes. Until late October, close to 1,000 had been released.

Over the years, [ISIS has kidnapped thousands of people](#), including journalists, activists, medical workers, community leaders, and human rights activists, whose fates continue to be unknown. In areas previously controlled by ISIS, more than 20 mass graves containing thousands of bodies have been discovered. In a positive step, on April 5, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the de facto Kurdish authority currently in control of areas formerly held by ISIS, announced the [creation of a new working group](#) consisting of lawyers, activists, and relatives to help identify what happened to the people disappeared by ISIS. However, at time of writing, [little progress had been made](#).

The global military coalition against ISIS has still not thoroughly investigated attacks by its members that killed civilians or created a program for compensation or other assistance for civilians harmed by coalition operations.

Across the country, there are 6.1 million internally displaced. By mid-February, 900,000 people had been displaced due to hostilities in Idlib governorate, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). As of May, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) records indicate that a total of 13,423 self-organized spontaneous returns had taken place from neighboring host countries. Turkey maintained a closed border.

On February 27, Turkey announced authorities would not intercept asylum seekers wishing to leave Turkey and head towards the European Union. Thousands of migrants and asylum seekers, including Syrian refugees, gathered at the Turkish-Greek border. Many of those that managed to cross into Greece were summarily pushed back. Greek security forces, along with unidentified armed men, detained, assaulted, sexually assaulted, robbed, and stripped asylum seekers and migrants, then forced them back to Turkey. Turkey continues to detain and summarily deport Syrians back to northern Syria in violation of its obligations under international law.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon bear the brunt of the deep economic and financial crisis in the country, in addition to widespread public and institutional discrimination.

Due to restrictive Lebanese residency policies, only 22 percent of an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon have the legal right to live in the country, leaving the majority to live under the radar, subject to arbitrary arrest, detention, harassment and summary deportation to Syria. At least 21 Lebanese municipalities have used the Covid-19 outbreak as a pretext to impose discriminatory restrictions on Syrian refugees that do not apply to Lebanese residents. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already-difficult situation for refugees and internally displaced people with disabilities in Lebanon.

Even before pandemic-related school closures, more than 2 million children in Syria, and nearly a million refugee children, were out of school. Syrian refugee children face [financial and bureaucratic obstacles to education](#) beyond the primary level, with little support from host countries or international donors. Enrollment rates collapsed from as high as 95 percent in primary schools to less than 30 percent in upper-secondary schools in Turkey and in Jordan, and to less than 5 percent in Lebanon. Accommodations for refugee children with disabilities at schools were virtually non-existent in Lebanon and Jordan.

The Syrian government continues to bar humanitarian workers from accessing and providing aid to 12,000 refugees stranded at al-Rukban camp near the Jordanian border. Delivery of basic goods to the camp is sporadic and made through informal routes, according to UNOCHA.

In July, Danish Minister of Immigration and Integration Mattias Tesfaye announced that Denmark will be reviewing and possibly revoking residence permits for refugees whom it deems no longer need protection. The country has already revoked five permits for refugees from Damascus given that the situation there has improved.

In April, the trial of two alleged former Syrian intelligence officials began in Koblenz, Germany, in a [landmark case on torture in one of Syrias detention facilities](#). The same month, the first trial addressing genocide by an ISIS suspect against the Yazidi minority began in Frankfurt. Other countries, including France and Sweden, are pursuing similar cases under their universal jurisdiction laws.

The UN-mandated International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), established in 2016 to assist investigations and prosecutions of war crimes and other serious crimes in Syria, continued its work, including by engaging with national judicial authorities

on their investigations.

The Investigation and Identification Team (ITT) at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons continues to investigate chemical weapons attacks in Syria with the aim of identifying perpetrators. In April, the ITT confirmed that the Syrian air force carried out three chemical weapons attacks that targeted al-Lataminah in March 2017.

On June 17, the US Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act came into force. While the stated purpose of the sanctions includes pursuing accountability for human rights violations, the act also allows US authorities to unilaterally impose sanctions such as travel restrictions and asset freezing on individuals, businesses, industries, and entities that provide material assistance to the Syrian government, its allies operating in Syria, and its paramilitary forces. Thirty-nine designations were initially made on June 17, followed by ten more on July 29. The full impact of these sanctions has yet to be assessed.

In September, the [Netherlands notified Syria](#) that it had invoked the United Nations Convention against Torture provision that provides for negotiations for disputes under the treaty and potential recourse to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Despite the creation of a UN-facilitated constitutional committee, political negotiations remain at a virtual standstill. The committee, formed to bring Syrian parties together, was delayed in meeting, is not fully representative, and has failed to show concrete results thus far.

Russia, Turkey, and Iran continue to wield influence in Syria, with Russia spearheading efforts to politically legitimize the Syrian government, including through its use of the veto in the UN Security Council. Turkey's influence is seen in areas under its direct control in Syria, as well as indirectly in Idlib governorate, where in March it negotiated a ceasefire with Russia that remains intact.

The US maintains its support for the anti-ISIS coalition operating in Syria and provides financial and logistical support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, as well as stabilization aid in the region. In the UN Security Council, the US, and some European Council members have pushed for the reinstatement of the humanitarian cross-border mechanism and have supported accountability for violations in Syria. Russia has continued to use its veto power to eviscerate the cross-border aid mandate.

The European Union continued to condemn violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Syria, and reiterated support for international accountability efforts. The EU hosted its fourth Brussels conference on Syria remotely, focusing on a political solution to the crisis and response to humanitarian needs.

Both the EU and the US renewed and expanded sanctions on the Syrian government.

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