

Human Rights Watch

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

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/syria>

Annual reports

Events of 2021

Displaced Syrians sit amid the ruins of their destroyed neighbourhood as they break their fast in Atareb town in the opposition-held western countryside of Syria's Aleppo province, on May 7, 2020.

2020 AAREF WATAD/AFP via Getty Images

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2021 marked a decade since the peaceful uprising in Syria turned into a brutal conflict. Since the start, parties to the conflict have flagrantly disregarded human rights and humanitarian law protections. Human Rights Watch has determined that some attacks by the Russia-Syria alliance are war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity.

In May 2021, Bashar al-Assad secured a fourth term as president for seven more years in elections that did not occur under the auspices of the United Nations-led political process and failed to adhere to standards for free and fair elections. His renewed term as president came as his security services continued to subject hundreds, including returning refugees, to arbitrarily arrest and torture, while millions go hungry due to his governments diversion of aid and failure to equitably address a debilitating economic crisis brought on primarily by the destruction of infrastructure and crises in neighboring countries.

Routine shortages in basic goods, including bread and fuel, have become commonplace and the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance increased by 21 percent in 2021 reaching a total of 13.4 million people, with 1.48 million in catastrophic need, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). A little over 1 percent of the countrys total population was fully vaccinated against Covid-19 at time of writing, and there were concerns about the governments ability to distribute vaccines equitably, even within areas under its control.

According to World Vision, by 2021 the economic toll of the war was US\$1.2 trillion. The costs incurred are largely due to the destruction of infrastructure and massive displacement caused by a decade of war using prohibited tactics, primarily by the Syrian-Russian military alliance. Human Rights Watch has determined that some attacks by the alliance are war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity. The US-led anti-ISIS coalition have also violated international humanitarian law, by conducting indiscriminate strikes in northeast Syria that resulted in civilian death and destruction

Prohibited attacks by the Syrian-Russian military alliance continue to be used in Idlib where, despite a tenuous ceasefire, the alliance still poses a threat to over three million civilians trapped there. Meanwhile the dominant anti-government armed group, Hayet Tahrir al-Sham, restricts civilians freedoms.

In Turkish-occupied territories, Turkey and local Syrian factions are abusing civilians rights and restricting their freedoms with impunity.

Following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) in northeast Syria, Kurdish-led authorities and the US-led coalition have yet to provide compensation for civilian casualties, offer support for identifying the fate of those kidnapped by ISIS, and adequately address the plight of more than 60,000 Syrian and foreign men, women, and children indefinitely held in dire conditions in closed camps and prisons as ISIS suspects and family members.

The UN Security Council failed to renew the full cross-border aid mechanism, leaving only one border crossing open and exacerbating

humanitarian crises in non-government areas. Meanwhile, the UN-led peace process continued to stagnate.

Despite the governments record of human rights abuses against its own citizens, this year also saw several countries normalize with the Syrian government, including the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, and make commitments to cooperate, leading to concerns about premature return of refugees and potential facilitation of rights abuse.

While all sides to the conflict have committed heinous laws-of-war violations, the Syrian-Russian military alliance has conducted indiscriminate aerial bombing of schools, hospitals, and markets the civilian infrastructure essential to a societys survival. According to Airwars, a UK-based monitoring group, the Russian air force alone has carried out around 39,000 airstrikes in Syria since 2015.

Tensions between government loyalists and anti-government forces in Daraa governorate intensified in June 2021, following a popular rejection of the results of the Syrian presidential elections in May 2021. Between June and September 2021, Syrian armed forces, and affiliated militias launched dozens of indiscriminate attacks on populated areas in Daraa, while anti-government fighters also attacked government-held areas leading to civilian casualties.

An estimated 55,000 civilians in Dara al-Balad, an area affiliated with anti-government sentiment, were besieged and restricted from accessing bread, fuel, electricity, and healthcare services. As a result of the siege and clashes, at least 38,000 were displaced to nearby areas. In September, a Russian-brokered reconciliation agreement was announced which mandated the entry of the Syrian government to these areas, and that civilians and opposition fighters sign so-called reconciliation agreements to be allowed to stay. Dozens of Syrians who refused were transferred to Idlib. Human Rights Watch has previously documented how the guarantees provided within reconciliation agreements fall short of providing necessary protections for Syrians. Following the agreement, a Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) food truck was allowed to enter the area for the first time in months.

By 2021, Syria's economic output shrunk by 60 percent, the national currency depreciated by 99 percent and more than 90 percent of the population live below the poverty line according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). At least 12.4 million Syrians out of an estimated population of around 16 million are food insecure, according to the World Food Programme (WFP), an alarming increase of 3.1 million in one year. More than 600,000 children are chronically malnourished. The Syrian government has exacerbated the economic crisis impact by failing to fairly and adequately address bread and fuel shortages, instead allowing discriminatory and inequitable distribution.

Residents also report severe electricity cuts and shortages. In areas re-taken by the government, the majority of those interviewed by Human Rights Watch still had their houses completely or partially destroyed and could not afford to rebuild or renovate. The Syrian government provides no reconstruction assistance even years after the territory has been re-taken. As such, many residents are living in makeshift tents, and boiling water for drinking. They are unable to afford rent elsewhere.

In reclaimed parts of Idlib and Hama, Syrian authorities, through pro-government militias and the government-controlled Peasants Unions, unlawfully confiscated the homes and lands of Syrians who fled Syrian-Russian military attacks and are selling them through auctions.

In February 2021, Col. Elias al-Bitar, head of the armys Exemptions and Reserves Branch, reminded the country of a late 2019 amendment to the conscription law that allows authorities to seize property of military evaders who fail to pay absurdly high fines.

At least 13.1 million Syrians need humanitarian aid across Syria.

Millions in northeast and northwest Syria rely on the cross-border flow of food, medicine, and other lifesaving assistance including the Covid-19 vaccine. Aid workers told Human Rights Watch that non-UN agencies have nowhere near the UNs capacity to buy supplies and transport them into the northwest. They said that shutting down UN aid supplies and ending UN funding would [deny aid to millions](#) of people.

Non-UN aid groups in northeast Syria, which is mostly under the control of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration, a quasi-autonomous authority, say they have been unable to bring in enough aid, particularly for health care, since the UN was forced to [stop](#) its cross-border operations between Iraq and Syria in January 2020.

In July 2021, the UN Security Council renewed its authorization for cross-border humanitarian aid through the Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey to northwest Syria, the only remaining cross-border aid corridor which has not yet been barred by Russias UNSC veto power.

As of September 2021, 610,257 Covid-19 vaccine doses had been administered in Syria including 119,158 doses in the northwest and 19,354 in the northeast. Around 3 percent of Syrias total population were able to receive the vaccine.

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, and to divert aid to punish those who express dissent.

In 2021, it imposed a siege on the city of Daraa al-Balad, preventing humanitarian agencies from accessing the area and severely restricting food, aid and medical supplies. The Syrian government continues to bar access to al-Rukban camp near the Jordanian border where the last UN humanitarian aid delivery took place in September 2019.

Syrian security forces and government-affiliated militias continue to arbitrarily detain, disappear, and mistreat people across the country, including children, people with disabilities and older people, and returnees and individuals in retaken areas who have signed so-called reconciliation agreements.

Human Rights Watch has documented 21 cases of arrest and arbitrary detention including 13 cases of torture, 3 kidnappings, 5 extrajudicial killings, and 17 enforced disappearances between 2017 and 2021 among refugees who had returned to Syria from Jordan and Lebanon.

On November 4, 2020, the Syrian government released 60 individuals from detention facilities in southern Syria and Damascus. However, thousands remain locked away in Syria's secretive detention system, many held from as far back as 2011, and with no clue as to their whereabouts.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), nearly 15,000 have died due to torture since March 2011, the majority at the hands of Syrian government forces.

The network also estimates that at least 100,000 Syrians remain forcibly disappeared, with nearly 85 percent at the hands of Syrian government forces. The UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) was also able to document cases of sexual violence inflicted during detention in government facilities, including rape, assault, and sexual humiliation against women, men, and girls and boys as young as 11 years old.

On October 21, the Syrian Ministry of Justice announced the execution of 24 individuals, and gave five minors sentences between 10-12 years, for involvement in setting wild fires in Syria last year. The government justified the decision under its overbroad and abusive Counterterrorism Law of 2019.

Women continue to face discrimination in relation to marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance under the Personal Status Law. A woman loses her right to financial maintenance from her husband if she refuses to live with her husband in the marital home without a legitimate excuse or if she works outside the marital home without her husband's permission. While authorities amended the law twice in 2019 removing the language of disobedience, the law still punishes women for some acts of disobedience relating to mobility.

While the authorities in 2020 repealed Article 548 of the penal code which allowed men to receive reduced sentences if they injured or killed their wives or immediate female relatives on finding them engaging in an illegitimate sexual act, other articles remain that could allow men to receive reduced sentences for violence against women. The Penal Code also criminalizes adultery in a manner that discriminates against women and provides a longer prison sentence for adultery for women than men.

[Syrian](#) state and non-state actors have subjected men, boys, transgender women, and nonbinary people to sexual violence during the Syrian conflict, resulting in severe physical and mental health consequences. Under Article 520 of the Syrian penal code, unnatural sexual intercourse is punishable by three years in prison.

Turkey invaded and occupied parts of northeastern Syria in October 2019, where it remains in control. In the immediate aftermath, many homes and private properties held by the local Kurdish population were looted and seized. By December 2019, Turkish authorities and an armed group affiliated with the Turkish-backed anti-government group the Syrian National Army (SNA) arrested and illegally transferred at least 63 Syrian nationals from northeast Syria to Turkey to face trial on serious charges that could lead to life in prison. Five of the 63 Syrians were sentenced to life in prison in October 2020.

In the first half of 2021, the SNA arbitrarily detained 162 individuals, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

SNA factions continue to recruit children; a 2021 Syrians for Truth and Justice report found at least 20 cases of child recruitment.

Anti-government groups in Syria continue to resort to abusive detention practices in areas under their control. In Idlib, Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Al-Qaeda affiliate, continues to raid and arbitrarily detain activists, humanitarian workers, and civilians voicing critical opinions.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, during the first half of 2021, HTS arbitrarily arrested at least 57 individuals. According to local sources, in some cases, HTS imposes the death penalty on detainees.

The group is increasingly interfering in every aspect of civilian life, limiting women's movements, imposing dress codes and even hair styles, and levying taxes and fines haphazardly. It has also seized many homes and properties held by Christians.

The number of child soldiers recruited by HTS increased from 61 cases to 187 cases in the first half of 2020, according to a 2021 UN report.

On October 20, a bomb exploded on a military bus at a highly populated area in Damascus, killing 14 and wounding others. An insurgent group called Saraya Qasioun claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led armed group, has carried out mass arrest campaigns against civilians including activists, journalists, and teachers. In the first half of 2021, the SDF arbitrarily detained 369 individuals, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

More than 60,000 men, women and children remain detained in degrading, arbitrary, and often inhuman and life-threatening conditions by regional authorities in northeast Syria. They include nearly 43,000 foreigners; 27,000 of them children from nearly 60 countries who have been held for more than two years without ever being brought before a court. Only 25 countries are known to have repatriated or helped bring home any of their nationals and most of these have allowed only a limited number to return.

Virtually no progress has been made by the Kurdish-led authorities or the US-led coalition to determine the fate of thousands disappeared by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

The Syrian displacement crisis remains one of the most dire and protracted consequences of the war. Since 2011, 12.3 million were forced to flee since the onset of the war, according to UNOCHA, with 6.7 million currently internally displaced across the country.

In 2021, efforts to force refugees to return have taken on new dimensions. In March, Denmark became the first European country to inform 94 Syrian refugees that their temporary protection status will not be renewed after a flawed report by Danish immigration services claiming that Damascus, and Damascus countryside are safe for returns, notwithstanding ample evidence that the risk of persecution remains pervasive.

Despite a decrease in active hostilities in Syria, returnees faced a host of human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, forced disappearances, and abuse by Syrian authorities, providing additional evidence that Syria is not safe. Returning refugees also faced extreme economic hardship, unable to afford basic food items. Most also found their homes either totally or partially destroyed and were unable to afford the costs of renovation. The Syrian government provided no assistance in repairing homes.

Schooling of refugee children, including children with disabilities, in refugee-hosting countries was severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in Lebanon, where the problems posed by the pandemic are additionally compounded by a severe political, financial, and economic crisis. There, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees faced heightened risks of dropouts, child labor, and child marriage.

In February 2021, a German court sentenced Eyad A., a former Syrian intelligence official, to four and a half years in prison for aiding and abetting crimes against humanity. This was the first verdict in a historic trial of two former Syrian intelligence officials, on charges related to state-sponsored torture in Syria.

In March, the UN International, Independent, Impartial Mechanism for Syria reported that it has provided information and evidence of atrocity crimes to 12 national jurisdictions. That month, Canada joined the Netherlands in efforts to hold the Syrian government accountable for torture under the United Nations Convention against Torture. The Dutch correspondence is an important step that could eventually lead to proceedings against Syria at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

In September, France's highest court, the Cour de cassation, ruled that an indictment against the company Lafarge for complicity in crimes against humanity was wrongly canceled by the Paris Appeals Court.

The UN-led peace process, including the constitutional committee, made virtually no progress this year, following a fifth round of talks held in January 2021. Russia, Turkey, and Iran, continue to provide military and financial support to warring factions and to shield them from accountability.

In July 2021, the UN Security Council failed to reauthorize full cross-border operations into the region and authorize a resumption of aid flows from Iraq to northeast Syria, due to the threat of a Russian veto. Instead, the Security Council was able to extend the opening of one border crossing to Northwest Syria.

In April 2021, states parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention voted to suspend Syrian rights and privileges at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Syria's government forces have repeatedly used chlorine and the nerve agent sarin against men, women, and children over the course of the war. ISIS militants have on several occasions used sulfur mustard, according to the UN and OPCW.

Individuals responsible for atrocity crimes, entities within or affiliated to the Syrian government, and ISIS continue to be under robust sanctions by the United States, European Union, and the UK, in addition to a few sector-wide sanctions. In July 2021, the US sanctioned financial facilitators who supported Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as well.

Israel has increasingly and frequently conducted aerial strikes on Iranian or Hezbollah-manned targets in Syria. The United States and other members of the anti-ISIS coalition continue to support ISIS counteroperations, through their support of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people in 90 countries worldwide, spotlighting abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice

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