

# SYRIA 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bashar Assad has ruled the Syrian Arab Republic as president since 2000. The constitution mandates the primacy of Baath Party leaders in state institutions and society, and Assad and Baath Party leaders dominated all three branches of government as an authoritarian regime. An uprising against the regime that began in 2011 continued throughout the year. The May 26 presidential election resulted in Assad's re-election, and the Baath Party-led National Progressive Front won 177 of the 250 seats in the People's Council 2020 parliamentary elections. These elections, considered by the international community to be illegitimate, took place in an environment of widespread regime coercion and without the participation of a majority of Syrians residing in opposition-held territory due to the lack of a safe and neutral environment for voter participation. Nongovernmental organization observers additionally raised concerns about electoral fraud and did not consider the elections free or fair.

The regime's multiple security branches traditionally operated autonomously with no defined boundaries between their areas of jurisdiction. Regime-affiliated militia, such as the National Defense Forces, integrated with other regime-affiliated forces and performed similar roles without defined jurisdiction. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the uniformed military, police, and state security forces, and used the security forces to carry out abuses, some of which rose to the level of crimes against humanity. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed numerous abuses. Civilian authorities possessed limited influence over foreign military or paramilitary organizations operating in the country, including proregime forces such as the Russian armed forces, Iran-affiliated Hizballah, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, members of which also committed numerous abuses.

Regime and proregime forces continued aerial and ground offensives initiated in 2019 to recapture Idlib Governate and other areas in the northwestern region of the country, killing civilians and forcing the additional displacement of more than 11,000 persons. Escalations in the northwest, frequently involving the use of

heavy weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Air strikes by regime and Russian forces repeatedly struck sites where civilians were present, including hospitals, markets, schools, settlements for internally displaced persons, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists.

As of September the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported there were 6.7 million internally displaced persons, 2.6 million of whom were children, and more than 5.6 million Syrian registered refugees outside the country. The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria found it probable that the regime, its Russian allies, and other proregime forces committed attacks “marked by war crimes” that “may amount to crimes against humanity.”

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings by the regime; forced disappearances by the regime; torture, including torture involving sexual violence, by the regime; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including denial of medical care; prolonged arbitrary detention; political prisoners and detainees; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for offenses allegedly committed by an individual; serious abuses in internal conflict, including unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers by the regime and other armed actors, and aerial and ground attacks impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure such as schools, markets, and hospitals; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence and threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and the existence of criminal libel laws; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial suppression of the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; undue restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; lack of investigation of and accountability for violence against women; coerced abortion; trafficking in persons; violence and severe

discrimination targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons; existence and use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; and severe restrictions on workers' rights.

The regime took no steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, or punish officials who committed human rights violations or abuses or who engaged in corruption.

Regime-linked paramilitary groups reportedly engaged in frequent violations and abuses, including massacres; indiscriminate killings; kidnapping of civilians; extreme physical abuse, including sexual violence; and unlawful detentions. Regime-aligned militias, including Hizballah, reportedly launched numerous attacks that killed and injured civilians.

Russian forces were implicated in the deaths of civilians and destruction of civilian objects and protected sites resulting from air strikes.

The unstable security situation in areas under the control of armed opposition groups continued to foster an environment in which human rights abuses were committed, including killings, extreme physical abuse, and abductions.

Armed terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham committed a wide range of abuses, including unlawful killings and kidnappings, extreme physical abuse, and deaths of civilians during attacks described by the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria as indiscriminate. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, the group continued to carry out unlawful killings, attacks, and kidnappings, sometimes targeting civilians.

Armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey in the northern region of the country committed human rights abuses, reportedly targeting Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other civilians, including: extrajudicial killings; the arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of civilians; torture; sexual violence; forced evacuations from homes; looting and seizure of private property; transfer of detained civilians across the border into Turkey; recruitment of child soldiers; and the looting and desecration of religious shrines. The Ministry of Defense of the Syrian Interim Government, an alternative government formed by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, investigated claims of abuses committed by the armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey that

make up the Syrian National Army. In September the Syrian Interim Government created a new office to investigate allegations of human rights violations and reported that its military courts issued verdicts in 169 cases.

Elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minority groups that included members of the Kurdish People's Protection Units, reportedly engaged in human rights abuses, including torture, arbitrary detention, recruitment of child soldiers, and restrictions on freedom of assembly. The Syrian Democratic Forces continued to investigate charges against their forces. There was no information available on prosecution of individual personnel.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person**

### **a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings**

There were numerous reports that the regime and its agents, as well as other armed actors, committed arbitrary or unlawful killings in relation to the conflict (see section 1.g.). No internal governmental bodies meaningfully investigated whether security force killings were justifiable or pursued prosecutions.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), more than 227,400 civilians were killed in the conflict from 2011 to March. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released its first estimated death toll since 2014; they documented more than 350,000 deaths since the beginning of the conflict but noted this was likely an “under-count of the actual number of killings.” Other groups estimated this number exceeded 550,000. This discrepancy was due in part to the vast number of disappeared, many of whom remained missing.

During the year the SNHR reported 1,116 civilians were killed, including at least 266 children and 119 women through November. According to the SNHR, the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies killed 295 civilians, including 91 children and 35 women. Most deaths occurred in the second half of the year during military operations led by the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies in Daraa Governate

and Idlib.

The regime continued to commit extrajudicial killings and to cause the death of large numbers of civilians throughout regime-controlled territories. For example, human rights groups and other international organizations reported that in June the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Army and other regime forces surrounded and attacked the city of Daraa, breaking the Russian-brokered cease-fire and conducting heavy and indiscriminate shelling. The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria (COI) and numerous human rights groups reported the regime continued to torture and kill persons in detention facilities. According to the SNHR, more than 14,580 individuals died due to torture between 2011 and November, including 181 children and 93 women; the SNHR attributed approximately 99 percent of all cases to regime forces during the year (see section 1.c.). The April report issued by the UN secretary-general on children and armed conflict in Syria noted that the United Nations verified 4,724 grave violations against children during the year, affecting at least 4,470 children, including the killing and maiming of more than 2,700 children.

Despite a cease-fire agreement in March 2020, the regime maintained its use of helicopters and airplanes to conduct aerial bombardment and shelling in Idlib. The SNHR documented the killing of 216 civilians in the Idlib region from the beginning of the year until November. According to the SNHR, the regime was responsible for the deaths of 78 of these civilians, including 25 children and 15 women. In February the COI determined there were reasonable grounds to believe Russian forces were guilty of the war crime of “launching indiscriminate attacks” and that there were reasonable grounds to believe “progovernment forces, on multiple occasions, have committed crimes against humanity in the conduct of their use of air strikes and artillery shelling of civilian areas.” It also noted that progovernment forces’ attacks amounted to the war crime of intentionally targeting medical personnel. In attacking hospitals, medical units, and health-care personnel, regime and progovernment forces violated binding international humanitarian law to care for the sick and wounded.

Other actors in the conflict were also implicated in extrajudicial killings (see section 1.g.).

## **b. Disappearance**

There were numerous reports of forced disappearances by or on behalf of regime authorities, and the vast majority of those disappeared since the start of the conflict remained missing. Human rights groups' estimates of the number of disappearances since 2011 varied widely, but all estimates pointed to disappearances as a common practice. The SNHR documented at least 2,210 cases of arrests of which 1,750 were categorized as cases of enforced disappearances. The SNHR also reported that at least 150,000 Syrians remained arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared as of November, with the regime responsible for at least 88 percent of those detentions. The regime targeted medical personnel and critics, including journalists and protesters, as well as their families and associates. Most disappearances reported by domestic and international human rights documentation groups appeared to be politically motivated, and a number of prominent political prisoners detained in previous years remained missing (see section 1.e.).

In its March report, the COI determined that “widespread enforced disappearance was deliberately perpetrated by government security forces throughout the decade on a massive scale, to spread fear, stifle dissent and as punishment.” The Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison alleged that regime and nonstate actors used enforced disappearance and arrests as a tactic to accumulate wealth and gain influence. Between May and July, the regime released 81 individuals under the latest amnesty decree issued in May. The regime had issued 18 amnesty decrees since 2011, although the amnesty decree issued in May did not include political detainees. The decree excluded the vast majority of detainees who were never formally convicted of a crime in any court of law and were classified by human rights groups as unacknowledged detainees or forcibly disappeared.

During its February session the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) transmitted 33 newly reported cases of enforced disappearance to the regime. The UNWGEID received no response from the regime on these or other outstanding cases. The UNWGEID also received reports of disappearances, including women and children, perpetrated by various armed groups, including those affiliated with the Turkish armed forces. The April report

issued by the UN secretary-general on children and armed conflict in Syria noted the abduction of 70 children from 2018 to 2020. The SNHR reported at least 5,000 children were still detained or forcibly disappeared as of November, with at least 50 of those detentions having taken place since the beginning of the year.

Throughout the year the regime continued publishing notifications of detainees' deaths in regime detention facilities. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Families for Freedom, many families were unaware of the status of their detained family members and learned that relatives they believed to be alive had died months or even years earlier. In many cases the regime denied the presence of these individuals in its detention centers until it released death notifications. The SNHR recorded at least 970 of these notifications, including six during the year, but estimated that the number of detainees certified as dead was in the thousands. The regime did not announce publication of notifications on updated state registers, return bodies to families, or disclose locations of remains.

For example, the SNHR reported in March the regime notified the family of Muhammad Qatlish, a military defector detained and forcibly disappeared by regime forces in 2018 after signing a reconciliation agreement, that he had died in regime custody. As was frequently the case, the regime did not provide Qatlish's body to the family or officially inform the family of the timing or manner of his death, although the SNHR reported it was likely due to torture.

The COI noted that the families of disappeared persons often feared approaching authorities to inquire about the locations of their relatives; those who did so had to pay large bribes to learn the locations of relatives or faced systematic refusal by authorities to disclose information about the fate of disappeared individuals. In January the Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison reported that families had paid officials approximately \$2.7 million for "information, promise to visit, or promise to release" prisoners since 2011.

Some terrorist groups and armed opposition groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected regime affiliates, journalists, and activists (see section 1.g.).

The regime made no efforts to prevent, investigate, or punish such actions.

### **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

The law prohibits torture and other cruel or degrading treatment or punishment and provides up to three years' imprisonment for violations. Human rights activists, the COI, and local NGOs, however, reported thousands of credible cases of regime authorities engaging in systematic torture, abuse, and mistreatment to punish perceived opponents, a systematic regime practice documented throughout the conflict, as well as prior to 2011. The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights assessed that, while individuals were often tortured to obtain information, the primary purpose of the regime's use of torture during interrogations was to terrorize and humiliate detainees.

While most accounts concerned male detainees, there were increased reports of female detainees suffering abuse in regime custody during the year. Activists maintained that many instances of abuse went unreported. Some declined to allow reporting of their names or details of their cases due to fear of regime reprisal. Many torture victims reportedly died in custody (see section 1.a.).

The COI reported in March that the regime used 20 different methods of torture, including administering electric shocks and the extraction of nails and teeth. The SNHR documented the deaths of at least 91 individuals from torture between January and November, including two children.

The COI and Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported regular use of torture against perceived regime opponents at regime facilities run by the General Security Directorate and Military Intelligence Directorate. Human rights groups identified numerous detention facilities where torture occurred, including the Mezzeh airport detention facility; Military Security Branches 215, 227, 235, 248, and 291; Adra Prison; Sednaya Prison; the Harasta Air Force Intelligence Branch; Harasta Military Hospital; Mezzeh Military Hospital 601; and the Tishreen Military Hospital.

In September Amnesty International reported that regime prison and intelligence officials subjected women, children, and men to sexual and gender-based violence, including rape. One interviewee, Alaa, said regime officials arrested her and her

25-year-old daughter at a border crossing, accusing them of “speaking against [President] Assad abroad,” and sexually assaulted her daughter while she was in the room.

In June the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), a consulting firm focused on political risk and development, reported that regime detention centers were routinely identified as sites of torture and sexual and gender-based violence for suspected members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) community.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) assessed that the regime perpetrated violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including the detention and torture of medical workers. In March PHR published the account of Houssam al-Nahhas, a physician who was imprisoned and tortured at the Military Intelligence Directorate in Aleppo for providing health care to injured protesters. According to al-Nahhas, he was released after signing a pledge to “not deliver health services to the government’s perceived adversaries.”

There continued to be a significant number of reports of abuse of children by the regime. Officials reportedly targeted and tortured children because of their familial relationships, real or assumed, with political dissidents, members of the armed opposition, and activist groups. According to witnesses, authorities continued to detain children to compel parents and other relatives associated with opposition fighters to surrender to authorities. The April report issued by the UN secretary-general on children and armed conflict in Syria noted 36 cases of sexual violence against children attributed to ISIS, regime forces, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and others between 2016 and the first half of 2018. The COI reported that the regime detained boys as young as age 12 and subjected them to severe beatings, torture, and denial of food, water, sanitation, and medical care.

In late February the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany, convicted and sentenced Eyad al-Gharib, a Syrian security officer, to four and one-half years in prison for “aiding and abetting a crime against humanity in the form of torture and deprivation of liberty.” The proceedings marked the first trial for regime officials who conducted state-sponsored torture in Syria. Al-Gharib had been charged with aiding and abetting in crimes against humanity and complicity in approximately 30

cases of torture. A second defendant, Anwar Raslan, a former colonel in the Syrian intelligence services, remained on trial in Germany at year's end. Raslan was charged with crimes against humanity, rape, aggravated sexual assault, and 58 murders at Branch 251, where he allegedly oversaw the torture of at least 4,000 individuals between April 2011 and September 2012.

In July German federal prosecutors announced charges against Alla Mousa, a Syrian doctor accused of 18 counts of torture in military hospitals in Homs and Damascus. He was arrested in Germany in 2020 and charged with murder and attempted, severe, and dangerous bodily harm at military hospitals No. 608 and No. 601, where he allegedly tortured protesters transported to the hospitals between 2011 and 2012. The indictment outlined his torture of detainees injured in anti-Assad demonstrations and noted the deaths of at least two victims.

Impunity was pervasive and deeply embedded in the security and intelligence forces and elsewhere in the regime. The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria and human rights groups reported that perpetrators often acted with a sense of impunity, and the vast majority of abuses committed since 2011 went uninvestigated. Numerous human rights organizations concluded that regime forces continued to inflict systematic, officially sanctioned torture on civilians in detention with impunity. There were no known prosecutions or convictions in the country of security force personnel for abuses and no reported regime actions to increase respect for human rights by the security forces.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison and detention center conditions remained harsh and in many instances were life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical and psychological abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care.

**Physical Conditions:** Prison facilities were grossly overcrowded. Authorities commonly held juveniles, adults, pretrial detainees, and convicted prisoners together in inadequate spaces. Human rights groups reported that authorities continued to hold children in prison with adults. In its August report, the COI recounted the testimony of a media activist detained in military intelligence branches where he was held with minors between 12 and 17 years of age.

In March the COI reported that the regime maintained a vast network of detention centers where detainees were subjected to human rights violations. Reports from human rights groups and former detainees suggested that there continued to be many informal detention sites and that authorities held thousands of prisoners in converted military bases and in civilian infrastructure, such as schools and stadiums, and in unknown locations. Activists asserted the regime housed arrested individuals in factories and vacant warehouses that were overcrowded and lacked adequate sanitary facilities.

In some cases authorities transferred detainees from unofficial holding areas to intelligence services facilities. Detention conditions at security and intelligence service facilities continued to be the harshest, especially for political or national security prisoners. Facilities lacked proper ventilation, lighting, access to potable water or adequate food, medical staff and equipment, and sufficient sleeping quarters.

Inside prisons and detention centers, the prevalence of death from disease remained high due to unsanitary conditions and the withholding of food, medical care, and medication. In its March report, the COI said that detainees died from “inhuman living conditions,” including severe overcrowding, lack of food, and unclean drinking water. Prisoners received inadequate or no medical care, leading to death from preventable conditions in unhygienic cells. Local NGOs and medical professionals reported authorities denied medical care to prisoners with pre-existing health needs, such as diabetes, asthma, and cancer, and often denied pregnant women any medical care. Released prisoners commonly reported sickness and injury resulting from such conditions. According to the COI’s September report, survivor detainees reported hundreds of detainee deaths in custody of government security branches, including Sednaya Prison and Tishrin Military Hospital, due to torture and inhuman treatment. Interviewees also noted that hunger and tuberculosis were widespread.

In February the *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* published an article noting the risks of a COVID-19 outbreak among prisoners confined in overcrowded regime detention facilities, saying their health had already been compromised by abuse, lack of medical care, and unhygienic prison conditions. OHCHR assessed the conditions in regime prisons were alarming and presented unique risks of a

COVID-19 outbreak.

Information on conditions and care for prisoners with disabilities was unavailable.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minority groups that included members of the Kurdish People's Protection Units, oversaw more than 20 detention centers in the northeast holding approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters detained during coalition operations. The largest of these was the Provincial Internal Security Forces detention center in Hasakah estimated to hold the bulk of ISIS detainees in the country. Detainees were provided with sufficient food and water, but medical care was lacking, reflecting the overall lack of medical supplies throughout the northeast region. Due to the limited justice system in which to try and sentence Syrian detainees in the northeast, many Syrian detainees remained in detention awaiting trial. Non-Syrian detainees remained in these detention centers until they could be repatriated to their home countries. The SDF managed a program to release nonviolent Syrian detainees who had been tried and served at least part of their sentences back to their home communities under a tribal sponsorship program.

According to the COI, conditions in detention centers run by nonstate actors, such as HTS, violated international law (see section 1.g.).

**Administration:** There were no credible mechanisms or avenues for prisoners to complain or submit grievances, and authorities routinely failed to investigate allegations or document complaints or grievances. Activists reported there was no ombudsman to serve on behalf of prisoners and detainees. The law provides for prompt access to family members, but NGOs and families reported inconsistent application of the law, with most families waiting years to see relatives and, in many cases, never being able to visit them at all unless they bribed regime officials. In many instances the regime never informed families of their relatives' detention or of deaths in detention.

In areas where regime control was weak or nonexistent, localized corrections structures emerged. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders oversaw facility administration. Former police forces or members of armed opposition groups operated facilities in areas under the control of

opposition forces. Nonstate actors often did not respect due process and lacked training to run facilities.

**Independent Monitoring:** The regime prohibited independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions, and diplomatic and consular officials had minimal access. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited central prisons and offered services aimed at restoring family links to relatives in detention.

The ICRC and Red Crescent continued to negotiate with all parties to gain access to detention centers across the country but were unable to gain access to any regime-controlled intelligence and military detention facilities during the year. The SDF provided the ICRC and UN-supported NGOs access to SDF prisons during the year. The ICRC continued to negotiate with all parties to try to gain access to other detention centers across the country.

Reportedly, the regime often failed to notify foreign governments when it arrested, detained, released, or deported their citizens, especially when the case involved political or national security charges. The regime also failed to provide consular access to foreign citizens known to be in its prisons and, on numerous occasions, claimed these individuals were not in its custody or even in the country.

#### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but a 2011 decree allows the regime to detain suspects for up to 60 days without charge if suspected of “terrorism” or related offenses. Arbitrary arrests continued during the year, according to the COI, local news sources, and various human rights organizations, as well as prolonged or indefinite detentions. The law provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, but the regime did not observe this requirement.

#### **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

The law generally requires a warrant for arrest in criminal cases, but police often cited emergency or national security justifications for acting without a warrant, which is permitted under the law. Under the constitution and code of criminal

procedure, defendants must be informed of the reasons for their arrest, and they are entitled to legal aid and are presumed innocent until convicted by a court in a fair trial. Civil and criminal defendants have the right to bail hearings and possible release from pretrial detention on their own recognizance, but the regime applied the law inconsistently. At the initial court hearing, which could be months or years after the arrest, the accused may retain an attorney at personal expense or the court may appoint an attorney, although authorities did not ensure lawyers' access to their clients before trial.

In March the COI reported that those arrested were typically not given information regarding the justification for the arrest. Those informed of the charges rarely had access to evidence supporting the charges. According to the COI, detainees were routinely tortured to extract confessions or compelled to sign declarations they had not been allowed to read. The COI also found that proceedings in field courts would "last only minutes," with no legal counsel or witnesses present.

In cases involving political or national security offenses, authorities reportedly often made arrests in secret, with cases assigned in an apparently arbitrary manner to the Counterterrorism Court (CTC), courts-martial, or criminal courts. The CTC, military field courts, and military courts are exempted from following the same procedures as ordinary courts, allowing them to operate outside of the code of criminal procedure and deny basic rights guaranteed to defendants. Numerous human rights organizations asserted that trials before these courts were unfair and summary in nature, sometimes resulting in death sentences. In March the COI noted that eyewitness accounts from CTC proceedings described the hearings as "brief, with scant (if any) evidence presented to support serious charges."

The regime reportedly detained suspects incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and denied them the right to a judicial determination of their pretrial detention. In most cases authorities reportedly did not identify themselves or inform detainees of charges against them until their arraignment, often months or years after their arrest. Individuals detained without charge did not qualify for release under regime-issued amnesty decrees. In January the Daraa Martyrs' Documentation Office reported the execution of 83 military dissidents who had accepted a settlement agreement with the regime mediated by the Russian military police, in addition to 31 others who did not accept the agreement. According to the

NGO Global Voices, the regime never complied with the conditions of the settlement and continued to target and arrest members of the opposition. In September the COI documented the case of a man from Homs who returned to Syria in 2019 under a regime-sponsored reconciliation process and was later detained for three and one-half months in several detention facilities until his family paid a bribe for his release. He said officials, as well as medical staff at Branch 235 of the Military Intelligence Directorate in Damascus, tortured him in detention.

Human rights groups continued to highlight the unlawful treatment of detainees and advocate for their release.

**Arbitrary Arrest:** According to NGO reports and confirmed by regime memoranda secured and released by human rights documentation groups, the security branches secretly ordered many arrests and detentions. Because the regime continued to withhold information on detainees, estimates varied widely, but the COI stated regime forces and affiliated militias continued to hold tens of thousands of persons arbitrarily or unlawfully in detention facilities. As of November the SNHR reported more than 150,000 persons remained arbitrary detained or forcibly disappeared; it attributed 88 percent of these cases to the regime, including the Syrian Arab Army, General Intelligence Directorate, Air Force Intelligence Directorate, General Administration Division, and Political Security Directorate. The SNHR reported that regime forces and proregime militias arbitrarily arrested or detained 756 individuals, including 19 children and 19 women, from the beginning of the year through November.

PHR reported that regime forces continued to specifically target health-care workers because of their status as medical professionals and their real or perceived involvement in the provision of health services to opposition members and sympathizers. Survivors reported the regime relied on torture to coerce medical workers to confess to crimes they did not commit and gather information on other health workers and health-care activities. Additionally, human rights activists said the regime arrested health-care providers who spoke to international media outlets regarding the COVID-19 crisis or contradicted the tightly controlled narrative on the impact of the pandemic on the country. According to the SNHR, at least 3,360 health care workers remained detained or forcibly disappeared as of November, of

which the regime was responsible for more than 3,300 cases.

The SNHR reported that authorities continued to arbitrarily arrest men and boys at checkpoints, often citing no reason for their arrest. Some who had previously settled their security status with the regime via reconciliation agreements were transferred to long-term detention facilities or forcibly disappeared.

The Norwegian Refugee Council reported fear of interrogation, forced conscription, and arbitrary arrests and detention deterred refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from returning to their homes in areas retaken by regime forces.

There also were instances of nonstate armed groups reportedly engaging in arbitrary and unlawful detention (see section 1.g.). For example, a January report from the NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reported that military police affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of Syrian armed opposition groups receiving support from the government of Turkey, detained 237 persons in the “Peace Spring” and “Olive Branch” areas at the end of 2020. At the time of the report’s release, 133 of these individuals remained incommunicado, including women and children. The STJ reported that armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey detained residents at times based on their affiliation or perceived affiliation with the SDF, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), or the Self Administration for North and East Syria (SANES). In its March report, the COI reported that the YPG forces of the SDF arbitrarily detained activists, NGO workers, and other individuals who expressed opposing views. NGOs also reported cases of arbitrary detention at the hands of the SDF, including in the context of anti-ISIS operations.

**Pretrial Detention:** Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem. Authorities reportedly held thousands of detainees incommunicado for months or years before releasing them without charge or bringing them to trial, while many detainees died in prison (see section 1.a.). A shortage of available courts and lack of legal provisions for speedy trial or plea bargaining contributed to lengthy pretrial detentions. There were numerous reported instances when the length of detention exceeded the sentence for the crime. Percentages for the prison and detainee population held in pretrial detention and the length of time held were not

available.

**Detainee’s Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court:** By law persons arrested or detained, regardless of whether on criminal or other grounds, are entitled to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention and any delay in obtaining judicial process. If the court finds that authorities detained persons unlawfully, they are entitled to prompt release, compensation, or both. Few detainees, however, had the ability to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court or obtain prompt release and compensation for unlawful detention. In its March report, the COI found that of the more than 500 former detainees interviewed, “almost none had been afforded the opportunity to present their case before the judiciary within a reasonable time.”

### **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but authorities regularly subjected courts to political influence and prosecutors and defense attorneys to intimidation and abuse. Outcomes of cases where defendants were affiliated with the opposition appeared predetermined, and defendants could sometimes bribe judicial officials and prosecutors. NGOs reported that the regime at times shared with progovernment media outlets lists of in absentia sentences targeting armed opposition groups before the sentences were issued by the court. The SNHR reported that most of the individuals detained by regime authorities between January and November were denied access to fair public trial.

### **Trial Procedures**

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial. The judiciary generally did not enforce this right, and the regime did not respect judicial independence. In its June report, the international NGO International Legal Assistance Consortium found that “overt and indirect intimidation by the Syrian security services continues to inhibit the judiciary’s independence,” noting that the lack of independence left judges vulnerable to pressure in instances where one party is affiliated with the regime or proregime armed groups.

The constitution presumes that defendants are innocent until proven guilty, but numerous reports indicated the CTC or courts-martial did not respect this right.

Defendants have the right to prompt, detailed notification of the charges against them, with interpretation as necessary, although authorities did not enforce this right, and a number of detainees and their families reported the accused were unaware of the charges against them. In its March report, the COI noted that some defendants learned they had been sentenced without being present at a hearing, while others were only informed of the verdict years after their trial. Trials involving juveniles or sexual offenses, or those referred to the CTC or courts-martial, are held via video conference instead of in person. The law entitles defendants representation of their choice, but it does not permit legal representation for defendants accused of spying. The courts appoint lawyers for indigents.

In March the COI reported that the regime denied detainees access to a lawyer and subjected detainees to incommunicado detention. The SNHR reported detainees on trial in military courts were often transferred to unknown locations without notification to their attorneys or families. The Truth and Justice Charter groups reported families of individuals detained by the regime continued to be unable to access information on the status of their relatives.

Human rights groups reported that in some cases the regime provided prosecution case files to defense lawyers that did not include any evidence, if they provided anything at all. By law defendants may present witnesses and evidence or confront the prosecution witnesses, but authorities often did not respect this right.

Defendants may not legally be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but family members and NGOs routinely reported defendants were tortured and intimidated to acquire information and force confessions, as described in a July SNHR report.

Convicted persons may appeal verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation. Not all citizens enjoyed these rights equally, in part because interpretations of religious law provide the basis for elements of family and criminal law and discriminate against women. Some personal status laws apply sharia regardless of the religion of those involved.

Additionally, media and NGO reports suggested the regime denied some, and in certain cases all, of these protections to those accused of political crimes, violence against the regime, or providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in opposition-

held areas. Sentences for persons accused of antigovernment activity tended to be harsh, if they reached trial, with violent and nonviolent offenders receiving similar punishments. The regime did not permit defendants before the CTC to have effective legal representation. The International Legal Assistance Consortium estimated that between March 2011 and August, more than 10,000 Syrians were tried in the CTC.

In opposition-controlled areas, legal or trial procedures varied by locale and the armed group in control. Local human rights organizations reported that local governing structures assumed these responsibilities. NGOs reported that civilians administered these processes employing customary sharia laws in some cases and national laws in others. Sentencing by opposition sharia councils sometimes resulted in public executions without an appeals process or visits by family members.

According to local NGOs, opposition-run sharia councils continued to discriminate against women, not allowing them to serve as judges or lawyers or to visit detainees.

In the territories it controlled, SANES authorities continued to implement a legal code based on the draft “Social Contract.” Reports described the Social Contract as a mix of Syrian criminal and civil law with laws concerning divorce, marriage, weapons ownership, and tax evasion drawn from EU law, but without certain fair trial standards, such as the prohibition of arbitrary detention, the right to judicial review, and the right to appoint a lawyer. The justice system within the SANES-controlled area consisted of courts, legal committees, and investigative bodies.

Human rights groups and media organizations continued to report that HTS denied those it had detained the opportunity to challenge the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention in its sharia courts. HTS reportedly permitted confessions obtained through torture and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families.

Tens of thousands of men, women, and children, many from former ISIS-held areas, remained in the overcrowded al-Hol camp, administered by an international NGO with security assistance provided by the SDF and Asayesh, the internal

security forces of SANES. Living conditions remained difficult at al-Hol camp, where security incidents persisted, and most camp residents had limited freedom of movement. According to camp management, 89 residents were reportedly killed in al-Hol camp during the year. Violence was likely due to ISIS-related or criminal-related activity in the camp. The international NGO Save the Children reported from the start of the year through mid-August three children were shot and killed in al-Hol. While basic humanitarian needs were met, services were at times reduced due to COVID-19.

The SDF reportedly provided information to the COI on its procedure for the return of al-Hol inhabitants. According to the COI's August report, 8,548 Syrians had been transferred out of al-Hol camp under tribal sponsorship agreements since mid-2019, while another 322 children and 56 women from 13 different countries were repatriated between September 2020 and June. Approximately 55,000 residents remained in al-Hol, more than 30,000 of them children younger than age 12.

### **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were numerous reports of political prisoners and detainees. Amnesty International reported the regime continued to detain civilians systematically, particularly those perceived to oppose the regime, including peaceful demonstrators, human rights activists, and political dissidents and their families. The four government intelligence agencies – Air Force, Military, Political Security, and General – were responsible for most such arrests and detentions.

Authorities continued to refuse to release information regarding the numbers or names of persons detained on political or security-related charges. Human rights groups noted detainees included doctors, humanitarian aid providers, human rights defenders, and journalists.

Prison conditions for political or national security prisoners, especially accused opposition members, reportedly continued to be much worse than those for common criminals. According to local NGOs, authorities deliberately placed political prisoners in crowded cells with convicted and alleged felons and subjected them to verbal and physical threats and widespread torture. Political prisoners also

reported they often slept on the ground due to lack of beds and faced frequent searches. According to reports from families, including the Families for Freedom network, authorities refused many political prisoners access to family and counsel. Some former detainees and human rights observers reported the regime also denied political prisoners access to reading materials, including the Quran, and prohibited them from praying in their cells. According to the SNHR and the Committee to Project Journalists (CPJ), regime forces arrested writer and journalist Bassam Safar at a regime checkpoint in Damascus in June. Prior to his arrest, Safar had conducted an interview on the presidential elections in which he criticized the regime. Safar was denied access to family and counsel. According to one local media outlet, Safar was released on July 30.

Many prominent civilian activists and journalists detained or forcibly disappeared following the 2011 protests reportedly remained in detention. There were no known developments in the majority of cases of reported disappearances from prior years, including the following persons believed forcibly disappeared by regime forces: nonviolent protester Abdel Aziz Kamal al-Rihawi; Alawite opposition figure Abdel Aziz al-Khair; Kurdish activist Berazani Karro; Yassin Ziadeh, brother of dissident Radwan Ziadeh; human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his assistant, Mohamed Zaza; human rights activist Adel Barazi; and peace activist and theater director Zaki Kordillo and his son, Mihyar Kordillo.

NGOs continued to report the regime used the counterterrorism law to arrest and convict nonviolent activists on charges of aiding terrorists in trials that violated basic due process rights. Although authorities reportedly brought charges under the guise of countering violent militancy, allegations included peaceful acts such as distributing humanitarian aid, participating in protests, and documenting human rights abuses.

**Amnesty:** The regime issued 18 amnesty decrees since 2011, but decrees generally resulted in the release of limited numbers of ordinary criminals. These amnesties excluded detainees who had not been charged with any crimes. In July the SNHR reported the regime released 81 detainees in the two months following the May amnesty announcement, while arbitrarily detaining 176 others within that same period. Limited releases of detainees occurred within the framework of localized settlement agreements with the regime. During the year regime forces

violated prior amnesty agreements by conducting raids and arrest campaigns against civilians and former members of armed opposition factions in areas with signed settlement agreements with the regime.

## **Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country**

**Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence:** Human rights groups reported the regime used violence and threats of violence against Syrians in other countries and their family members residing in Syria for the purpose of politically motivated reprisal. In September National Public Radio reported the regime subjected witnesses in a trial against regime official Anwar Raslan taking place in Koblenz, Germany, and their families in Syria to threats and harassment. One witness, Hassan Mahmoud, reported withdrawing his testimony after feeling threatened by reports that regime security officials went searching for his brother, Waseem, in their Syrian hometown of Salamiyah.

**Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion:** In late 2020 the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) issued a report analyzing regime documentation that detailed coordination between regime intelligence officials and Syrian embassy staff in Saudi Arabia and Spain, corroborating long-standing NGO reporting that the regime maintained a global surveillance apparatus to track dissidents' activities both inside and outside of the country systematically.

**Misuse of International Law-enforcement Tools:** In October INTERPOL announced that its executive committee lifted “corrective measures” imposed on Syria in 2012 that restricted the Assad regime’s use of INTERPOL databases and communication systems. Following the decision media outlets and human rights organizations reported concern by human rights organizations that the Syrian government may use Red Notices to pursue political opponents.

**Efforts to Control Mobility:** The regime amended the military conscription law to allow authorities to confiscate the assets of “[military] service evaders” and their families who failed to pay the military exemption fee. *The Guardian* newspaper reported this regulation amounted to an effort to extort Syrian citizens living

abroad, many of whom fled the country to escape the regime's military offensive and would be unwilling to serve in the military. According to the Ministry of Defense, military exemption fees range from \$7,000 for those who had four years of permanent and continuous residence outside Syria before or after entering the age of assignment, \$8,000 for those who residing outside Syria for less than four years and more than three years, \$9,000 for those residing outside Syria for two years, and \$10,000 for those residing outside Syria for one year.

### **Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies**

Regime civil remedies for human rights violations were functionally nonexistent. In areas under their control, opposition groups did not organize consistent civil judicial procedures. HTS and other extremist groups had no known civil judicial mechanisms in the territories they controlled.

In the areas of the northeast under the control of SANES, civilian peace and reconciliation committees reportedly resolved civil disputes before elevating them to a more formal justice system.

### **Property Seizure and Restitution**

Regime security forces routinely seized detainees' property and personal items. The law provides for the confiscation of movable and immovable property of persons convicted of terrorism, a common charge for political opponents and other detainees since 2012. Security forces did not catalog these items in accordance with the law, and although detained individuals had the right to retrieve their confiscated belongings after release, authorities often did not return the property. In its June report, the International Legal Assistance Consortium found that the CTC continued to issue orders for the seizure of property of those accused of terrorism, broadly interpreted to include perceived opponents, noting that such orders were also directed at medical workers, members of the Syrian Civil Defense, and journalists. According to media reports and activists, regime forces also seized property left by refugees and IDPs and used confiscations to target regime opponents. The CTC can try cases in the absence of the defendant, thus providing legal cover for confiscation of property left by refugees and IDPs.

In its September report, the COI found that some confiscated land was also

“burned or destroyed,” which the COI concluded may amount to pillage, an act prohibited under international humanitarian law and a possible war crime. The housing, land, and property rights situation was further complicated by the destruction of court records and property registries in opposition-held areas in the years following the 2011 uprising.

In February the SNHR reported that the regime seized at least 170 square miles of agricultural land in the suburbs of Hama and Idlib. The SNHR called the seizing of regime opponents’ property part of the regime’s strategy to “engineer the demographic and social structure of the Syrian state that automatically constitutes a major obstacle to the return of refugees and IDPs.”

In April HRW reported that regime authorities unlawfully confiscated the homes and lands of citizens who fled regime and Russian military offensives in Hama and Idlib. In interviews with HRW, those whose lands were seized said the regime provided no notice or compensation. In three cases, they said that security committees consisting of the Peasants’ Cooperative Associations, Syrian military intelligence, and progovernment militia were responsible for seizing and leasing their land.

The regime continued to use Decree 66, issued in 2012, to “redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas” and replace them with “modern” real estate projects. In April the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy described these urban development projects as illustrative of the regime’s efforts to punish opponents and “consolidate power and wealth among elites” allied with the regime. In September Presidential Decree No. 237 officially created a new development district known as the Northern Gate of Damascus Regulatory Area on the outskirts of Damascus. Homeowners and renters are required to submit proof of residence to qualify for interim housing during development. COAR predicted these projects would ultimately displace thousands of residents living in informal and transient neighborhoods in the area and cause refugees and IDPs to lose ownership of their property.

Armed groups also reportedly seized residents’ properties. In July the chair of the COI noted that SNA members in Afrin and Ra’s al-Ayn looted and appropriated properties under their control. The SJAC similarly reported SNA fighters in Afrin

and Ra's al-Ayn used threats of extortion, abduction, and torture to force residents, primarily of Kurdish origin, to flee their homes so the fighters could occupy them. A coalition of 34 NGOs assessed these and other abuses by armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey were part of a systematic effort to enforce demographic change targeting Kurdish Syrians. In September Syrian Interim Government authorities said it had facilitated the return of 300 Kurdish families to their original homes in Afrin and provided them with resettlement assistance.

(See section 1.e., Efforts to Control Mobility, for information regarding seizing property of Syrians abroad who do not pay exemption fees for military service.)

#### **f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary searches, but the regime routinely failed to respect these prohibitions. Police and other security services frequently bypassed search warrant requirements in criminal cases by citing security reasons or emergency grounds for entry into private property. Arbitrary home raids occurred in large cities and towns of most governorates where the regime maintained a presence, usually following antigovernment protests, opposition attacks against regime targets, or resumption of regime control.

The regime continued to open mail addressed to both citizens and foreign residents and routinely monitored internet communications, including email (see section 2.a.).

Numerous reports confirmed the regime punished large numbers of family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives, such as by arbitrarily placing them on a list of alleged terrorists and freezing their assets. In March the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published a report noting that family members of perceived regime opponents and political detainees “are at risk of extortion and intimidation, and, in some cases, the unlawful freeze of assets and confiscation of property as a form of collective punishment.” UNHCR also noted that family members remained at risk of “threats, harassment, arbitrary arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance for the purpose of retaliation or to force real or perceived government critics to surrender.”

## **g. Conflict-related Abuses**

The regime, proregime militias such as the National Defense Forces, opposition groups, the SDF, violent extremist groups such as HTS and ISIS, foreign terrorist groups such as Hizballah, and the governments of Russia, Turkey, and Iran were all involved in armed conflict throughout the country.

The most egregious human rights violations and abuses stemmed from the regime's systemic disregard for the safety and well-being of its people. These abuses manifested themselves in a complete denial of citizens' ability to choose their government freely and peacefully, law enforcement authorities refusing to protect the majority of individuals from state and nonstate violence, and the use of violence against civilians and civilian institutions. Numerous reports, such as Amnesty International's September report, indicated that Syrian refugees who returned to Syria were subjected to torture, sexual abuse, detention, and disappearance by regime intelligence officers. Amnesty International documented violations against 79 refugees who returned to Syria from 2017 through year's end. Attacks impacting and destroying schools, hospitals, places of worship, water and electrical stations, bakeries, markets, civil defense force centers, densely populated residential areas, and houses were common throughout the country.

As of September there were more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in neighboring countries and 6.7 million IDPs. In April the World Food Program found that 12.4 million Syrians, nearly 60 percent of the population, were food insecure.

**Killings:** The regime reportedly committed the majority of killings throughout the year (see section 1.a.). The SNHR attributed 91 percent of civilian deaths to regime and proregime forces.

Media sources and human rights groups varied in their estimates of how many persons had been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. In September the UN high commissioner for human rights announced that from March 2011 to March, 350,209 identifiable individuals had been killed in the conflict. The commissioner noted that the figure indicated "a minimum verifiable number," and that it "is certainly an under-count of the actual number of killings." Other groups

attributed more than 550,000 killings to the conflict. This discrepancy was largely due to the high number of missing and disappeared Syrians, whose fates remained unknown. Regime and proregime forces reportedly attacked civilians in hospitals, residential areas, schools, IDP settlements, and Palestinian refugee camps throughout the year. These forces reportedly used as military tactics the deliberate killing of civilians, as well as their forced displacement, rape, starvation, and protracted siege-like conditions that occasionally forced local surrenders.

These attacks included indiscriminate bombardment with barrel bombs. According to the SNHR, the regime has dropped approximately 81,900 barrel bombs between July 2012 and March. Aerial and ground offensives throughout the demilitarized zone destroyed or ruined civilian infrastructure, including “deconflicted” hospitals, schools, marketplaces, and farmlands. In its February report, the COI determined it had “reasonable grounds” to believe that proregime forces had committed crimes against humanity as a result of their air strikes and artillery shelling of civilian areas. The COI further stated that the Syrian Air Force deployed barrel bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on densely populated civilian areas in a manner that was “inherently indiscriminate and amounted to war crimes.” It added that proregime forces likely committed “the war crime of spreading terror among the civilian population.”

In its September report, the COI detailed a February 2020 cluster munitions attack launched by regime and Russian forces impacting three schools in Idlib. The SNHR reported the regime and Russian forces carried out 495 cluster munition attacks since 2011, comprising the majority of cluster munition attacks during that time period. The SNHR also reported that attacks launched by these forces resulted in the deaths of at least 1,030 civilians, including 386 children and 217 women, as well as injuries to approximately 4,360 civilians. The SNHR documented at least 1,600 attacks on schools between March 2011 and November, with the regime responsible for 75 percent of the attacks.

The COI’s February report noted that progovernment forces established a pattern of intentionally targeting medical personnel. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), hundreds of health-care workers had been killed during the conflict. From 2011 through November the SNHR documented the death of 861 medical personnel, including five deaths from

the beginning of the year through November. In March PHR documented the killing of 930 medical personnel since the onset of the conflict, reporting the regime and Russian forces were responsible for more than 90 percent of attacks. In Idlib medical professionals continued to be injured and killed throughout the year.

In June regime forces surrounded and attacked the city of Daraa, breaking the Russian-brokered cease-fire and leading to a surge in heavy shelling. In its September report, the COI found that targeted killings increased in Daraa and noted that it was investigating 18 incidents that occurred between July 2020 and February, although it had received reports of hundreds more. Victims included medical workers, local political leaders, judges, and former members of armed groups, some of whom had reconciled with the regime. The COI reported that in April armed men killed Ahmed al-Hasheesh, a former paramedic who had reportedly resisted reconciliation.

Although no use of prohibited chemical weapons was reported during the year, in April the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe the regime carried out a chemical weapons attack in Saraqib in 2018. The IIT also concluded in its April 2020 report that the regime was responsible for three chemical weapons attacks on Ltamenah in 2017. These attacks preceded the more deadly sarin attack in nearby Khan Shaykhun less than two weeks later and were alleged to be part of the same concerted campaign of terror perpetrated by the Assad regime. In April the OPCW Conference of the State Parties adopted a decision condemning the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. The organization suspended certain rights and privileges of the regime under the Chemical Weapons Convention, including voting rights, until the OPCW director general reported that the government had completed the measures requested in the executive council's July 2020 decision.

Additionally, PHR, the SNHR, and other NGOs reported that the regime and Russia targeted humanitarian workers such as the Syria Civil Defense (known as the White Helmets) as they attempted to save victims in affected communities. In June the SNHR reported that regime and Russian forces were suspected of shelling and destroying a Syria Civil Defense center in Hama, killing one rescue worker and injuring three others. The SNHR recorded at least 470 incidents of attacks on

Syria Civil Defense facilities between March 2013, the date the Syria Civil Defense was established, and November; it attributed 320 attacks to the regime and 125 attacks to Russian forces.

In March Reuters reported accounts of Russian aerial strikes hitting a gas facility, cement factory, and several towns in the northwest. According to the COI's September report, drawn from investigations into incidents occurring between July 2020 and June, Russian forces conducted at least 82 air strikes in support of the regime.

There were numerous reports of deaths in regime custody, notably at the Mezzeh airport detention facility, Military Security Branches 215 and 235, and Sednaya Prison, by execution without due process, torture, and deaths from other forms of abuse, such as malnutrition and lack of medical care (see section 1.a.). In most cases authorities reportedly did not return the bodies of deceased detainees to their families.

Violent extremist groups were also responsible for killings during the year. The SNHR attributed 17 civilian deaths, including five children, to HTS from January to November. In its March report, the COI found that some detainees in HTS detention facilities died of injuries sustained from torture and the subsequent denial of medical care. The COI also reported that HTS carried out executions without due process and noted that it had gathered 83 individual accounts, including from former detainees, about the executions.

The COI reported that ISIS also carried out executions of civilians and forced local residents, including children, to witness the killings. According to the COI, unauthorized "courts" handed down the sentences. In August the SNHR documented the killing of eight civilians at al-Hol camp by individuals believed to be affiliated with ISIS cells.

During the year armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey allegedly carried out extrajudicial killings. In March the COI reported the SNA had conducted extrajudicial and summary executions of captured fighters. For example, the SNHR reported the SNA Suqour al-Shamal Brigade unlawfully detained Hekmat Khalil al-De'ar on September 16 for alleged dealings with the

SDF. The family received al-De'ar's body the next day. The autopsy report by Ras al-Ayn Health Directorate confirmed he had been subjected to torture, an assessment corroborated by photographs and videos received by the SNHR. Human rights monitors also reported several instances of individuals dying under torture in Firqat al-Hamza and SNA military police detention. The Syrian Interim Government, to whom the SNA nominally reports, established a commission within its Ministry of Defense to investigate serious allegations of abuses in 2020. Since 2016 the Syrian Interim Government and the armed groups in the SNA had detained 2,390 soldiers on offenses ranging from vehicle theft to murder, but the commission did not announce any new investigations during the year. In its September report, the COI said that the SNA leadership stated it was investigating SNA elements involved in violations and that "it was committed to improving the conditions of detainees, respecting human rights in places of detention, and providing fair trial guarantees." In September the Syrian Interim Government announced the creation of a human rights office. According to the Syrian Interim Government, military courts prosecuted at least 169 cases for crimes including petty theft, property confiscation, deprivation of liberty, human trafficking, physical violence, and murder among other offenses. The individuals belonged to various armed opposition groups, and many were prosecuted in absentia. The Syrian Interim Government and Turkish government also reported in June and July that SNA forces were receiving human rights training. Geneva Call – an NGO working to strengthen respect of humanitarian norms by armed nonstate actors – reported providing training on international humanitarian law and international human rights law for 33 SNA factions. Human rights activists reported the reforms lacked credibility and did not hold perpetrators accountable.

The COI, the SNHR, and other human rights groups reported dozens of civilian deaths from multiple car bombings, other attacks involving IEDs, and fighting between armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey in areas these groups support in the north. The COI also noted the rise in such attacks during the year.

The Center for American Progress reported the YPG and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, were likely responsible for many of the vehicle-borne IED and other attacks on the SNA and Turkish-affiliated

individuals, including civilians. In September the news publication *MENA Affairs* reported a car bomb attack carried out by YPG in the Afrin region killed three civilians and injured six civilians, including three children. Some NGOs and media accused the YPG forces of carrying out shelling on June 12 that destroyed the UN-supported al-Shifaa Hospital in Afrin and killed 19 civilians, including health workers and children, and wounded 27 others; however, attribution for this attack was not confirmed. The attack destroyed the hospital's surgical department and delivery room and partially damaged the outpatient room, prompting hospital staff to evacuate patients to nearby facilities.

**Abductions:** Regime and proregime forces reportedly were responsible for the most of disappearances during the year (see section 1.b.).

Armed groups not affiliated with the regime also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected regime affiliates, journalists, and activists. In March the COI reported that HTS detained civilians “in a systematic effort to stifle political dissent.” According to the COI and human rights organizations, HTS detained political opponents, journalists, activists, and civilians perceived as critical of HTS. The SNHR reported that HTS forces had detained or forcibly disappeared approximately 2,300 individuals as of November, among them 42 children. For example the SNHR reported that in June HTS detained five civilians in Idlib, alleging they had been involved in reconciling and communicating with the regime.

Although ISIS no longer controlled significant territory, the fate of 8,648 individuals forcibly disappeared by ISIS since 2014 remained unknown, according to the SNHR. In its March report, the COI noted that 81 former detainees reported experiencing enforced disappearance or incommunicado detention by ISIS, as corroborated by 218 interviewees who had credibly witnessed such abuses. Among those abducted in northern Iraq were an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, who ISIS reportedly transferred to Syria and sold into sex trafficking, forced into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or gave as “gifts” to ISIS commanders. The Yezidi organization Yazda reported more than 3,000 Yezidi women and children had since escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity, but more than 2,700 remained unaccounted for.

There were no updates in the kidnappings of the following persons believed to have been abducted by ISIS, armed opposition, or unidentified armed groups during the conflict: activists Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazim Hamadi; religious leaders Bolous Yazigi and Yohanna Ibrahim; and peace activist Paulo Dall'Oglio.

The COI reported the SDF continued to detain civilians, including women and children, and hold them in detention without charge. The SNHR reported that from the start of the crisis in 2011 until November, the SDF forcibly detained or disappeared more than 3,800 Syrians, including 667 children and 522 women. The SNHR and STJ reported instances of SDF fighters detaining civilians, including journalists, human rights activists, opposition party members, and persons affiliated with the SNA. In some instances the location of the detainees remained unknown. For example the SNHR reported the SDF detained Muhammad Suleiman in a July raid on his home in Aleppo. The SDF did not provide information on Suleiman's status after he was transferred from a hospital in Aleppo. In October SANES set up telephone lines for persons in Hasakah and Raqqa to inquire if their relatives had been detained.

The SDF continued to allow the ICRC access to detention facilities to monitor and report on conditions. The SDF continued to investigate charges against their forces. According to the COI, in March the SDF launched an internal investigation into alleged abuses by their forces against civilians detained in a March raid of a hospital in Deir Ezzour, following an attack reportedly carried out by ISIS. The SDF also brought the members before a military tribunal. There was no update available on the results of the military tribunal at year's end.

The COI, Amnesty International, and SNHR reported multiple first-hand accounts of kidnapping and arbitrary detention by armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey. The SNHR attributed to these groups 86 unlawful detentions and abductions in August alone, including one child and 10 women. The HRW and the COI reported that SNA forces detained and unlawfully transferred Syrian nationals to Turkey. In August the Human Rights Organization of Afrin and the Missing Afrin Women Project reported that hundreds of women had been abducted in areas under Turkish control since 2018 and that nearly 300 women remained missing. For example, the Human Rights Organization of Afrin reported the

August 22 kidnapping of Hivin Abedin Gharibo, a young Kurdish woman from the town of Baadina. No additional information was available at year's end.

According to the COI, abductions and extortions were increasing in regions where hostilities between armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey and government forces had created a security vacuum. Victims of abductions by armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey were often of Kurdish or Yezidi origin or were activists openly critical of these armed groups. For example, in February *Afrin Post* reported that Sultan Murad, a Syrian opposition group supported by Turkey, kidnapped a Kurdish citizen, Khalil Manla, after he filed a complaint against the militant group. Sultan Murad members reportedly beat and tortured Khalil at their headquarters and later released him on a ransom of 1,000 Turkish liras (\$104).

The COI reported on the frequent presence of Turkish officials in SNA detention facilities, including in interrogation sessions where torture was used. The justice system and detention network used by SNA forces reportedly featured “judges” appointed by Turkey and paid in Turkish lira, suggesting the SNA detention operations acted under the effective command of Turkish forces. The COI asserted these and other factors reflected effective Turkish control over certain areas of Syria. The Turkish government denied responsibility for conduct by Syrian opposition or armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey but broadly acknowledged the need for investigations and accountability related to reports of abuse. It claimed the Turkish-supported SNA had mechanisms in place for investigation and discipline.

**Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture:** According to the COI and NGO reports, the regime and its affiliated militias consistently engaged in physical abuse, punishment, and torture of opposition fighters and civilians (see sections 1.c. and 1.d.). Numerous organizations and former detainees reported that nearly all detainees in regime detention experienced physical abuse and torture at some point during their detention.

As of November the SNHR estimated parties of the conflict committed at least 11,520 incidents of sexual violence since March 2011. Regime forces and affiliated militias were reported to be responsible for the vast majority of these

offenses – more than 8,000 incidents in total – including more than 880 incidents inside detention centers and more than 440 against girls younger than 18. The SNHR also reported almost 3,490 incidents of sexual violence by ISIS and 12 incidents by the SDF. Numerous NGOs reported that persons in areas retaken by regime forces remained reluctant to discuss events occurring in these areas due to fear of reprisals. In its February report, the COI found that regime forces and affiliated militias perpetrated rape and sexual abuse against women and girls, and occasionally men, during ground operations and house raids targeting opposition activists and perceived opposition supporters (see section 1.d.).

There were also reports of armed opposition groups engaging in physical abuse, punishment, and treatment equivalent to torture, primarily targeting suspected regime agents and collaborators, proregime militias, and rival armed groups. Between 2011 and November, the SNHR attributed 50 deaths from torture, including one child and two women, to armed opposition groups; 30 to HTS, including two children; and 32 to ISIS, including one child and 14 women. In its March report, the COI noted numerous reports of mistreatment and torture of detainees in HTS and ISIS detention facilities, including electrical shocks, stress positions, beatings, and suspension by their limbs.

The SDF was also implicated in several instances of torture, with the SNHR reporting the group used torture as a means of extracting confessions during interrogations. The SNHR attributed 73 deaths from torture to the SDF from 2011 to November, 12 of which occurred during the year. In June the SNHR reported that Amin Aisa al-Ali died in SDF custody after being detained and tortured by the SDF. According to the COI's March report, 10 percent of former SDF detainees interviewed reported experiencing torture. The SDF reported it continued to implement protocols to ensure torture was not used as an interrogation technique and initiated two investigations into specific incidents of torture presented by the COI. There was no update available on the results of the investigation at year's end.

According to the SNHR's March report, HTS continued to torture and abuse perceived political opponents, activists, and journalists. In August an HTS "court" sentenced Hassan al-Sheikh and Khaled al-Jajah to death on charges of collaborating with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. The families of both

individuals denied the accusations, and al-Sheikh's family reported that HTS extracted a confession from him under torture. Human rights groups continued to report that HTS, which officially denounces secularism, routinely detained and tortured journalists, activists, and other civilians in territory it controlled who were deemed to have violated the group's stringent interpretation of sharia. HTS reportedly permitted confessions obtained through torture in its sharia "courts," denied detainees the opportunity to challenge the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention, and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families.

The COI, OHCHR, and human rights groups reported that since 2018, armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey had allegedly participated in the torture and killings of civilians in Afrin and, since 2019, in the areas entered during Turkish Operation Peace Spring. The COI reported in September that it had reasonable grounds to believe that members of armed groups under the umbrella of the SNA committed "torture, cruel treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, which constitute war crimes." The COI in March reported the torture and rape of minors in SNA detention, stating "the Syrian National Army attempted to systematize its detention practices through its vast network of detention facilities in Afrin and Ra's al-Ayn." The SNHR reported SNA fighters detained and tortured Ali al-Sultan al-Faraj in September, filming themselves beating him with a whip and a club while he was stripped naked.

**Child Soldiers:** Several sources documented the continued unlawful recruitment and use of children in combat.

The UN General Assembly's annual *Children and Armed Conflict Report of the Secretary-General*, published in May, reported the recruitment and use of 813 children (777 boys and 36 girls) in the conflict between January and December 2020. According to the report, 805 of the children served in combat roles. The report attributed 119 verified cases to SDF-affiliated groups, 390 to HTS, 170 to Free Syria Army-affiliated groups, 31 to Ahrar al-Sham, four to ISIS, three to Jaysh al-Islam, three to Nur al-Din al-Zanki, and two to regime forces.

The United Nations continued to receive reports of children being recruited by

HTS. According to the *Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic Report of the Secretary-General* published in April, HTS recruited boys as young as 10 years of age in districts across Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama. In the period covering July 2018 to June 2020, the United Nations observed a “significant increase” in HTS’ recruitment and use of children, noting 61 cases in 2018 and 187 cases in the first half of 2020. The report cited the case of two boys who were 16 and 17 years of age who served as guards at camp in Idlib after six weeks of training.

The STJ reported in August that SNA forces, including the Sultan Murad Division, continued to use more than 55 child soldiers.

The UN continued to receive reports of children being recruited by the SDF and YPG-affiliated groups like the Revolutionary Youth Union (RYU). The STJ reported in June that the RYU recruited seven minors in the first quarter of the year. According to the UN report, the SDF continued to implement an action plan with the UN secretary-general’s special representative for children and armed conflict to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children, resulting in the “disengagement of 150 children from SDF ranks” during the year. The SDF continued to implement an order banning the recruitment and use in combat of anyone younger than 18, ordering the military records office to verify the ages of those currently enlisted, requiring the release of any conscripted children to their families or to educational authorities in the northeast, and ending salary payments. The SDF order also prohibited using children to spy, act as guards, or deliver supplies to combatants. The order makes military commanders responsible for appointing ombudsmen to receive complaints of child recruitment and ordered punitive measures against commanders who failed to comply with the ban on child recruitment. During the year the SDF identified 908 minors seeking to join its ranks and continued to develop and refine an age screening mechanism in coordination with the United Nations. According to the UN secretary-general’s special representative for children and armed conflict, the SDF also established an age assessment committee, as well as a child protection committee and office, to provide parents a single SANES and SDF point of contact to inquire about, identify, and demobilize minors from the SDF. According to the SDF, the child protection office addressed 313 complaints between January 1 and August 31. In

October the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported the SDF child protection office returned 54 minors to their families. In June the STJ called for stricter monitoring of the protection office in receiving complaints and taking punitive measures against those implicated in child recruitment, including the RYU and Young Women's Union, the parallel all-women structure of the RYU.

Additionally, reports and evidence from human rights groups and international bodies indicate the Turkish government provided operational, material, and financial support to an armed opposition group in Syria that recruited child soldiers.

Also see the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

**Other Conflict-related Abuse:** In cities where the regime regained control, the COI reported the regime imposed blockades and restricted residents' movement and access to health care and food. Human rights groups reported the regime and its allies frequently imposed these and other collective measures to punish communities, including by restricting humanitarian access; looting and pillaging; expropriating property; extorting funds; engaging in arbitrary detentions and widespread conscription; detaining, disappearing, or forcibly displacing individuals; engaging in repressive measures aimed at silencing media activists; and destroying evidence of potential war crimes.

In Daraa, Amnesty International alleged in August the regime was resorting to "surrender or starve" tactics, involving "a combination of unlawful siege and indiscriminate bombardment of areas packed with civilians," to punish them for their association with the opposition and compel surrender. In its September report, the COI found that proregime forces' use of siege-like tactics may amount to the war crime of collective punishment. In August UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen called for an end to the "siege-like situation" in Daraa. Reports from NGOs also indicated that hostilities in Idlib continued to take place despite the cease-fire brokered between Turkey and Russia in March 2020.

HRW and various media organizations found that the regime implemented a policy and legal framework to manipulate humanitarian assistance and reconstruction

funding to benefit itself, reward those loyal to it, and punish perceived opponents. The regime regularly restricted humanitarian organizations' access to communities in need of aid, selectively approved humanitarian projects, and required organizations to partner with vetted local actors to ensure that the humanitarian response was siphoned centrally through and for the benefit of the state apparatus, at the cost of preventing aid from reaching the population unimpeded. Organizations continued to report that entities such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent faced difficulties accessing areas retaken by the regime.

The regime frequently blocked access for humanitarian assistance and removed items such as medical supplies from convoys headed to civilians, particularly areas held by opposition groups. In July the Wilson Center reported that the regime had weaponized humanitarian assistance, withholding aid to punish opposition areas and channeling aid to reward "strategically significant" areas.

In February the COI reported that repeated attacks on schools, growing poverty rates amidst economic crisis, recruitment of boys for military roles, and violent treatment of children in detention centers continued to hamper the ability of children to receive an education and had a disproportionate impact on girls as well as on all displaced children.

NGOs and media outlets documented repeated and continuing attacks on health facilities and other infrastructure in northwest Syria perpetrated by regime and Russian forces. According to UNOCHA, more than half of all health facilities in the country were closed or partially functioning. From 2011 through March, the SNHR documented at least 868 attacks on medical facilities between March 2011 and November, whereas PHR reported 598 attacks on at least 350 separate health facilities and documented the killing of 930 medical personnel since the onset of the conflict. PHR reported regime and Russian forces perpetrated 90 percent of the attacks. In March the Syrian American Medical Society reported the artillery shelling of the al-Atareb Surgical Hospital in Aleppo, whose coordinates had been shared with the UN-led deconfliction mechanism. According to the COI, at least eight civilian patients, including two boys, were killed and 13 others were wounded, including five medical workers. In Idlib medical professionals continued to be injured and killed throughout the year; on September 7, artillery shelling struck a medical center in southern Idlib. The COI concluded this pattern

of attack strongly suggested “the deliberate targeting of medical facilities, hospitals and medical workers by government forces” and that such attacks “deprived countless civilians of access to health care and amounted to the war crimes.”

The COI and human rights organizations detailed the practice in which, after hostilities ceased and local truces were implemented, regime and proregime forces required certain individuals to undergo a reconciliation process as a condition to remain in their homes. The option to reconcile reportedly often was not offered to health-care personnel, local council members, relief workers, activists, dissidents, and family members of fighters. In effect the COI assessed the “reconciliation process” induced displacement in the form of organized evacuations of those deemed insufficiently loyal to the regime and served as a regime strategy for punishing those individuals. Various sources continued to report cases during the year in which the regime targeted persons who agreed to reconciliation agreements (see sections 1.b., 1.d., and 1.e.). The SNHR documented the arrest of at least 3,530 individuals, including 71 children and 36 women, in areas undergoing reconciliation agreements between 2015 and November.

Regime forces and armed groups also reportedly pillaged and destroyed property, including homes, farms, and businesses of their perceived opponents.

NGOs such as the SNHR alleged that, taken together with steps such as the law allowing for the confiscation of unregistered properties, the forcible displacements fit into a wider plan to strip those displaced of their property rights, transfer populations, and enrich the regime and its closest allies (see section 1.e.).

While the government pushed forward to recapture areas around Idlib, armed groups such as HTS reportedly launched counterattacks against government positions. These attacks, although much fewer and smaller in scale than those by the regime and proregime forces, reportedly caused some civilian casualties and destruction of infrastructure. The NGO Assessment Capacities Project and STJ reported in March that armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey had engaged in the systematic and repeated looting and seizure of civilian homes and property, particularly those of Kurds, resulting in civilian displacement. According to the Syrian Interim Government, however, in August these armed groups also reportedly began to enable some families to return to their properties in the north.

The SJAC confirmed in May that SNA militias continued to profit from their control over real estate and agricultural exports seized from the local population. The group reported that the construction of settlements with foreign investment in these areas hindered the return of the original inhabitants and contributed to the processes of demographic change.

Armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey reportedly continued to interfere with and disrupt water access to parts of the northeast. UNICEF reported in July that damage from hostilities to the Alouk water station, continued to disrupt water supplies, affecting access to water for up to one million individuals al-Hassakeh governorate and surrounding areas. Another factor contributing to the water shortage was lack of electricity to operate the pumps, which was generated by the aging Rumelan gas power plant. UNICEF reported the lack of access to clean water exacerbated threats to public health posed by COVID-19. According to NGOs, Alouk Station was offline for periods of time between October 2019 and August. Turkish authorities alleged the frequent shutdowns resulted from inadequate power being provided to the Derbassiyah plant powering Alouk, which in turn received power from the Rumelan gas station in SDF-controlled areas, a claim disputed by the United Nations and NGOs present in the northeast.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media**

While the constitution provides for limited freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, the regime severely restricted this right, often terrorizing, abusing, arresting, or killing those who attempted to exercise this right.

**Freedom of Expression:** The law contains a number of speech offenses that limit the freedom of expression, including provisions criminalizing expression that, for example, “weakens the national sentiment” in times of war or defames the president, courts, military, or public authorities. The law imposes a one- to three-year sentence on anyone who criticizes or insults the president. The regime routinely characterized expression as illegal, and individuals could not criticize the

regime publicly or privately without fear of reprisal. The regime also stifled criticism by broadly invoking provisions of law prohibiting acts or speech inciting sectarianism. The regime monitored political meetings and relied on informer networks.

**Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media:** Although the law provides for the “right to access information about public affairs” and bans “the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists,” press and media restrictions outweighed freedoms. The law contains many restrictions on freedom of expression for the press, including provisions criminalizing, for example, the dissemination of false or exaggerated news that “weakens the spirit of the nation” or the broadcasting abroad of false or exaggerated news that “tarnishes” the country’s reputation. The law bars publication of content that affects “national unity and national security,” harms state symbols, defames religions, or incites sectarian strife or “hate crimes.” The law further forbids publication of any information about the armed forces. The law criminalizes the publication on social media of false news that causes fear and panic, with prison sentences up to 15 years with hard labor. Individuals found responsible for broadcasting of false or exaggerated news abroad that undermines the prestige of the state, or its financial standing, are subject to a minimum prison sentence of six months in addition to a fine. The law similarly criminalizes the broadcasting of false news or claims that undermine confidence in the “state currency.”

The regime continued to exercise extensive control over local print and broadcast media, and the law imposes strict punishment for reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to regime requests.

The SNHR reported that only print publications whose reporting promoted and defended the regime remained in circulation. Books critical of the regime were illegal. The regime owned some radio stations and most local television companies, and the Ministry of Information closely monitored all radio and television news broadcasts and entertainment programs for adherence to regime policies. Despite restrictions on ownership and use, citizens widely used satellite dishes, although the regime jammed some Arabic-language networks.

**Violence and Harassment:** Regime forces reportedly detained, arrested, harassed, and killed journalists and other writers for works deemed critical of the state as well as journalists associated with networks favorable to the regime (see section 1.c.). Harassment included intimidation, banning individuals from the country, dismissing journalists from their positions, and ignoring requests for continued accreditation. YouTubers and other citizen journalists were routinely detained, intimidated, and tortured, both by the regime and extremist groups.

The regime and, to a lesser extent, HTS and other armed groups routinely targeted and killed both local and foreign journalists, according to the COI, Freedom House, and the CPJ. The CPJ estimated that at least 139 journalists were killed since 2011. The SNHR documented more than 710 journalists and media workers killed between March 2011 and November and attributed 551 citizen journalist deaths in that period to regime forces.

In July Reporters without Borders (RSF) reported freelance photographer Homam al-Asi was killed during an artillery bombardment while covering rescue operations by members of the White Helmets.

According to NGO reports, the regime routinely arrested journalists who were either associated with or writing in favor of the opposition and instigated attacks against foreign press outlets throughout the country. RSF reported that more than 300 journalists had been arrested by the regime and more than 100 abducted by other parties to the conflict since the start of the conflict in 2011. The SNHR recorded at least 1,210 cases of arrests and abductions of journalists and media workers by parties to the conflict between March 2011 and November. According to the SNHR, 432 of these individuals remained under arrest or forcibly disappeared, including 17 foreign journalists. The SNHR attributed 357 of the arrests and abductions to the regime, seven to the SDF, 12 to armed opposition groups, 48 to ISIS, and eight to HTS.

RSF reported that regime authorities in January detained Hala Jerf, a Damascus-based television presenter, after she published comments on social media concerning the decline of living standards in Syria. According to the Syrian Journalists Union, Jerf was being investigated under the cybercrime law that prohibits statements that “undermine national sentiment.” Media outlets reported

Jerf was released in May.

**Censorship or Content Restrictions:** According to Freedom House, the regime enforced censorship of news sites and social media content more stringently in regime-controlled areas. The regime continued to block circumvention tools used to access censored content, internet security software that can prevent state surveillance, and other applications that enable anonymous communications. The Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE) and private internet service providers (ISPs) implemented censorship using various commercially available software programs. Decisions surrounding online censorship lacked transparency, and ISPs did not publicize the details of how blocking was implemented or which websites were banned. The STE was known to implement blocking decisions; it was unclear which state agency typically made the decisions, although security and intelligence bodies were believed to play an important role. Websites covering politics, minorities, human rights, foreign affairs, and other sensitive topics were censored or blocked outright.

The regime continued to strictly control the dissemination of information, including on developments regarding fighting between the regime and the armed opposition and the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and prohibited most criticism of the regime and discussion of sectarian matters, including sectarian tensions and problems facing religious and ethnic minority communities. The Ministries of Information and Culture censored domestic and foreign publications prior to circulation or importation, including through the General Corporation for the Distribution of Publications, and prevented circulation of content determined critical or sensitive. The regime prohibited publication or distribution of any material security officials deemed threatening or embarrassing to the regime. Censorship was usually more stringent for materials in Arabic.

Local journalists reported they engaged in extensive self-censorship on subjects such as criticism of the president and his family, the security services, Alawite religious groups, and the spread of COVID-19.

Despite regime censorship and a campaign of intimidation to suppress information regarding the spread of COVID-19, medical workers reported the virus spread quickly across the country and that government hospitals were overwhelmed. In

January PHR reported that the regime pressured medical professionals to suppress reporting on the spread of COVID-19. PHR assessed the regime's persecution and intimidation "hindered physicians from sharing potentially life-saving information" and had "grave consequences for the country's ability to cope and effectively save the lives of thousands of its citizens." Civil society reported that the regime continued to list pneumonia as the cause of death for individuals suspected to have died from COVID-19.

In March RSF reported journalists fled the advance of regime troops, fearing imprisonment as soon as the regime controlled the province. RSF assessed the regime's persecution of journalists for more than 10 years justified their fears, especially since many of them had covered the uprising from its outset, helped to document the regime's human rights violations, and risked severe reprisals if identified with the opposition. In March *VOA News* reported that many journalists who decided to stay in areas recaptured by regime forces experienced retaliation from the regime and their affiliates.

**Libel/Slander Laws:** The law criminalizes libel, slander, insult, defamation, and blasphemy, and the regime continued to use such provisions to restrict public discussion and to detain, arrest, and imprison journalists perceived to have opposed the regime.

**National Security:** The regime regularly cited laws protecting national security to restrict media criticism of regime policies or public officials.

**Nongovernmental Impact:** According to Freedom House, media freedom varied in territory held by armed opposition groups, but local outlets were typically under heavy pressure to support the dominant militant faction. The CPJ and RSF reported that extremist opposition groups, such as HTS, detained, tortured, and harassed journalists (see section 1.g.) and posed a serious threat to press and media freedoms. The SNHR documented the death of eight journalists at the hands of HTS since the start of the conflict. The COI stated in September that HTS targeted journalists and activists, particularly women, in Idlib to restrict freedom of expression, imposing regulations designed to restrict the ability of media workers to travel and report.

In May the SNHR reported that media activist Amer al-Asi was forcibly disappeared by police affiliated with HTS after he was summoned to an HTS police station in Idlib. In its September report, the COI similarly documented the case of a journalist summoned to HTS' "prosecutor's office" to appear on allegations of defamation after he criticized online marriage procedures in Idlib. The journalist was forced to put his thumbprint on a document containing a confession and was transferred to an underground facility before he was released days later following mounting public pressure.

Media outlets, human rights organizations, and the COI reported that HTS members detained civilians who spoke out against the group in what the COI described as a "systematic effort to stifle political dissent."

### **Internet Freedom**

In areas controlled by the regime, the STE served as both an ISP and a telecommunications regulator, providing the government with tight control over the internet infrastructure. Independent satellite-based connections were prohibited but heavily employed across the country, given the damage that information and communication technology infrastructure sustained in the conflict. ISPs and cybercafes operating in regime-controlled areas required a permit from the STE and another security permit from the Interior Ministry, and cybercafe owners were required to monitor customers and record their activities. The regime controlled and restricted access to the internet and monitored email and social media accounts.

Freedom House continued to report that self-censorship was widespread online and had increased in recent years as users contended with threats and violent reprisals for critical content. Sensitive topics included President Assad, former president Hafez Assad, the military, the ruling Baath Party, and influential government officials. Other sensitive subjects, including religious and ethnic tensions, COVID-19, and corruption allegations related to the president's family, were also off limits. Individuals and groups reportedly could not express views via the internet, including by email, without prospect of reprisal. The regime applied the law to regulate internet use and prosecuted users. The anticybercrime law, which increased penalties for cybercrimes, including those affecting the freedom of

expression, remained in place. It also mandates the creation of specialized courts and delegates “specialized jurists” for the prosecution of cybercrimes in every governorate. Citizen journalists and other civilians were frequently targeted based on their digital activism. Hackers linked to Iran and Russia continued cyberattacks against Syrian opposition groups to disrupt reporting on human rights violations.

The regime interfered with and blocked internet service, text messages, and two-step verification messages for password recovery or account activation. The regime employed sophisticated technologies and hundreds of computer specialists for filtering and surveillance purposes, such as monitoring email and social media accounts of detainees, activists, and others. The regime did not prosecute or otherwise take action to restrict the security branches’ monitoring and censoring of the internet. The security branches were largely responsible for restricting internet freedom and access.

The regime also restricted or prohibited internet access in areas under attack. Regime officials obstructed connectivity through their control of key infrastructure, at times shutting the internet and mobile telephone networks entirely or areas of unrest. Authorities limited the amount of data citizens were able to use through an “internet rationing” scheme. There was generally little access to state-run internet service in besieged areas unless users could capture signals clandestinely from rooftops near regime-controlled areas. Some towns in opposition-held areas had limited internet access via satellite connections. Some activists reportedly gained access independently to satellite internet or through second- and third-generation (2G and 3G) cellular telephone network coverage.

The regime expanded its efforts to use social media, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, to spread proregime propaganda and manipulate online content, including false content aiming to undermine the credibility of human rights and humanitarian groups. The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), a group of proregime computer hackers, frequently launched cyberattacks on websites to disable them and post proregime material. In addition to promoting hacking and conducting surveillance, the regime and groups it supported, such as the SEA, reportedly planted spyware and other malware in android applications using COVID-19-related lures to target human rights activists, opposition members, and journalists. Local human rights groups blamed regime personnel for instances in which

malware infected activists' computers. Arbitrary arrests raised fears that authorities could arrest internet users at any time for online activities perceived to threaten the regime's control, such as posting on a blog, tweeting, commenting on Facebook, sharing a photograph, or uploading a video.

Observers also accused the SEA of slowing internet access to force self-censorship on regime critics and diverting email traffic to regime servers for surveillance.

### **Academic Freedom and Cultural Events**

The regime restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Authorities generally did not permit employees of academic institutions to express ideas contrary to regime policy. The Ministry of Culture restricted and banned the presentation of certain films.

### **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The regime limited freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

#### **Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

The constitution provides for the freedom of peaceful assembly, but the law grants the government broad powers to restrict this freedom.

The Ministry of Interior requires permission for demonstrations or any public gathering of more than three persons. As a rule the ministry authorized only demonstrations by the regime, affiliated groups, or the Baath Party, orchestrating them on numerous occasions. In its February report, the COI determined that regime forces regularly targeted protests and demonstrations. Following protests in Daraa, regime forces besieged and shelled the city in June, breaking the Russian-brokered cease-fire negotiated in 2018. The regime's assault on Daraa caused civilian casualties, damaged the city's infrastructure, including its only medical facility, and resulted in acute food, water, fuel, and medicine shortages that continued despite a new cease-fire that was brokered on September 5.

According to allegations by human rights activists and press, at times the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the YPG components of the SDF, suppressed freedom of assembly in areas under their control. Protests generally occurred

throughout the northeast on a variety of topics without interference from local authorities; however, human rights organizations reported that the Asayesh, the internal security forces of SANES, opened fire during a protest in Manbij against SDF conscription, killing five protesters. In November the Asayesh announced its forces were beginning crowd-control training.

### **Freedom of Association**

The constitution provides for the freedom of association, but the law grants the regime latitude to restrict this freedom. The regime required prior registration and approval for private associations and restricted the activities of associations and their members. Executive boards of professional associations were not independent of the regime.

None of the local human rights organizations operated with a license, due to the regime's practice of denying requests for registration or failing to act on them, reportedly on political grounds, but some functioned under organizations that had requisite government registration. The regime continued to block the multiyear effort by journalists to register a countrywide media association, but journalists in exile continued working to empower the role of freedom of the press and expression through the Syrian Journalist Association, an independent democratic professional association established in 2012 by Syrians in exile.

The regime selectively enforced the 2011 decree allowing the establishment of independent political parties, permitting only proregime groups to form official parties (see section 3). According to local human rights groups, opposition activists declined to organize parties, fearing the regime would use party lists to target opposition members.

Under laws that criminalize membership and activity in illegal organizations as determined by the regime, security forces detained individuals linked to local human rights groups, prodemocracy student groups, and other organizations perceived to be supporting the opposition, including humanitarian groups.

HTS and other armed groups also restricted freedom of association, including civil society activity, in areas they controlled. Armed Syrian opposition groups supported by Turkey reportedly detained residents based on their affiliation with

SANES (see section 1.d.).

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

### **d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country**

The constitution provides for freedom of movement “within the territories of the state unless restricted by a judicial decision or by the implementation of laws,” but the regime, HTS, and other armed groups restricted internal movement and travel and instituted security checkpoints to monitor such travel throughout the regions under their respective control. Regime attacks on Idlib Governorate restricted freedom of movement and resulted in documented cases of death, starvation, and severe malnutrition, while fear of death and regime retribution resulted in mass civilian displacement and additional breakdowns in service provision and humanitarian assistance (see section 1.g.).

**In-country Movement:** In areas outside of regime control, regime forces blocked humanitarian access, leading to severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care, and death. The violence, coupled with significant cultural pressure, severely restricted the movement of women in many areas. Additionally, the law allows certain male relatives to place travel bans on women.

The regime expanded security checkpoints into civilian areas to monitor and limit movement, and the COI reported regime security officials detained, forcibly conscripted, and extorted residents at checkpoints, at times impeding civilians' access to health care and education. Regime forces used violence to prevent protests, enforce curfews, target opposition forces, and in some cases prevent civilians from fleeing besieged towns. The regime also barred foreign diplomats, including delegations from the United Nations and the OPCW IIT, from visiting most parts of the country and rarely granted them permission to travel outside Damascus. The consistently high level and unpredictability of violence severely restricted movement throughout the country.

In areas they controlled, armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as HTS

also restricted movement, including with checkpoints (see section 1.g.). The COI reported in February that HTS imposed severe restrictions on women and girls' freedom of movement, harassing unaccompanied women and denying them access to public life. NGOs continued to report that HTS also attempted to control and interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

While the Syrian Democratic Council and the SDF generally supported IDP communities in the northeast, human rights organizations reported that SANES restricted the movement of more than 10,000 foreign women and children suspected to be affiliated with ISIS in the al-Hol displaced persons camp. The COI reported in February that children faced problems related to obtaining identity documentation, noting that the lack of birth registration papers, in some cases because parents were unable to register, jeopardized their rights to a nationality.

**Foreign Travel:** While citizens have the right to travel internationally, the regime denied passports and other vital documents, based on the applicant's political views, association, or perceived association with or support for opposition groups, or ties to geographic areas where the opposition dominated. Additionally, the regime often banned travel by human rights or civil society activists, their families, and affiliates. The regime comprehensively banned international travel of opposition members, often targeting any such individual who attempted to travel. Local media and human rights groups repeatedly stated that opposition activists and their families hesitated to leave the country, fearing attacks and arbitrary detention at airports and border crossings. The regime also imposed exit visa requirements and routinely closed the Damascus airport and border crossings, claiming the closures were due to violence or threats of violence. Syrian passports cost between \$800 to \$2,000, which many found prohibitive. Many citizens reportedly learned of the ban against their travel only when authorities stopped them at points of departure. The regime reportedly applied travel bans without explanation or explicit duration, including in cases when individuals sought to travel for health reasons.

The regime also often refused to allow some citizens to return, while other Syrians who fled to neighboring countries reportedly feared retribution by the regime should they return. In September Amnesty International reported that returning Syrian refugees faced detention, abuse, and torture upon their re-entry. Regime

authorities targeted returnees for having fled the country and accused them of treason and support of terrorist activity. Amnesty International reported five cases of detainees dying in custody after returning to the country during the year.

In February the regime announced it was amending the military conscription law to allow for the immediate seizure of assets of men who evaded military conscription and failed to pay military exemption fees (see section 1.e., Efforts to Control Mobility). According to HRW the amendment grants the Ministry of Finance the power to confiscate and sell an individual's property without providing notice or giving the individual the opportunity to challenge the decision. HRW reported this was an obstacle for Syrians considering returning to the country, particularly men who fled to avoid military conscription.

Women older than 18 have the legal right to travel without the permission of male relatives, but a husband may file a request with the Interior Ministry to prohibit his wife from departing the country. Syrians born abroad to parents who fled the conflict and remained in refugee camps generally did not have access to Syrian citizenship documents. The regime allowed Syrians living outside of the country whose passports had expired to renew their passports at consulates. Many who fled as refugees, however, feared reporting to the regime against which they may have protested or feared the regime could direct reprisals against family members still in the country.

### **e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons**

Violence and instability continued to be the primary cause for displacement, most often Syrians fleeing regime and Russian aerial attacks, including more than 37,000 persons who were displaced in Daraa between July and August. Years of fighting repeatedly displaced persons, with each displacement further depleting family assets. The UN estimated more than 6.7 million IDPs were in the country and 5.9 million individuals needed acute assistance. According to UNOCHA, in April the humanitarian community tracked 34,000 IDP movements across the country and 12,000 spontaneous IDP returnees. Approximately 6,000 of these returns were recorded within and between Aleppo and Idlib Governorates. Spontaneous IDP return movements in areas other than the northwest remained very low.

The crisis inside the country continued to meet the UN criteria for a level three response – the classification for response to the most severe, large-scale humanitarian crises. UN humanitarian officials reported most IDPs sought shelter with host communities or in collective centers, abandoned buildings, or informal camps.

The regime generally did not provide sustainable access to services for IDPs, offer IDPs assistance, facilitate humanitarian assistance for IDPs, or provide consistent protection. The regime forcibly displaced populations from besieged areas and restricted movement of IDPs. The regime did not promote the safe, voluntary, and dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs, and in some cases authorities refused to allow IDPs to return home. In its February report, the COI determined that IDPs were “routinely denied return to their places of origin” due to regime restrictions and fear of arrest in retaken or formerly besieged areas, including Rif Damashq, Daraa, Quneitra, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. According to NGOs PAX and Impunity Watch, the regime’s confiscation of property from Syrians perceived to threaten the regime’s authority presented an increasingly grave impediment to the return of refugees and IDPs (see section 1.e., Property Restitution).

Persons with a backlog of service bills or back taxes who were unable to pay their debt to the regime were given a brief window to leave their property, while intelligence forces summarily seized homes and businesses of some former opposition members.

Humanitarian actors noted that access remained a key obstacle to assisting vulnerable persons in areas controlled by the regime and nonregime actors. The regime routinely disrupted the supply of humanitarian aid, including medical assistance, to areas under siege as well as to newly recaptured areas (see section 1.g.). NGOs operating from Damascus faced regime obstruction and interference in attempting to provide humanitarian assistance. UN agencies and NGOs sought to increase the flow of assistance to opposition-held areas subject to regime offensives to meet growing humanitarian needs, but the regime continued to restrict cross-line operations originating from Damascus. In July the Russian government threatened to veto a draft UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution to authorize UN cross-border humanitarian aid through the Bab al-Hawa and

Yaroubiya crossings in the northwest and northeast. The UNSC ultimately approved UNSC Resolution 2585 reauthorizing the use of one crossing, Bab al-Hawa, for 12 months.

Turkey placed restrictions on the provision of humanitarian and stabilization aid to areas of the northeast from Turkey. Jordan placed restrictions on the provision of humanitarian aid to the Rukban displacement camp near its border with Syria.

The regime and Russian government routinely refused to approve UN requests for assistance delivery to the Rukban camp. The most recent UN convoy to Rukban took place in 2019. Armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as HTS also impeded humanitarian assistance to IDPs. The COI and humanitarian actors reported HTS attempted to control and interfere with the delivery of aid and services in areas of the northwest, including by confiscating food items or distributing them on a “preferential basis” within their groups. NGOs continued to report bureaucratic difficulties in working with the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government, which impeded delivery of services in the camps.

The SDF and SDC generally facilitated the safe and voluntary return of IDPs during the year, particularly to Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa.

## **f. Protection of Refugees**

The regime inconsistently cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern. The regime provided some cooperation to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which assisted Palestinian refugees in the country.

UNHCR maintained that conditions for Syrian refugee return to the country in safety and dignity were not yet in place and did not promote or facilitate the return of refugees to the country during the year. The COI and various NGOs, including Amnesty International and HRW, reported cases of the regime subjecting returning refugees to arbitrary detention and torture, even in cases where reconciliation agreements were in place (see section 2.d.). Throughout the year, however, the regime and Russian government maintained a diplomatic campaign to encourage the return of refugees to the country. The Russian government reportedly sought

to use the return of Syrian refugees to secure international donations for Syrian reconstruction efforts.

**Access to Asylum:** The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the regime has established a system for providing protection to refugees. UNHCR and UNRWA were able to maintain limited protection areas for refugees and asylum seekers, although violence hampered access to vulnerable populations. In coordination with both local and international NGOs, the United Nations continued to provide such individuals essential services and assistance.

**Abuse of Migrants and Refugees:** Both regime and opposition forces reportedly besieged, shelled, and otherwise made inaccessible some Palestinian refugee camps, neighborhoods, and sites, which resulted in severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care and humanitarian assistance, and civilian deaths. As of 2019, the UN estimated that at least 120,000 Palestinian refugees had been displaced from Syria since 2011.

**Employment:** The law does not explicitly grant refugees, except for Palestinians, the right to work. While the regime rarely granted non-Palestinian refugees a work permit, many refugees found work in the informal sector as guards, construction workers, and street vendors and in other manual jobs.

**Access to Basic Services:** The law allows for the issuance of identity cards to Palestinian refugees and the same access to basic services provided to citizens. The regime also allowed Iraqi refugees access to publicly available services, such as health care and education, but residency permits were available only to refugees who entered the country legally and possessed a valid passport, which did not include all refugees. The lack of access to residency permits issued by authorities exposed refugees to risks of harassment and exploitation and severely affected their access to public services. The approximately 23,600 non-Palestinian refugees and asylum seekers in the country faced growing protection risks, multiple displacements, tightened security procedures at checkpoints, and difficulty obtaining required residency permits, all of which resulted in restrictions on their freedom of movement.

### **g. Stateless Persons**

Following the 1962 census, approximately 150,000 Kurds lost their citizenship. A legislative decree had ordained a single-day census in 1962, and the government executed it unannounced to the inhabitants of al-Hasakah Governorate. Persons not registered for any reason or without all required paperwork lost their Syrian citizenship from that day onward. The government at the time argued it based its decision on a 1945 wave of alleged illegal immigration of Kurds from neighboring states, including Turkey, to al-Hasakah, where they allegedly “fraudulently” registered as Syrian citizens. In a similar fashion, authorities recorded anyone who refused to participate as “undocumented.” Because of this loss of citizenship, these Kurds and their descendants lacked identity cards and could not access government services, including health care and education. They also faced social and economic discrimination. Stateless Kurds do not have the right to inherit or bequeath assets, and their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricted their travel to and from the country.

In 2011 President Assad decreed that stateless Kurds in al-Hasakah who were registered as “foreigners” could apply for citizenship. It was unclear how many Kurds benefited from the decree. UNHCR reported in 2015 that approximately 40,000 of these Kurds remained unable to obtain citizenship. Likewise, the decree did not extend to the approximately 160,000 “unregistered” stateless Kurds. The change from 150,000 to 160,000 reflected an estimated increase in population since the 1962 census.

Children derive citizenship solely from their father. Because women cannot confer nationality on their children, an unknown number of children whose fathers were missing or deceased due to the continuing conflict were at risk of statelessness. Mothers could not pass citizenship to children born outside the country, including in neighboring countries hosting refugee camps. Children who left the country during the conflict also experienced difficulties obtaining identification necessary to prove citizenship and obtain services.

## **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

Although the constitution provides citizens the ability to choose their government

in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, citizens were not able to exercise that ability.

## **Elections and Political Participation**

**Recent Elections:** Presidential elections were held in May with three candidates, including incumbent president Bashar Assad, who claimed victory with an alleged 95 percent of the vote. Media outlets and human rights organizations described the election as “neither free nor fair” and noted the lack of a safe and neutral environment for campaigning and voter participation. Though regime officials claimed that 78 percent of voters participated in the elections, the Atlantic Council and others reported turnout was closer to 33 percent of the electorate. According to the COI’s September report, voting was restricted to regime-controlled areas and parts of the diaspora. National Public Radio reported that millions of Syrians living in Idlib Governate and the northeast, and in many countries abroad were excluded. The law only allows diaspora voting for presidential, not legislative, elections. Syrian refugees seeking to vote were required to present a valid passport with an exit stamp at Syrian embassies abroad, thereby excluding the large number of citizens who fled the country or did not have a valid Syrian passport. The fear of surveillance also dissuaded Syrian refugees from going to vote at the only designated locations in Syrian embassies.

The regime claimed there were no reported violations or infringements, but *The Washington Post* reported that government intimidation and coercion forced individuals to vote under the threat of being fired, dismissed from school, or having their businesses closed. There were also reports of intimidation at diaspora voting locations, such as in Lebanon, where voters reported threats of reprisals and property seizures. Residents of regime-held areas told *The Washington Post* the regime made voting a condition for the distribution of bread subsidies in Homs and World Food Program aid baskets in Damascus and Aleppo.

Parliamentary elections which introduced primaries and a two-round election system were held in July 2020, with 1,656 candidates vying for 250 seats. *The Washington Post* reported that the elections resulted in reports of alleged corruption, even within the regime loyalist community, including fraud, ballot stuffing, and political interference. Media outlets described low voter turnout,

despite compulsory voting requirements for military and law enforcement officials, reportedly intended to bolster support for regime-affiliated candidates. Syrians residing outside the country were not permitted to vote, and those in areas outside regime control often had no or limited access to voting locations. Similar to the presidential elections in May, reports of citizens being pressured to vote were common, and voter privacy was not guaranteed. Polling staff reportedly handed out ballots already filled in with Baath Party candidates. According to observers the results were rigged in favor of the ruling Baath Party, and losing candidates leveled allegations of fraud, ballot stuffing, and political interference. Most candidates were either from the Baath Party or associated with it.

In 2017 Kurdish authorities held elections for leaders of local “communes” in an effort to establish new governing institutions to augment claims of regional autonomy. The regime does not recognize the Kurdish enclave or the elections. The Kurdish National Council (a rival to the PYD) called for a boycott, terming the elections “a flagrant violation of the will of the Kurdish people.” Media outlets reported the election was monitored by a small group of foreign experts, including a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which runs the Kurdish Regional Government in neighboring Iraq.

**Political Parties and Political Participation:** The constitution provides that the Baath Party is the ruling party and assures that it has a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers’ and women’s groups. The Baath Party and nine smaller satellite political parties constituted the coalition National Progressive Front. The Baath-led National Progressive Front dominated the 250-member People’s Council, holding 183 of the 250 parliament seats following the 2020 election marred with allegations of electoral fraud. The law allows for the establishment of additional political parties but forbids those based on religion, tribal affiliation, or regional interests.

Membership in the Baath Party or close familial relationships with a prominent party member or powerful regime official assisted in economic, social, and educational advancement. Party or regime connections made it easier to gain admission to better schools, access lucrative employment, and achieve greater advancement and power within the government, military, and security services. The regime reserved certain prominent positions, such as provincial governorships,

solely for Baath Party members. Freedom House reported that political access was primarily a function of proximity and loyalty to the regime, noting that Alawites, Christians, Druze, and members of other religious minorities who were considered to be outside of the regime's inner circle were "politically disenfranchised along with the rest of the population."

The regime showed little tolerance for other political parties, including those allied with the Baath Party in the National Progressive Front. The regime harassed parties, such as the Communist Union Movement, Communist Action Party, and Arab Social Union. Police arrested members of banned Islamist parties, including Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria. Reliable data on other illegal political parties was unavailable.

The law prohibits individuals convicted of a felony or misdemeanor that "shakes public trust" from voting for 10 years after their conviction. The Ministry of Justice determines which felonies or misdemeanors fall under this category as the law does not specifically delineate the list of relevant crimes. As a result large numbers of Syrians, including those arrested on political charges, were unable to vote, according to NGOs.

SANES generally controlled the political and governance landscape in the northeast while allowing for Arab representation in local governance councils. SANES, however, maintained overall control of critical decisions made by local councils. SANES-affiliated internal security forces at times reportedly detained and forcibly disappeared perceived opponents.

**Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups:** No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Although there were no formal restrictions, cultural and social barriers largely excluded women from decision-making positions, except for within SANES, which enforced a minimum of 40 percent female representation in all civilian entities. The Syrian Democratic Council was led by a woman, Ilham Ahmad. Media reported that the government formed after the May election remained largely unchanged and included three women in the cabinet. Women accounted for 13 percent of the members of parliament elected in July 2020. There were Christian, Druze, and Armenian members of parliament but no Kurdish

representatives. Alawites, the ruling religious minority, held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities, as well as more authority than the majority Sunni sect.

## **Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government**

Although the law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, the regime did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of regime corruption during the year. Corruption continued to be a pervasive problem in police forces, security services, migration management agencies, and throughout the regime.

**Corruption:** Due to the lack of free press and opposition access to instruments of government and media, there was no detailed information about corruption, except petty corruption. Freedom House reported that to secure its support base, the regime regularly distributed patronage in the form of public resources and implemented policies to benefit favored industries and companies. Authorities reportedly awarded government contracts and trade deals to allies such as Iran and Russia, possibly as compensation for political and military aid. Basic state services and humanitarian aid reportedly were extended or withheld based on a community's demonstrated political loyalty to the regime, providing additional leverage for bribe-seeking officials.

Human rights lawyers and family members of detainees stated that regime officials in courts and prisons solicited bribes for favorable decisions and provision of basic services. In its June report, the International Legal Assistance Consortium found that bribery and corruption in the justice system was widespread. Lawyers interviewed for the report said bribes were needed for a case to proceed in court. The consortium said that court officials appeared "highly susceptible" to bribery, noting that the practice "often leaves individuals who lack the financial means for bribes with no recourse to justice."

Despite a bread crisis, the regime often refused to allow private bakers in areas previously under opposition control to operate. According to HRW, since the beginning of the conflict, regime and proregime forces systematically destroyed

bakeries and ovens, thereby limiting the ability to produce and distribute bread in contested areas. HRW reported that the regime security services took bread from bakeries and sold it on the black market. HRW interviewed aid workers who said the government directed the rehabilitation of bakeries according to the political affiliation, rather than the need, of a particular neighborhood. Interviewees also reported the discriminatory distribution of food, noting that government-supported bakeries had separate queues for residents, IDPs, and military and intelligence services, and that those affiliated with the regime were prioritized.

Entities with known or suspected links to Assad regime officials and Hizballah were reportedly producing and trafficking illicit narcotics in the country, particularly an amphetamine-type stimulant known widely as Captagon. According to *The New York Times*, much of the production and distribution of Captagon in Syria was overseen by the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army, a unit headed by President Assad's brother Maher al-Assad. In recent years, authorities in Europe and the Middle East seized hundreds of millions of Captagon pills originating from regime-controlled ports in Syria. According to *The Economist*, Captagon has become the country's main source of foreign currency.

## **Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

The regime restricted attempts to investigate alleged human rights violations, criminalized their publication, and refused to cooperate with any independent attempts to investigate alleged violations. The regime did not grant permission for the formation of any domestic human rights organizations. Nevertheless, hundreds of such groups operated illegally in the country.

The regime was highly suspicious of human rights NGOs and did not allow international human rights groups into the country. The regime normally responded to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by denying the facts of the case or by reporting that the case was still under investigation, the prisoner in question had violated national

security laws, or, if the case was in criminal court, the executive branch could not interfere with the judiciary. The regime denied organizations access to locations where regime agents launched assaults on antigovernment protesters or allegedly held prisoners detained on political grounds.

The regime continued to harass domestic human rights activists by subjecting them to regular surveillance and travel bans, property seizure, detention, torture, forcible disappearance, and extrajudicial killings (see section 1.e., Political Prisoners and Detainees).

Terrorist groups, including HTS, violently attacked organizations and individuals seeking to investigate human rights abuses or advocating for improved practices. The SDF and other opposition groups occasionally imposed restrictions on human rights organizations or harassed individual activists, in some cases subjecting them to arbitrary detention.

**The United Nations or Other International Bodies:** The regime continued to deny access for the COI, mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to document and report on human rights violations and abuses in the country. The regime did not cooperate fully with numerous UN and other multilateral bodies, resulting in restrictions on access for humanitarian organizations, especially to opposition-controlled areas. In addition, the regime did not allow the OPCW IIT to access the sites under investigation in Ltamenah, as required by UN Security Council Resolution 2118.

The UNWGEID continued to request information from the regime on reported cases of enforced disappearances, but it failed to respond. The regime also ignored UNWGEID requests for an invitation to visit the country, dating back to 2011. The regime similarly ignored UN and international community calls for unhindered access for independent, impartial international humanitarian and medical organizations to all regime's detention centers.

## **Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses**

### **Women**

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** The law criminalizes rape and sexual assault of

women, men, and children, but the regime did not enforce the law effectively. Rape is punishable by imprisonment and hard labor for at least 15 years (at least nine years in mitigating circumstances), which is aggravated if the perpetrator is a government official, religious official, or has legitimate or actual authority over the victim. Rape of men is punishable by imprisonment for up to three years. The law specifically excludes spousal rape, and it reduces or suspends punishment if the rapist marries the victim. The victim's family sometimes agreed to this arrangement to avoid the social stigma attached to rape.

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies, NGOs, and media outlets characterized rape and sexual violence as endemic, underreported, and uncontrolled in the country (see sections 1.c. and 1.g.). The COI reported regime and proregime forces continued to commit sexual violence targeting protesters and opposition supporters, including rape and sexual abuse. Regime officials in the intelligence and security services perpetrated sexual and gender-based violence with impunity, according to the NGO Trial International. A September Amnesty International report revealed that refugees who returned to Syria, particularly women and children, faced severe sexual violence, including rape. There were instances, comparatively far fewer, of armed opposition groups reportedly raping women and children. Victims often feared reporting rape and sexual abuse, according to OHCHR, due to the stigma associated with their victimization and threat of retaliation.

Women and girls subjected to sexual violence lacked access to immediate health care, particularly in regime detention facilities where reports of sexual violence continued to be prevalent, and authorities often denied medical care to prisoners (see section 1.g.). The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy reported that many detainees were subjected to rape, sexual harassment, genital mutilation, intimate searches, forced nudity, and forced abortions (see section 6, Reproductive Rights).

In April HRW reported that Syrian state and nonstate actors subjected gay and bisexual men, transgender women, and nonbinary persons to sexual violence resulting in severe physical and mental health consequences.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, but it stipulates that men may discipline their female relatives in a form permitted by general custom.

UNFPA and local human rights groups reported women and children were at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence due to the economic impact of COVID-19. Security forces consistently treated violence against women as a social rather than a criminal matter. Observers reported that when some abused women tried to file a police report, police did not investigate their reports thoroughly, if at all, and that in other cases police officers responded by abusing the women.

In January the COI reported Kurdish and Yezidi women in SNA detention were “raped and subjected to other forms of sexual violence, including degrading and humiliating acts, threats of rape, performance of ‘virginity tests,’ or the dissemination of photographs or video material showing the female detainee being abused.” The UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict reported in March that members of the SNA were implicated in a number of rape cases and were found to have used sexual violence in detention facilities. In March the COI reported that sexual and gender-based violence committed by ISIS was a “regular practice specifically targeting women and girls,” and noted in its February report that ISIS members subjected Yezidi women and girls to rape, including through sexual slavery. The COI also reported that former detainees described sexual violence, including rape, in HTS facilities.

In previous years several domestic violence centers operated in Damascus, licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Local NGOs reported, however, that many centers no longer operated due to the conflict. There were no known government-run services for women outside Damascus. According to human rights organizations, local coordination committees and other opposition-related groups offered programs specifically for protection of women. These programs were not available throughout the country, and none reported reliable funding.

**Other Harmful Traditional Practices:** The law permits judges to reduce penalties for murder and assault if the defendant asserts an “honor” defense, which often occurred. The regime kept no official statistics on use of this defense in murder and assault cases and reportedly rarely pursued prosecution of so-called honor crimes. Reporting from previous years indicated that honor killings increased following the onset of the crisis in 2011. In September the STJ reported the honor killing of a young woman and her mother in the HTS-controlled Idlib

Governate. A paternal male cousin of the young woman killed her and her mother after the daughter posted a photograph to social media of herself without a hijab. A May STJ report on domestic violence and honor killings recorded the death of 16 women at the hands of male relatives on the pretext of bringing shame to the family from January 2020 to February. The SNHR reported thousands of victims of violence, sexual exploitation, and forced marriage were subsequently ostracized by their families because of their abuse. OHCHR noted one reason why sexual violence remained severely underreported was the threat of honor killings of the victims by family members.

**Sexual Harassment:** Sexual harassment was pervasive and uncontrolled. The law prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of gender but does not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment. The regime did not enforce the law effectively. *The Syrian Observer* reported cases of women in Damascus facing sexual harassment and exploitation after being forced to drop out of school and enter the labor market.

**Reproductive Rights:** There were no reports of involuntary sterilization. PHR stated that women reportedly were increasingly choosing caesarean deliveries to reduce the amount time spent in hospitals which were known to be targets of attacks. In July 2020 UNOCHA reported an increase in coerced abortions in the northwest in response to increasing psychosocial stress, poverty, and lack of employment opportunities, compounded by the effects of COVID-19; no additional information was available.

Violence throughout the country made accessing medical care and reproductive services both costly and dangerous, and the COI reported that the regime and armed extremists sometimes denied pregnant women passage through checkpoints, forcing them to give birth in unsterile and often dangerous conditions, without pain medication or adequate medical treatment. PHR assessed that attacks on humanitarian actors by the regime and Russia and, to a lesser degree, armed groups caused medical providers to operate in secret or in some cases to leave the country (see section 1.g.). Attacks impacting hospitals affected pregnant women, and during the year midwives reported that hostilities forced an increasing number of women to give birth through caesarean sections to control the timing of their delivery and avoid traveling in insecure environments. The NGO International

Rescue Committee reported pregnant women did not receive care during pregnancy, such as monitoring the fetus or essential vitamins. UNFPA reported a dramatic rise in early deliveries, miscarriages, and low-weight births during the year and expressed concern that COVID-19 threatened to further restrict access to family planning services already impacted by the conflict.

Activists reported that regime detention centers did not provide medical care to women during pregnancy or birth.

Many pregnant women living in IDP camps in Idlib Governorate and camps such as al-Hol and Rukban lacked access to hospitals, doctors, or skilled birth assistants.

**Discrimination:** Although the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Criminal, family, religious, personal status, labor, nationality, inheritance, retirement, and social security laws discriminate against women. For example if a man and a woman separately commit the same criminal act of adultery, then by law the woman's punishment is double that of the man. The law generally permits women to initiate divorce proceedings against their spouses, but the law does not entitle a divorced woman to alimony in some cases. Under the law a divorced mother loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach age 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family. Personal status laws applied to Muslims are derived from sharia and are discriminatory toward women. Church law governs personal status questions for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case. While the constitution provides the "right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work," the law does not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work. Women cannot pass citizenship to their children. The regime's interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, courts usually granted Muslim women half the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less. If they refuse to provide this support, women have the right to sue.

The law provides women and men equal rights in owning or managing land or

other property, but cultural and religious norms impeded women's property rights, especially in rural areas.

The Commission for Family Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor share responsibility for attempting to accord equal legal rights to women. Governmental involvement in civil rights claims, including cases against sexual discrimination, was stagnant, and most claims went unanswered.

Women participated in public life and in most professions, including the armed forces, although UNFPA reported the conflict, and more recently COVID-19, reduced women's access to the public sphere. Various sources observed that women constituted a minority of lawyers, university professors, and other professions.

HTS reportedly placed similar discriminatory restrictions on women and girls in the territories it controlled. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's February report noted women cannot grant citizenship to their children, initiate divorce, or exercise their right to vote under HTS. HTS imposed a dress code on women and girls, banned women and girls from wearing makeup, forbade women from living alone, and required that women be accompanied by a *mahram* – a male member of their immediate family – in public. According to the STJ, HTS routinely detained, abused, and killed women under pretexts including “insulting deity,” “adultery,” and “espionage.”

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

The regime actively restricted national and ethnic minorities from conducting traditional, religious, and cultural activities. The regime continued to limit the use of the Kurdish language, restricting publication in Kurdish of books and other materials and Kurdish cultural expression. The Kurdish population – citizens and noncitizens – faced official and societal discrimination and repression (see section 2.g.), as well as regime-sponsored violence. Regime and proregime forces, as well as ISIS and armed opposition forces such as the Turkish-backed SNA, reportedly arrested, detained, tortured, killed, and otherwise abused numerous Kurdish activists and individuals, as well as members of the SDF during the year (see section 1.g.). In March the COI reported cases of SNA members arresting,

beating, and kidnapping Kurdish women in Afrin and Ra's al-Ayn, and in September the COI found that the SNA continued to subject civilians of Kurdish origin to unlawful deprivations of liberty.

The minority Alawite community to which President Assad belongs enjoyed privileged status throughout the regime and dominated the state security apparatus and military leadership. Nevertheless, the regime reportedly also targeted Alawite opposition activists for arbitrary arrest, torture, detention, and killing. Extremist opposition groups targeted Alawite communities on several occasions for their perceived proregime stance.

ISIS members continued to target ethnic and religious minorities in attacks. The February COI report stated that ISIS subjected Yezidi women and girls to human trafficking, torture, inhuman treatment, murder, and rape (see sections 1.g. and section 6, Children). In February *The Jerusalem Post* reported Yezidis in Syria denounced a new regime ruling that required them to follow Islamic personal status laws. Some Yezidis had previously requested to have their own court oversee personal status matters.

HTS violently oppressed and discriminated against members of all non-Sunni Arab ethnic minorities in the territories it controlled (see section 1.g.).

## **Children**

**Birth Registration:** Children derive citizenship solely from their father. In large areas of the country where civil registries were not functioning, authorities often did not register births. The regime did not register the births of Kurdish noncitizen residents, including stateless Kurds (see section 2.g.). Failure to register resulted in deprivation of services, such as diplomas for high school-level studies, access to universities, access to formal employment, and civil documentation and protection.

**Education:** The regime provided free public education to citizen children from primary school through university. Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of six and 12. Enrollment, attendance, and completion rates for boys and girls generally were comparable. Noncitizen children could also attend public schools at no cost but required permission from the Ministry of Education. While Palestinians and other noncitizens, including stateless Kurds, could

generally send their children to school and universities, stateless Kurds were ineligible to receive a degree documenting their academic achievement. The regime continued to limit the teaching of the Kurdish language.

Combatants on all sides of the conflict attacked or commandeered schools. The COI reported in February that repeated attacks on schools, growing poverty rates amid an economic crisis, recruitment of boys for military roles, and violent treatment of children in detention centers continued to hamper the ability of children to receive an education and had a disproportionate impact on displaced children, particularly girls. Many school buildings required extensive repairs, sometimes including clearance of explosive remnants of the war, and administrators required assistance to obtain basic supplies for learning.

In October UNICEF reported 6.8 million children needed humanitarian assistance, negatively impacting their ability to remain in school. Approximately 2.1 million children were out of school among more than 2.6 million internally displaced Syrian children, including refugees; another 1.3 million were at risk for leaving school. HTS reportedly imposed its interpretation of sharia on schools and discriminated against girls in the territories it controlled (see section 1.g.). The group imposed dress codes on female teachers and pupils where it allowed girls to remain in school, while preventing large numbers of girls from attending school at all, according to the COI.

The COI reported in September that the 40,000 children in al-Hol camp lacked sufficient access to education.

The SDF reportedly imposed penalties on school administration staff members who did not use their curriculum. For example, the COI reported in September that Asayesh, the SANES internal security forces, detained six teachers for tutoring students enrolled in university exams and forced them to sign a pledge that they would no longer instruct the government curriculum.

**Child Abuse:** The law does not specifically prohibit child abuse, but it stipulates parents may discipline their children in a form permitted by general custom. In September the COI reported children, especially girls, were acutely vulnerable to violence and were victims of a broad array of abuses.

NGOs reported extensively on reports of regime and proregime forces, as well as HTS and ISIS, sexually assaulting, torturing, detaining, killing, and otherwise abusing children (see sections 1.a., 1.b., 1.c., and 1.g.). HTS subjected children to extremely harsh punishment, including execution, in the territories it controlled.

The regime did not take steps to combat child abuse.

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage:** The legal age for marriage is 18 for men and 17 for women. A boy as young as 15 or a girl as young as 13 may marry if a judge deems both parties willing and “physically mature” and if the fathers or grandfathers of both parties consent. Many families reportedly arranged marriages for girls, including at younger ages than typically occurred prior to the start of the conflict, believing it would protect them and ease the financial burden on the family. In February the COI reported that the death or disappearance of male parental figures at the hands of the regime and other armed groups left many children vulnerable to child labor and child marriage. In July the STJ reported that violence against women was increasing, leaving girls increasingly vulnerable to early and forced marriage due to the extreme financial hardships placed upon families by the conflict, problems exacerbated by COVID-19, and societal pressures. In August UNFPA reported an increase in early marriage cases, especially in Hassia camp, Hussainiya camp, Wadi Hassia industrial camp, Majar farms, and Shamsin.

There were instances of early and forced marriage of girls to members of regime, proregime, and armed opposition forces.

NGOs reported that early and forced marriages were prevalent in areas under the control of armed groups, and citizens often failed to register their marriages officially due to fear of detention or conscription at regime checkpoints.

In previous years ISIS abducted and sexually exploited Yezidi girls in Iraq and transported them to Syria for rape and forced marriage (see section 1.g.). The Free Yezidi Foundation reported that Yezidi women and children remained with ISIS-affiliated families in detention camps due to fear and the intense trauma from their treatment under ISIS.

From 2014 onwards ISIS began to forcibly marry women and girls living in

territories under its control. Some of those forced to marry ISIS members were adults, but many forced marriage cases the COI documented in its February report involved young girls. Many women and girls reportedly were passed among multiple ISIS fighters, some as many as six or seven times within two years.

**Sexual Exploitation of Children:** The law stipulates penalties for those found guilty of certain forms of child abuse associated with trafficking crimes, including kidnapping and forced “prostitution,” both of which carry a penalty of up to three years in prison. The law considers child pornography a trafficking crime, but the punishment for child pornography was set at the local level with “appropriate penalties.” There were no known prosecutions for child pornography.

The age of sexual consent by law is 15 with no close-in-age exemption. Premarital sex is illegal, but observers reported authorities did not enforce the law. Rape of a child younger than 15 is punishable by not less than 21 years’ imprisonment and hard labor. There were no reports of regime prosecution of child rape cases.

**Displaced Children:** The population of IDP children increased for the 10th consecutive year due to the conflict, and a limited number of non-Syrian refugee children continued to live in the country. These children reportedly experienced increased vulnerability to abuses, including by armed forces (see sections 1.c., 1.g., 2.e., and 2.f.).

**International Child Abductions:** The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

## **Anti-Semitism**

NGOs and media reported that the Jewish population had fled the country and there were no known Jews still living in the country. In January the *Jewish Chronicle* newspaper reported that researchers had compiled a list of more than 2,000 important Jewish heritage sites in the country that should be protected, many of which had sustained damage during the conflict. The national school curriculum did not include materials on tolerance education or the Holocaust.

There is no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards except for Jews. Government-controlled radio and television programming continued to disseminate anti-Semitic news articles and cartoons. The regime-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency frequently reported on the “Zionist enemy” and accused the Syrian opposition of serving “the Zionist project.”

## **Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Persons with Disabilities**

While the law provides some protections for persons with disabilities, the regime did not make serious attempts to enforce applicable laws effectively during the year. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for assisting persons with disabilities, working through dedicated charities and organizations to provide assistance.

The destruction of schools and hospitals, most often by regime and proregime forces, limited access to education and health services for persons with disabilities, but government and nongovernment social care institutes reportedly existed for blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, and physical and intellectual disabilities. In February the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported violence against health-care workers and attacks on health facilities had compounded the effects of COVID-19, making it increasingly difficult for anyone to receive medical care, including those suffering from disabling injuries from the conflict. The regime did not effectively work to provide access for persons with disabilities to information, communications, buildings, or transportation. The COI’s February report noted the difficulties experienced by children with disabilities caused by the conflict. A June HRW report revealed that the conflict and lack of access to aid services had a devastating impact on the mental health of children with disabilities. In April the UNHCR reported 36 percent of IDPs had a disability, and 47 percent of this population lacked access to health facilities.

## **HIV and AIDS Social Stigma**

There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons with HIV or AIDS, but human rights activists believed such cases were underreported, and COAR noted that stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS was enormous. The UN Development Program assessed COVID-19 presented barriers access to HIV testing and treatment. COAR also assessed schools employed substandard educational curricula concerning HIV/AIDS and determined that HIV/AIDS awareness was inadequate.

## **Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

The law criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct, defined as “carnal relations against the order of nature,” and stipulates imprisonment of up to three years. In previous years police used this charge to prosecute LGBTQI+ individuals. There were no reports of prosecutions under the law during the year, but COAR reported the lack of protections in the legal framework created an environment of impunity for rampant, targeted threats and violence against LGBTQI+ individuals. NGO reports indicated the regime had arrested dozens of LGBTQI+ persons since 2011 on charges such as abusing social values; selling, buying, or consuming illegal drugs; and organizing and promoting “obscene” parties.

In June COAR reported that the regime and other armed groups subjected perceived members of the LGBTQI+ community to humiliation, torture, and abuse in detention centers, including rape, forced nudity, and anal or vaginal “examinations.”

Although there were no known domestic NGOs focused on LGBTQI+ matters, there were several online networking communities, including an online magazine. Human rights activists reported there was overt societal discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in all aspects of society.

In February the COI reported that ISIS systematically discriminated against LGBTQI+ individuals as a matter of policy. HTS and other armed groups used

unauthorized “courts” to impose draconian social restrictions, according to the COI, particularly against women and LGBTQI+ individuals (see section 1.g.).

## **Other Societal Violence or Discrimination**

Yezidis, Druze, Christians, Shia, and other religious minorities were subject to violence and discrimination by ISIS, HTS, the SNA, and other groups (see section 1.g.).

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

While the law provides for the right to form and join unions, conduct legal labor strikes, and bargain collectively, there were excessive restrictions on these rights. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination but also allows employers to fire workers at will.

The law requires all unions to belong to the regime-affiliated General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). The law prohibits strikes involving more than 20 workers in certain sectors, including transportation and telecommunications, or strikes resembling public demonstrations. Restrictions on freedom of association also included fines and prison sentences for illegal strikes. The regime did not effectively enforce applicable laws or make any serious attempt to do so during the year. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination.

The law requires that government representatives be part of the bargaining process in the public sector, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor could object to, and refuse to register, any agreements concluded. The law and relevant labor protections do not apply to workers covered under civil service provisions, under which employees neither have nor are considered to need collective bargaining rights. The law does not apply to foreign domestic servants, agricultural workers, NGO employees, or informal-sector workers. There are no legal protections for

self-employed workers, although they constituted a significant proportion of the total workforce. Foreign workers may join the syndicate representing their profession but may not run for elected positions, except for Palestinians who may serve as elected officials in unions.

The Baath Party dominated the GFTU, and Baath Party doctrine stipulates that its quasi-official constituent unions protect worker rights. The GFTU president was a senior member of the Baath Party, and he and his deputy could attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. In previous years the GFTU controlled most aspects of union activity, including which sectors or industries could have unions. It also had the power to disband union governing bodies. Union elections were generally free of direct GFTU interference, but successful campaigns usually required membership in the Baath Party. Because of the GFTU's close ties to the regime, the right to bargain collectively did not exist in practical terms. Although the law provides for collective bargaining in the private sector, past regime repression dissuaded most workers from exercising this right.

There was little information available on employer practices regarding antiunion discrimination. Unrest and economic decline during the year caused many workers to lose their private-sector jobs, giving employers the stronger hand in disputes.

## **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

The law does not prohibit or criminalize all forms of forced or compulsory labor, and such practices existed. The penal code does not define forced labor. The code states, "Those sentenced to forced labor will be strictly required to do work with difficulty on par with their sex, age, and may be inside or outside of the prison." The penal code allows for hard labor as a mandatory or optional sentence for numerous crimes, such as treason. Authorities may sentence convicted prisoners to hard labor, although according to the International Labor Organization, authorities seldom enforced such a sentence. There was little information available on regime efforts to enforce relevant laws during the year or whether penalties for violations were commensurate with those for analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

Terrorist groups, including ISIS and HTS, reportedly forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited some foreigners, including migrants from Central Asia,

children, and Western women, to join them. Thousands of Yezidi women and girl captives of ISIS remained missing and were presumed to have been victims of sex trafficking and subjected to domestic servitude (see section 1.g.).

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

### **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

The law provides for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace and prohibits all the worst forms of child labor, including limitations on working hours, occupational safety, and health restrictions for children. Child labor, including its worst forms, occurred in the country in both informal sectors, including begging, domestic work, and agriculture. Conflict-related work such as lookouts, spies, and informants subjected children to significant dangers of retaliation and violence. Various forces, particularly terrorist groups and regime-aligned groups, continued to recruit and use child soldiers (see section 1.g.).

The law specifies that authorities should apply “appropriate penalties” to violators; however, it was unclear which penalties were appropriate to assess whether such penalties were commensurate with those for analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping. There was little publicly available information on enforcement of the child labor law. Independent information and audits indicated the regime did not make significant efforts to enforce laws that prohibit or eliminate child labor. Organized begging rings continued to subject children displaced within the country to forced labor. Restrictions on child labor do not apply to those who work in family businesses and do not receive a salary.

The minimum age for most types of nonagricultural labor is 15 or the completion of elementary schooling, whichever occurs first, and the minimum age for employment in industries with heavy work is 17. Parental permission is required for children younger than 16 to work. Children younger than 18 may work no more than six hours a day and may not work overtime or during night shifts, weekends, or on official holidays.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

#### **d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation**

Although the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Labor and nationality laws discriminate against women. The labor law prohibits women from working during certain hours and does not allow women to work in jobs deemed hazardous, arduous, or morally inappropriate. Additional regulations prohibit women from working in factories or several industries, including mining, agriculture, energy, and construction. While the constitution provides the “right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work,” the law does not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work. The Commission for Family Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor shared responsibility for attempting to accord equal legal rights to women. Governmental involvement in civil rights claims, including cases against sexual discrimination, was stagnant, and most claims went unanswered. Women participated in most professions, including the armed forces, although UNFPA reported that violence and lawlessness in many regions reduced women’s access to the public sphere. Various sources observed that women constituted a minority of lawyers, university professors, and other professions.

The constitution does not address discrimination based on sexual orientation, age, or HIV-positive status. Since the law criminalizes homosexuality, many persons faced discrimination due to their sexual orientation.

The law prohibits most forms of discrimination against persons with disabilities, including their access to education, employment, health services, and other state services, but the regime did not enforce these provisions effectively, and the labor law allows an employer to decrease the wages of persons with disabilities whenever their productivity is substantially reduced as attested by a medical certificate. It was unclear whether there were penalties for violations commensurate to laws related to civil rights, such as election interference. Discrimination occurred in hiring and access to worksites. The law seeks to integrate persons with disabilities into the workforce, reserving 4 percent of government jobs and 2 percent of private-sector jobs for them. Private-sector businesses are eligible for tax exemptions after hiring persons with disabilities.

Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to certain minority groups (see section 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities).

### **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

**Wage and Hour Laws:** The law provides for a national minimum wage for all sectors of the economy. The law divides the public-sector monthly minimum wage into five levels based on job type or level of education, almost all of which fell below the World Bank's poverty indicator. Benefits included compensation for meals, uniforms, and transportation. The law on minimum wage states it should rise gradually to meet the cost of living, and media reported it was raised in April. In December the regime raised civil and military salaries by 30 percent and pensions by 25 percent. The government did not effectively enforce laws related to the minimum wage and overtime. It was unclear whether penalties existed that were commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud. There is no employer liability for late payment of wages, allowances, or other social benefits. Most public-sector employees relied on bribery to supplement their income. Private-sector companies usually paid much higher wages, with lower-end wage rates semiofficially set by the regime and employer organizations. Many workers in the public and private sectors took additional manual jobs or relied on their extended families to support them.

The public-sector workweek is 35 hours, and the standard private-sector workweek is 40 hours, excluding meals and rest breaks. Hours of work may be increased or decreased based on the industry and associated health hazards. The law provides for at least one meal or rest break totaling no less than one hour per day.

Employers must schedule hours of work and rest such that workers do not work more than five consecutive hours or 10 hours per day in total. Employers must provide premium pay for overtime work. There was little information available on regime efforts to enforce relevant laws during the year or whether penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, such as fraud.

**Occupational Safety and Health:** The government did not effectively enforce occupational safety and health laws or standards as set by the regime. It was unclear whether penalties for violations of the law were commensurate with those

for crimes such as negligence or were appropriate for the main industries in the country, which included petroleum and agriculture or food processing. Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remains with experts and not the worker based on hazards inherent to the nature of work. The law does not protect workers who remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety from losing their employment. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for enforcing the minimum wage and other regulations pertaining to acceptable conditions of work. The Ministries of Health and of Social Affairs and Labor designated officials to inspect worksites for compliance with health and safety standards. Workers could lodge complaints regarding health and safety conditions with special committees established to adjudicate such cases. There was little information on regime enforcement of labor law or working conditions during the year. There were no health and safety inspections reported, and even previous routine inspections of tourist facilities, such as hotels and major restaurants, no longer occurred. Enforcement of labor law was lax in both rural and urban areas, since many inspector positions were vacant due to the conflict, and their number was insufficient to cover more than 10,000 workplaces.

Before the conflict began, 13 percent of women participated in the formal labor force, compared with 73 percent of men. During the year the unemployment rate for both men and women remained above 50 percent, with millions unable to participate in the workforce due to continued violence and insecurity. During the year UNFPA reported that local female employment participation increased in areas such as Damascus, Raqqa, and Daraa, as men were detained or killed.

**Informal Sector:** Foreign workers, especially domestic servants, were vulnerable to exploitative conditions. For example the law does not legally entitle foreign female domestic workers to the same wages as Syrian domestic workers. The law does not explicitly grant refugees, except for Palestinians, the right to work. While the regime rarely granted non-Palestinian refugees a work permit, many refugees found work in the informal sector as guards, construction workers, or street vendors and in other manual jobs. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor oversees employment agencies responsible for providing safe working conditions for migrant domestic workers, but the scope of oversight was unknown. Wage and hour regulations, as well as occupational health and safety rules, do not apply to

migrant workers, rendering them more vulnerable to abuse.

The continued unrest resulted in the large-scale voluntary departure of foreign workers as demand for services significantly declined, but violence and lawlessness impeded some foreign workers from leaving the country.