

# Syrian Network for Human Rights

## -Working Methodology-

**SNHR**

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

### - Faith -

SNHR believes that the main goal in documenting the human rights violations in Syria is to preserve victims' rights and to hold the perpetrators of crimes against them accountable for the sake of attaining justice and to deter anyone considering perpetrating similar acts, as well as to support the path of transitional justice, honor the victims, and contribute to the political and social advocacy process. Moreover, SNHR believes that all of these goals represent a way to challenge the policies of impunity that have flourished for decades in Syria, which have intensified the cycle of violence and oppression and impeded the establishment of a new government founded on the values of justice, equality, and democracy.

### - Clarity and Commitment -

The SNHR team is committed to ensuring that survivors, eyewitnesses, and victims' families and friends are fully informed about SNHR's work and the methodology we use, and of the purpose of their testimonies, and their right to conceal their identities and to be reassured that the information they provide will not be made publicly available in case they fear that doing so might endanger their own lives and freedom. SNHR possesses an exhaustive archive of eyewitnesses' names, contact information, and testimonies as well as the pictures and videos included in all our reports and researches. We incorporate high-level security measure to maintain information security.

### - Credibility and Expansion -

Since the establishment of SNHR in June 2011, all of its members, who are spread across Syria, have worked to create and ensure trust and cooperation within their local communities in order to document the increasing violations of human rights through collecting as much information and details as possible on the daily incidents and on the victims, in addition to documenting testimonies from survivors, relatives of the victims, others close to them, and eyewitnesses who were present at the time of these incidents. Over years

of daily cumulative work, SNHR has formed an extensive network of contacts connecting thousands of field sources. Through our continuous documentation and cross-checking information, SNHR has been able to rely on these sources as additional references to investigate information.

### - Definitions and Classifications -

SNHR is committed throughout its work to scrupulous adherence to the definitions and classifications included in International human rights law and international humanitarian law, as well as to the definitions and classifications used by international bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross; for example, in cases lacking conclusive evidence on the identity of the victim, if there are grounds for doubt about classifying an individual as a civilian or fighter, we register him as a civilian.

As a result of the existence of several definitions as to what makes a certain incident a massacre according to the number of the victims who were killed at the same time, as well as uncertainty in terms of definition in other areas, such as whether an arrested person is considered to be forcibly disappeared according to the period of time that passed without any documented information about them; SNHR adopted the following definitions in our work:

Massacre: any incident in which at least five peaceful individuals are killed.

Enforced Disappearance: A case in which 20 days have passed since the arrest of a certain individual without any documented information being revealed regarding his or her fate by the party that arrested him/her.

#### Other definitions

Men: Term used to refer to any adult male aged 18 years or over.

Women: Term used to refer to any adult female aged 18 years or over.

Children: Term used to refer to male and female juveniles aged under 18. These are divided into male children and female children.

Elder: Term used to refer to any individual of either sex aged 60 years or over.

Infant: Any infant from newborn up to two years of age.

Females: Term used to refer to both adult females (women), who are aged over 18, and female children aged under 18.

Males: Term used to refer to both adult males (men), who are over 18, and male children, aged under 18.



Citizen journalist: Term used to refer to all individuals who have played an important role in reporting and disseminating news. This is not necessarily a neutral person, as is supposed to be the case of a journalist in normal circumstances. However, when an individual takes up arms and participates directly in offensive combat operations, he or she is no longer categorized as a citizen journalist; this categorization can be restored, however, if the individual abstains completely from military action.

Media workers: This category includes journalists, citizen journalists, and other workers in the media field, all of whom play an important role in the reporting and disseminating news, as well as students of communications faculties. Again, when anyone classified as belonging within this category takes up arms and participates directly in offensive combat operations, they are no longer categorized as media workers; however, this categorization can be restored once they abstain completely from military action.

Medical personnel: This category includes all personnel working in the medical field, including doctors, nurses, paramedics, pharmacists, phlebotomists and other experts, and administrative staff, as well as those working in the operation and transport of medical supplies, and students of medicine studying at university or medical institutes. Again, inclusion in this category is suspended if any of these individuals take up arms and participate directly in offensive combat operations, but is restored once the individuals abstain completely from military action.

Fighter: This category includes any individual who takes up arms and engages in combat activities as defined by international humanitarian law. When we encounter documentation of a shelling incident in which civilians and military operatives are killed, we refer to any victims whose status is uncertain as “an individual” until their status can be correctly defined later.

Timing: We use the 24-hour clock in recording the times of incidents, and use the local time for the area where the incident took place to record the times of the incidents.

Division of areas of control: As a result of combat operations between multiple parties of the Syrian conflict taking place across the country, the various parties’ control of areas is subject to constant fluctuation and change. Since some reports and studies require lengthy periods of research, verification and analysis to ensure accurate documentation, the identity of the forces that are in control of a given area at the time of these report’s release might be different from those forces who were controlling the area at the time of the incidents covered in these reports. Therefore, SNHR always prioritizes the dates on which the violations in question took place.



## - Classification of the Violation-Committing Parties -

As a human rights organization that is independent from all parties to the conflict, SNHR is not involved in subjective analysis or justification of attacks, or in speculation on reactions or motives, focusing instead solely on the violations that result from these attacks or those which result from retaliatory counter-attacks.

At the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Syrian regime was the sole party responsible for perpetrating violations of human rights in Syria. According to all the statistics, the regime remains by far the largest perpetrator of violations. However, as the situation deteriorated, various groups emerged on the Syrian scene, committing multiple violations; many of these groups have worked under various and changeable labels. One common goal unites these groups or their actions, however; they are directed to serve the interest of a certain side. Thus, SNHR distinguishes parties who commit violations in Syria on the basis of their objective, allegiance, overwhelmingly distinctive traits, and the way in which they operate. After extensive work to identify the main parties responsible for these violations, with many similar groups being derivatives or offshoots of those main parties, the outcome is as follows: The first party: Government Forces: includes the Syrian government's army, security forces, local militias, and foreign militias who are mainly of a Shiite sectarian nature. These violations began since the first day of the popular uprising for democracy in 2011.

The second party: Democratic Union Party Forces; this is a branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party and its allied forces. These forces were never previously distinguishable from the government forces until 2012 when we began to distinguish between the two parties. At the beginning of 2014, the party formed what was called the "Self-Management" division, whose primary unit is the Democratic Union Party Forces, divided between the "People's Protection Units" and "Al Asayesh Forces". From the end of 2015, these forces united to form the "Syrian Democratic Forces", incorporating a largely symbolic presence of other components of Syrian society.

The third party: Syrian Opposition Forces; This includes all "Armed Opposition Factions", the "Free Syrian Army", and "Non-Extremist Islamist Factions", who began their operations in August 2011 sporadically before expanding gradually up until March 2012, when the International Committee of the Red Cross declared that the conflict in Syria is a non-international armed conflict.



The fourth party: Extremist Islamist Groups: This includes “Al Nusra Front” which is a faction of Al Qaeda Organization in Syria whose establishment was announced in January 2012. This category also includes the so called “Islamic State” organization – ISIS—whose establishment was announced in April 2013 and “Jund Al Aqsa”, along with anyone who pledged allegiance to these groups.

The fifth party: International Coalition Forces, led by the United States of America: This is a coalition of a group of countries led by the USA, who share the goal of fighting the Islamic State Organization – ISIS. This group commenced its operations in Syria in September 2014

The sixth party: Russian Forces: official armed forces affiliated to the Russian Federation, which formally declared its entrance into Syria in September 2015.

The seventh party: This category includes victims killed in bombings and shootings whose source we’ve been unable to definitely identify, as well as fatal landmine explosions whose perpetrators are yet to be identified, incidents of drowning, and killings by Jordanian, Lebanese, and Turkish forces.

It should be emphasized that, in the context of SNHR’s work, terms used, such as “Islamist”, “Shiite”, “Kurdish”, etc. have no significance beyond factual definition of the parties involved in incidents, being solely used in defining the common features of a number of armed groups who share similar goals, with these definitions based on what it is widely known, and used by many parties.

### **- Documentation and Classification of Victims -**

SNHR’s Victim documentation department works constantly to document incidents of violation, using a shift system to ensure coverage throughout the course of the day; this department receives information about victims of an incident through members of the Network, volunteers, and a network of sources within the Syrian community. Consequently, the team communicates with survivors and with victims’ relatives, friends and other associates to obtain their testimonies about incidents and cross-checks all information received from several sources in order to accurately register the victims. At the end of each working day the members of this department check the lists of the victims documented that day before archiving the names that have been verified using an archiving software. The department personnel then categorize the victims according to each one’s gender, age, governorate of origin, place of death, cause of death and method of killing used, perpetrator, type of weapon or munition used, and other detailed information, which can be more or less detailed depending on the circumstances surrounding each incident, as well as archiving an image of each victim.



When we distribute the total death toll of victims according to governorates, we try to highlight the loss of each governorate's residents. For this reason, in documenting each case, we categorize the victims according to their place of birth or residence, not according to where they were killed. This methodology is used only in cataloguing the total toll, while in documenting the victims of the incidents individually, the place where the violation took place is the one noted.

### **SNHR classifies the victims that are documented according to the following:**

- o Civilian victims: these are the victims who are killed by any one of the seven parties listed above who are involved in perpetrating violations in Syria.
- o Military victims from armed opposition: these are the victims who were affiliated to an armed opposition side. The likelihood of documenting military victims from the armed opposition is small, considering the difficulties faced by the documentation team in obtaining accurate information from the battlefronts and in the armed opposition forces' secrecy surrounding fatalities amongst their forces, as well as the understandable reluctance of the victims' families and friends to reveal or publish any information about their demise.

Similarly, SNHR is unable to accurately document victims from amongst the government forces (the Syrian army, the security forces, local militias, and affiliated foreign militias), victims of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, and victims of Extremist Islamist factions. The problems with documenting these victims are primarily concerned with the absence of any clear methodology that can be followed for documentation in light of these parties' position with respect to human rights organizations, who are deemed hostile, untrusted, and unwelcome parties by all these groups. Additionally, official sources are extremely secretive about this kind of information, as are these victims' families and friends, while Network members face obvious difficulties in reaching the battlefronts to catalogue the death toll.

SNHR provides [a special form](#) available to the public that can be used to document the names and details of any victim, so that the victim team can follow up the information provided and verify it, before adding it to the database.

### **- Documentation of Detainees -**

SNHR's Detainees department works on a daily basis to catalogue and follow up on incidents of arrest and detention. This department receives information about detainees through SNHR members and volunteers, as well as through its network of sources within the Syrian community. After receiving information department personnel work to communicate with witnesses who saw the arrest incident take place to record their testimonies. Department



staff also communicate with the families, friends and other associates of the detainees in question to document personal details about each detainee or any information related to the arrest incident, the party responsible, the place of detention and any other available information. This data is then registered on the database after a stringent cross-checking process. The detainees department also constantly works to pursue any new leads or possible new information about each detainee, the place of detention, and his or her current conditions via reports from survivors of detention, detainees' families and those who are close to them, as well as meeting with survivors of regime detention and documenting their testimonies about the circumstances and experience of their detention, along with those who they saw within the detention centers. The detainees department constantly updates the database of detainees who were released as and when information becomes available.

SNHR continues to encounter massive challenges in documenting the daily detentions which have been constant since 2011. The most prominent of these challenges are the concerns and anxiety of the families and friends of the detainees who fear possible repercussions for the detainees and for other family members from publicizing any information about their loved ones, particularly in the case of female detainees. Instead, in most cases, the detainees' families feel they have no choice but to communicate and negotiate with the party who carried out the detention; in most cases, this is the Syrian government's forces, who routinely blackmail detainees' families, forcing them to pay exorbitant sums of money, sometimes amounting to tens of thousands of dollars in an effort to secure a detainee's release.

In addition to the challenges faced by SNHR's team in documenting the detainees, large segments of the Syrian society are fully convinced of the uselessness of cooperation with human rights' bodies in any effort to free their loved ones; this skepticism is the result of the failure of any of the human rights organizations and of the international community, the United Nations and all of its organs to put any pressure on the Syrian authorities to release even one detainee (including prisoners whose sentences have ended), including prisoners of conscience. Most of those released by the regime were released as part of exchange deals with the armed opposition, or through paying bribes or ransoms to influential officials.

Another difficulty facing the SNHR is that, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the Syrian government adamantly denies carrying out any abductions or detentions. In all of the many interviews we have conducted with thousands of prisoners since 2011, we have never heard of any of the regime functionaries carrying out arrests providing any arrest warrant or giving any cause for detention. Most of the arrests are made either through peremptorily detaining individuals at checkpoints in the street or by means of violent raids conducted without any warning in which regime personnel break down the doors of the





detainees' homes before dragging them out. It is apparent that government forces use these methods in order not to leave any evidence that could be used to hold the regime to account for these arrests and the torture, physical violence, extrajudicial killing, and other violations that follow.

The arrest figures which SNHR has been able to document on its database do not include detainees from criminal backgrounds; it is also apparent that the number of arrests documented is far smaller than the actual number of detainees imprisoned by the regime, with SNHR unable to access information about most detentions in light of the severe challenges we encounter. In registering and cataloguing the arrests and detainee details on our database, SNHR documents cases and incidents of detention according to the location where the incident of detention or arrest took place.

SNHR also notes in all of its reports that the Syrian regime has stopped supplying any evidence to the families of detainees via official notification of their loved ones' deaths in regime detention centers; this admission by the regime of these detainees' deaths was itself only a recent development since mid-2018 when the regime began officially revealing that a number of the forcibly disappeared individuals detained previously had died; in most cases, prior to these notifications, the regime had denied any knowledge of these detainees whereabouts. Those revelations were made by the way of death notices published at civil registration offices. Even in these cases, the Syrian regime has failed to provide the bereaved families with any hard evidence proving that their loved ones are dead aside from brusque phone calls in some cases or a certificate from civil registration offices. As such, the Syrian regime hasn't conclusively revealed the fate of the disappeared; consequently, SNHR stresses that the status and the crime of enforced disappearance in these case remains unchanged, despite these notifications, and that this status will continue so long as the person in question remains physically missing, whether dead or alive. In accordance with the international law, we shall continue to classify these individuals as being forcibly disappeared persons, with the primary suspect accused in connection with their disappearance being the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime has perpetrated a string of crimes and indignities, from warrantless arrests and denying detainees their right to an attorney, to extremely brutal conditions of detention in which detainees are subjected to torture, with 85 percent of the detentions documented going on to be registered as cases of forcible disappeared; in those cases, where detainees' families are informed of their loved ones' demise, they receive no body or any remains for burial.



As well as allowing anyone to view details about any detainees through using the detainees [search engine](#) on its official web site, SNHR also provides a special form on the site that family members or other individuals concerned for detained family members or friends can submit by providing a name and information on a detainee so that the detainees department can follow up the information provided, ensure its validity and then upload it to the database.

### - Documenting Vital Facilities -

SNHR works on a daily basis to document the targeting of those vital civilian facilities which are still operational. These facilities are classified by function, such as places of worship including mosques and churches; vital medical facilities such as medical centers, ambulances; vital educational facilities such as schools and universities; vital cultural facilities such as archeological areas and museums; communal facilities such as gardens, markets, and playgrounds; facilities bearing International Humanitarian Insignia such as centers and vehicles of Red Crescent and Red Cross; infrastructure facilities such as power stations, as well as civil defense centers and factories, and finally diplomatic representatives and refugee camps.

#### **Details of classifying vital facilities:**

##### Places of Worship:

- Mosques
- Churches and monasteries

##### Vital Educational Facilities:

- Schools
- Universities
- Educational Institutions
- Nurseries
- University Campuses
- Orphanages

##### Vital Medical Facilities:

- Medical facilities (Hospitals, dispensaries, medical clinics, and field hospitals etc.)
- Ambulances

##### Vital Cultural Facilities:

- Archeological sites (citadels, forts, ancient cemeteries, temples, amphitheatres and theatres etc.)
- Museums



### Communal Facilities:

- Gardens
- Markets
- Malls and commercial centers
- Hotels
- Elderly home care
- Playgrounds and stadiums

### International Humanitarian Insignia

- International Red Cross (facilities and vehicles)
- Red Crescent (facilities and vehicles)

### Infrastructure:

- Power stations and energy facilities (Power grids, electricity generation and transmission stations, fuel stations, oil wells and stations, gas wells and stations, oil and gas pipelines etc.)
- Civil Defense centers (facilities and vehicles)
- Fire stations (facilities and vehicles)
- Water facilities and related resources (water pipes, wells, water pumping and treatment stations, irrigation canals, dams, water tanks, sewage treatment plants, sewage systems).
- Official Headquarters (Institutions and ministries etc.)
- Agricultural lands
- Means of transport (bridges, water crossings, highways, railroads, garages, car parks, bus and railway stations, civil airports, border crossings and associated offices etc.)
- Bakeries
- Banks
- Domestic animal farms
- Grain silos
- Industrial facilities (industrial factories, facilities and cities etc.)
- International headquarters and organizations' offices and other assets.
- Pharmacies

Diplomatic missions (embassies, consulates, foreign representatives, diplomatic centers and offices)

### Refugee Camps



## - Challenges -

The documentation of human rights violations in Syria is one of the most difficult and complicated processes in the world in light of the extraordinary and exceptional circumstances under which the documentation process takes place; these include the deliberate sabotage and severance of communication networks, lack of internet access, lack of security, and the large number of parties responsible for violations (in some cases, it is deemed difficult to determine the perpetrator party, so we include such incidents alongside other cases in which we couldn't identify the perpetrators). Over the last two years, the Syrian people have understandably lost faith in the documentation processes and their usefulness in exposing the criminals responsible for the violations and massive suffering inflicted on the nation and in holding these perpetrators accountable; this skepticism is wholly understandable after eight years of absolute impunity, which has even enabled some of the criminals to brag about their crimes, a feature most prominently seen among the Syrian regime's supporters. In this context, all of the incidents documented by the SNHR are subjected to intensive analysis review and continuing investigations. In cases in which we find additional information, or more accurate information, or identify errors, we immediately update the SNHR' database.

## - Not Everything We Document is Crimes -

In the course of documenting various incidents, SNHR seeks to collect evidence and information in order to determine the true facts in every case, and to establish the appropriate legal description for the incident when it is included in reports, research documents, and other studies released by SNHR, despite the differences in the number and types of available evidence and information from one incident to another in light of the various challenges SNHR encounters in the course of documentation.

Since SNHR continuously monitors and registers any newly discovered items of evidence or information concerning the incidents already documented, it is possible for such new data to lead to a change in the legal classification of the incident in light of these revelations. Therefore, SNHR works constantly to update its database to reflect any new evidence and information in its archives, adjusting the legal description for any incident where appropriate according to new data.

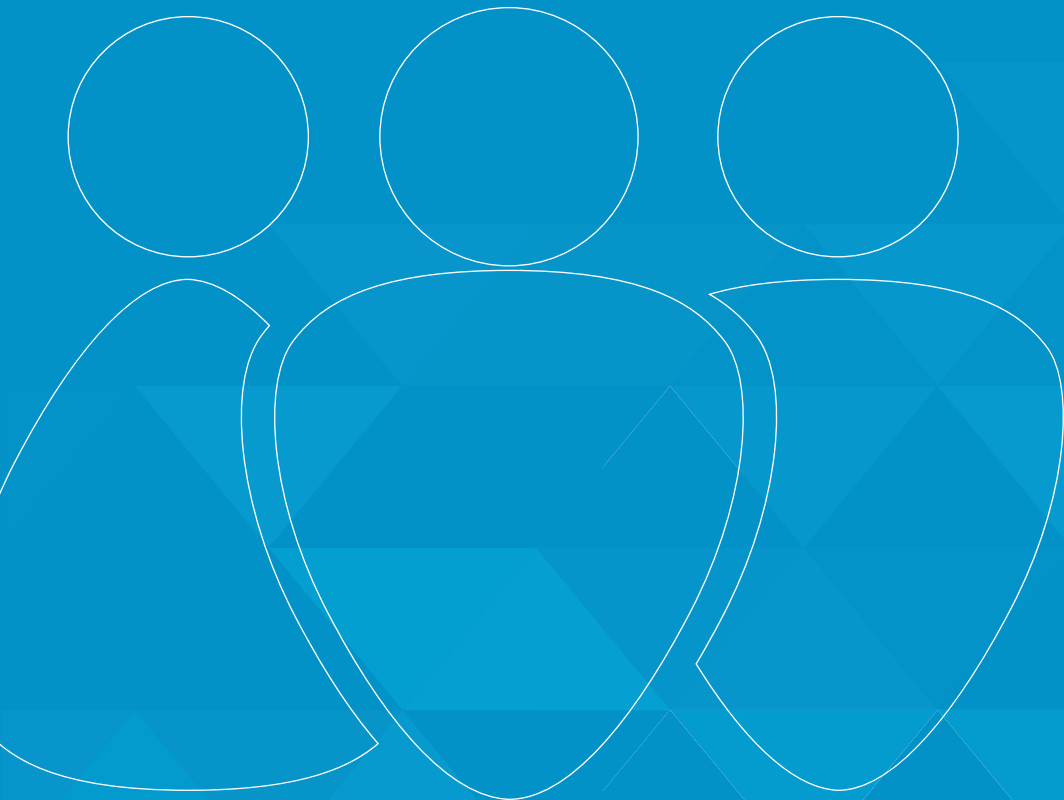
It should also be noted, however, that while many incidents documented don't formally constitute violations of international humanitarian law, they do involve some degree of collateral damage, with SNHR recording and archiving these incidents in order to maintain a source of historical knowledge and to preserve these incidents as a national record for the future. That said, however, these incidents don't necessarily formally qualify as crimes.



## - Reality is Greater -

All of the statistics and reports released by SNHR and other human rights organizations, as well as those issued by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, reflect only the bare minimum of the actual numbers of victims, detainees, injuries, and destruction. These records show what SNHR is able to document in light of the constant and severe challenges posed by proscriptions and threats, and of pursuit and targeting of human rights organizations and their personnel, as well as reflecting our limited material means. Due to the staggering scale and magnitude of the crisis in Syria, the documentation of the human rights violations and crimes perpetrated there will continue for decades to come.





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