

Syrian Network for Human Rights

-Work Methodology-

**SNHR**

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

The Syrian Network for Human Rights, founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, non-profit independent organization that is a primary source for the United Nations on all death toll-related statistics in Syria



## Faith

SNHR believes that the main goal for documenting the violations in Syria is to preserve the victims' rights and hold the criminals accountable for the sake of fulfilling justice in addition to deter anyone who is thinking of perpetrating similar acts, support the path of transitional justice, memorialize the victims, and contribute to the political and social advocacy process. Moreover, SNHR believes that all of these goals support the fight against impunity policies that manifested for decades in Syria, which furthered the cycle of violence and oppression and impeded the establishment of a new regime on the basis of justice, equality, and democracy.

## Clarity and Commitment

SNHR teams makes sure to inform the survivors, eyewitnesses, and victims' families and friends about the work methodology we follow at SNHR and the purpose of their testimonies, and about their right to conceal their identity and the right to keep the information they provided away from public knowledge in case they believed that by doing so, they might put them at risk. SNHR possesses an entire archive of eyewitnesses' names, contact information, and their testimonies as well as the pictures and videos that were included in our reports. 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 all over Syria, have worked on creating trust and cooperation with their local communities for the sake of documenting the increasing violations of human rights through collecting as much information and details on the daily incidents and victims as possible in addition to documenting testimonies from survivors, relatives of the victims, those who are close to them and eyewitnesses who were present at the time of the incident. Over years of daily cumulative work, a wide web of relationships connecting thousands of sources has been formed. SNHR was able, through the continuous documentation, to rely on many of them as an additional reference to investigate information.



## Definitions and Classifications

SNHR is committed throughout its work to the definitions and classifications included in the International human rights law and the international humanitarian law, as well as the definitions and classifications used by international bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, which says, for example, (in case of the lack of a conclusive evidence on the identity of the victim, and if there was doubt about his classification -fighter or warrior-, 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 if the arrested is considered a forcibly-disappeared according to the period of time that passed without any documented information about them; SNHR adopted, through its work, the following definitions:

**The Massacre:** is an incident in which at least five peaceful people are killed all at once.

**Enforced Disappearance:** is a case in which a whole month has passed since the arrest of a certain person without any documented information being revealed regarding his fate by the party that arrested him.

### Other definitions

**Men:** any adult male who is 18 years of age or older

**Women:** any adult female who is 18 years of age or older

**Children:** This term includes male and female children who are less than 18 years of age. They are divided into male children and female children.

**Elder:** any individual who is over 60 years of age. Both sexes.

**Infant:** anyone whose age is less than two years. Both sexes

**Females:** divided into adult females (women), who are over 18 years of age, and female children who are younger than 18 years of age.

**Males:** divided into two adult males (men), who are over 18 years of age, and male children, who are younger than 18 years of age.

**Fighter:** anyone who bears arms and gets engaged in combat activities as it is stated in the international humanitarian law. When we encounter a shelling incident wherein civilians and military men are killed, we call a victim “an individual” where they are to be classified later.

**Timing:** we follow the 24-hour clock in recording the time of incidents.



## Classification of the Violation-Committing Parties

In the beginning, The Syrian regime was the only party who perpetrated violations of human rights in Syria. According to all the statistics, the regime is still the largest perpetrator of violations. However, as the situation aggravated, different groups have emerged in the Syrian scene and committed multiple violations; these groups worked under various and changeable labels. However, a common goal encompasses these groups or their actions are directed in the interest of a certain side. Thus, SNHR distinguishes parties who commit violations in Syria on the basis of their goal, allegiance, overwhelmingly distinctive traits, and the way they operate. After extensive work to identify the main parties responsible for these violations, where many similar groups are derivatives of those main parties, the outcome was as follows:

- **The first party:** Government Forces: includes the government Syrian army, security forces, local militias, and foreign militias who are mainly of Shiite beliefs. The violations started since the first day of the popular protests in 2011.
- **The second party:** Democratic Union Party Forces, a branch of Kurdistan Workers Party and its allied forces. These forces were never distinguishable from the government forces until 2012 when we started to distinguish between the two parties. At the beginning of 2014, the party formed what was called «Self-Management», its main pillar is the Democratic Union Party Forces and it is: «People's Protection Units» and «Al Asayesh Forces»; then these forces formed by the end of 2015 what was called «Democratic Syrian Forces» along with some components of the Syrian Society.
- **The third party:** Syrian Opposition Forces includes all «Armed Opposition Factions», «The Free Army», and «Non-Extremist Islamic Factions»; started their work in August 2011 sporadically then expanded gradually 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 Islamic Groups: includes «Al Nussra Front» which is a part of Al Qaeda Organization in Syria whose establishment was announced in January 2012. In addition to the «Islamic State Organization – ISIS—whose establishment was announced in April 2013 and «Jund Al Aqsa» and anyone who pledged allegiance to them.



- **The fifth party:** International Coalition Forces led by the United States of America: it is a coalition of a group of countries led by the United States of America with the goal of fighting the Islamic State Organization – ISIS. It commenced its strike in September 2014

- **The sixth party:** Russian Forces: official armed forces affiliated to the Russian Federation, which declared that it has entered Syria in September 2015.

- **The seventh party:** This category includes victims killed in bombing we haven't identify the groups behind them, unknown sources of bullets, landmines of unknown sources, drowning, and Jordanian, Lebanese, and Turkish forces.

It is worth mentioning that the terms used, such as the «Islamic», «Shiite», «Kurdish»..., do not carry any dissemination and its use in the context doesn't imply any expression or indication as it is for determining the common aspect for a number of armed groups that is similar to each other in their goals and based on what it is commonly known and used.

## Documentation and Classification of Victims

The Victim documentation division at SNHR works on following the violations' incidents using a shift system over the course of the day; the division receives information about victims of an incident through members of the Network, volunteers, and the network of relations inside the Syrian community. Consequently, the team communicates with survivors, relatives of the victims, and those who are close to them to obtain their testimonies about the incident and cross-check the information received from several sources in order to register the victims. At the end of each working day the members of the division check the lists of the victims before archiving the names that have been verified by using a archiving software. Then, they sort the names according to the governorate, gender, age, time, place, the method of killing, the perpetrator, the type of used weapon, and other detailed information that may increase or decrease depending on the circumstances surrounding each incident, in addition to the archiving an image of the victim.

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

- o Civilian victims: they are the victims who are killed by any party of the seven parties that are perpetrating violations in Syria.
- o Military victims from armed opposition: they are the victims who were killed and were affiliated to an armed opposition side. The likelihood of documenting military victims from the armed opposition is rather slim considering the difficulties faced by the documentation team in to get to the battlefronts and the armed opposition forces' secrecy on the fallen victims and their families and friends' abstention from revealing or publishing any information about them.



On the other hand, SNHR cannot document victims from government forces (the Syrian army, the security forces, and local militias, and the foreign militia related to it), victims of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, and victims of Extremist Islamic factions and that is due to the absence of a clear methodology that can be followed for documentation in light of these parties' position with respect to human rights organizations that are deemed a hostile, untrusted, and unwelcomed party by these groups. Additionally, official sources are extremely secretive about this kind of information which is also the case for those victims' families and friends in addition to difficulties faced by the Network members and volunteers to get to the battlefronts.

SNHR offers a [special form](#) that can be filled the names and details of a victim, so the victim team can follow-up with this information and verify it, before adding it to the database.

## Documentation of Detainees

The Detainees division in SNHR works on a daily basis on following up with the incidents of the arrests. The division gets the information about the detainees through the members and the volunteers of the network and its network of relations inside the Syrian community. Then, they work on communicating with witnesses who have seen the arrest incident to get their testimonies. In addition to communicating with the families and those who are close to them to get personal details about the detainee or about any information related to the incident, the party who committed it, the place of detention and any other available information. Then, this data is registered to the database after a cross-checking process. The detainee division continues to follow-up for any new information about the detainee, his place, and the circumstances surrounding him via survivors from detention, detainees' families and those who are close to them. In addition to meeting with the survivors of the detention and receiving their testimonies about the circumstances of their detention.

SNHR is encountering huge challenges in documenting the daily detaining that has been ongoing since 2011. The most prominent challenges among all are the fear and anxiety of the families of the detainees and their relatives to publicize any of the information about the detainee and in particular if the detainee was female. Instead, the detainees' families communicate and negotiate with the party who carried out the detention; in most case, it is the Syrian government forces, in which it starts to blackmail the families who will be obliged to pay expensive sums of money that amount to tens of thousand dollars in some cases.



In addition to the challenges faced by SNHR team in documenting the detainees, large segments of the Syrian society are fully convinced of the uselessness of cooperation with human rights' bodies in the process as a result of the failure of any of them as well as the international community and the United Nations and all of its organs to press on the Syrian authorities to release even one case (including prisoners whose sentences have ended), even prisoners of conscience. Most of the releases were part of exchange deals with the armed opposition, or through paying bribes or ransoms for influential officials.

The Syrian government denies carrying out any abductions or detentions. In all of the many interviews we conducted with thousands of prisoners since 2011, we have never heard of an arrest warrant or a cause. Most of the arrests are either through breaking doors and arresting people from their homes or at checkpoints in the streets. Seemingly, government forces follow this method in order to wipe off any evidence that might put it responsible for these arrests and the torture, physical violence, extrajudicial killing, and other violations that follow.

The arrested toll which SNHR managed to document does not include detainees of criminal backgrounds, and believes that this toll is less than the actual number of detainees as we have not been able to access information about them in light of the challenges we encounter.

SNHR notes in all of its reports that the Syrian regime has stopped delivering any hard proof to the families whom the Syrian regime contact to inform that one of their members have died inside detention centers, or as was the case in mid-2018 when the Syrian regime revealed that a number of forcibly-disappeared persons had died. Those revelations were by the way of civil registration offices. In those cases, the Syrian regime hasn't provided any families with any hard proofs proving that their relatives had died aside from a phone call or a certificate from civil registration offices. As such, the Syrian regime hasn't conclusively revealed the fate of the disappeared, and, consequently, SNHR stresses that the crime of enforced-disappearance is still existing as long as the person in question hasn't been found, dead or alive. In accordance with the international law, we are going to continue to consider those people as forcibly-disappeared persons and the main accused is the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime has perpetrated a string of crimes and indignities, from the warrantless arrest and denying the right to an attorney, to the extremely brutal detention conditions, subjecting the detainees to torture, and then turning 85% of them into forcibly-disappeared, before informing the families without delivering a dead body or remains or revealing a burial.





SNHR allows anyone to view details about any detainees through using the detainees [search engine](#) on the official web site of the Network, it also offers a special form that can be filled by the name and information of the detainee so the division of detainees can follow with the information provided and ensures their validity and then upload it to the database.

## Documenting Vital Facilities

SNHR works on a daily basis on [documenting](#) the targeting of vital facilities. These facilities are classified into places of worship such as mosques and churches; medical facilities such as medical centers, ambulances; educational facilities such as schools and universities; cultural facilities such as archeological areas and museums; communal facilities such as gardens, markets, and playgrounds; International Humanitarian Insignia such as centers and vehicles of Red Crescent and Red Cross; infrastructures such as power stations and energy sources as well as civil defense centers and factories; diplomatic representatives and 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 such as severing communication, lack of internet access, and lack of security, and the multiple number of parties who commit violations (in some cases, it is deemed difficult to determine the perpetrator party, so we put such incidents with the cases in which we couldn't identify the perpetrator). Over the last two years, the Syrian people have lost faith in the documentation processes and their usefulness regarding exposing the criminal and holding them accountable, after seven years of impunity, which even enabled some of the criminals to brag about their crimes, which is something mostly noticeable on the Syrian regime's supporters.

In this context, all of the incidents are subjected to a review and continued investigations. In case we find additional information, or more accurate information, or mistakes, we update our database.

## Reality is Greater

All of the statistics and reports released by SNHR and other human rights organizations, as well as the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights only reflect the bare minimum of the actual figures. of victims, detainees, injuries, and destruction. This is what SNHR has been able to document in light of the ban, pursuit, and security threats, as well as our limited resources. Documenting violations of human rights and crimes in Syria will go on for decades to come.







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