



Statement

SNHR Is the Second Most Cited Source in the US Department of State's Report on the Human Rights Situation in Syria - 2020

On Tuesday, March 30, 2021, the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor released its annual report for 2020 on the human rights situation for various countries worldwide, with the Syria section of the report reaching 70 pages, and including documentation of multiple patterns of violations of international law.

The report notes that the 2020 People's Assembly elections in Syria took place in an environment of widespread regime coercion, and that many Syrians residing in opposition-held territory did not participate in the elections, confirming that many reports did not classify the elections as being free or fair in any way, but rather noted that they were clearly rigged in favor of the ruling Baath Party, with most candidates either being from the Baath Party or closely associated with it.

The report adds that the Syrian regime grants absolute powers to the security services and affiliated militias (such as the National Defense Forces and others), but possesses limited influence over foreign military or paramilitary organizations operating in the country, including the Russian armed forces, the Iranian-affiliated Hezbollah, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The report notes that Syrian regime and pro-regime forces have continued major aerial and ground offensives initiated in 2019 to recapture areas of northwest Syria, killing thousands of civilians and forcing nearly one million people to flee before a ceasefire was brokered in March 2020, which largely held through the remainder of the year.

The report also notes that military operations involving the use of heavy weapons have devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation, adding that Syrian and Russian airstrikes repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, settlements for internally displaced persons, and farms, many of which were included in UN de-confliction lists. The report further notes that there are currently 6.6 million internally displaced persons in Syria, 2.6 million of whom are children, with more than 5.5 million more Syrians registered as refugees outside the country.

The report addresses the significant patterns of violations of international human rights law that took place in Syria in 2020, foremost among which are: unlawful or arbitrary killings by the Syrian regime; forced disappearances; torture, including torture involving sexual violence; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including denial of medical care; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; persecution of prisoners of conscience; serious restrictions on free expression, including restrictions on the press; unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers; serious abuses in internal conflict, including aerial and ground attacks impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure; in addition to other types of violations of civil and political rights, including the inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections. The report affirms that the Syrian government took no steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, or punish any officials or any of those involved in committing violations or crimes, with impunity being all-pervasive and deeply embedded in the security and intelligence forces and elsewhere in the Syrian regime.

The report particularly focuses on the fact that Syrian regime-linked paramilitary groups were engaged in frequent violations, including indiscriminate killings; massacres against civilians; kidnapping and arbitrary arrest; extreme physical abuse, including sexual violence; and unlawful detentions, and that the regime-aligned militias, including Hezbollah, repeatedly launched attacks against civilians.

The report stresses that Russian forces are implicated in the deaths of civilians resulting from airstrikes characterized by the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria as indiscriminate, which resulted in the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, particularly during Russia's support of the regime's military campaign in northwest Syria, which took place between 2019 and March 2020. These indiscriminate Russian airstrikes led to widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, mainly targeting hospitals, shelters, markets, homes, and other essential civilian facilities, damaging medical supplies and equipment and shutting down vital health-care networks, and followed a well-documented pattern of attacks with serious and deleterious humanitarian and civilian impact.

The report also cites violations by other parties, in addition to the Syrian regime and its Russian ally, touching on the violations in areas controlled by the Armed Opposition factions, including killings, physical abuse and arbitrary detention.

The report emphasizes that armed terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda-linked Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, have committed a wide range of abuses, including unlawful killings and kidnappings, unlawful detention, extreme physical abuse, forced evacuations from homes based on sectarian identity, and deaths of civilians during attacks described by the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria as indiscriminate.

The report further indicates that despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, the group has continued to carry out unlawful killings, bombings, and kidnappings, sometimes targeting civilians. The report referred to the Carnegie Corporation's assessment that ISIS benefited from a security vacuum left by the reduction in the various military forces' activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report states that the Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups in northern Syria have committed human rights abuses, targeting Kurdish and Yezidi residents and other civilians, including the arbitrary arrest 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, the cutting of water to civilian populations, recruitment of child soldiers, and the desecration of religious shrines.

The report notes that elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces, that include members of the Kurdish People's Protection Units, were also engaged in human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, acts of corruption, and restrictions on freedom of assembly.

The report draws attention to a crucial factor also reported by the UN Commission of Inquiry and human rights groups, namely that the vast majority of abuses committed since 2011 have gone uninvestigated, and that perpetrators often acted with a sense of impunity.

The report highlights the Syrian regime's systematic practices in seizing its opponents' property, noting the regime's legitimization of these seizure practices against its opponents through the enactment of an arsenal of relevant laws, and cited an example of the legislation issued by the Syrian regime since 2012, which provides for the confiscation of movable and immovable property of persons convicted of terrorism, a charge commonly used by the regime against the vast majority of dissidents, political opponents and others arrested in connection with the popular uprising for democracy since it began in March 2011; the Counter-Terrorism Court is empowered to try cases in the absence of the defendant, thus providing legal cover for confiscation of property left by refugees and IDPs. The report further notes that Syrian regime forces and affiliated pro-regime militias have seized properties abandoned by refugees and IDPs forced to flee in the areas over which the regime regained control, as well as practicing widespread looting.

The report also refers to the conference held by the Syrian regime and the Russian government in Damascus last November on the return of refugees, adding that the conference did not address any of the root causes that caused persons to flee the regime or offer any actionable steps to secure the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of refugees, and was organized without input or support from any internationally recognized authority on humanitarian or refugee issues. The conference also failed to address the provision of any practical steps to secure the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees, with the report noting that the Russian government sought to use the return of Syrian refugees as a means to secure international donations for its Syria reconstruction efforts.

The report relies on several sources, most notably:

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI), and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) which was the second most cited source of data according to the quotes cited in the report, with Human Rights Watch (HRW) being the third most cited source:

COI: 71 quotes

SNHR: 55 quotes

HRW: 16 quotes

The report also relies on other sources such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), local organizations and multiple other sources, in addition to the experience and investigations of the staff of the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

We note that this is [the ninth consecutive year](#) in which [the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor has relied primarily on the Syrian Network for Human Rights](#) in its report on the human rights situation in Syria, with the report by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor being an essential reference for various bodies in the US government, as well as for many congressmen.

In October 2019, the SNHR and the Government of the United States of America signed [a Memorandum of Understanding](#) providing for the establishment of a coordination and cooperation mechanism to share information and data documented by SNHR on human rights violations in Syria and on those involved in such violations in order to participate in the investigations carried out by the Government of the United States of America into some of these violations, and to place the greatest possible number of those involved in these violations on the lists of economic and political sanctions; this will constitute a major impediment to any effort to rehabilitate the Syrian regime in all its organs, and serve as an important form of accountability that's previously been unavailable.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights stresses its willingness to contribute to all states' and international organizations' reports on the human rights situation in Syria, and will make the greatest possible effort to continue to report the ongoing violations and incidents objectively and credibly to achieve the goal of protecting civilians in Syria, holding all perpetrators accountable, and helping to start the country along the path of change towards democracy.

To read the report issued by the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, please visit [the link](#)