



HREIT

HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY INSTITUTION OF TÜRKİYE

HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY THE BASHAR AL-ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA





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LAW VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY THE BASHAR
AL-ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA**

Ankara

2025



HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY
INSTITUTION OF TÜRKİYE

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HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY INSTITUTION OF TÜRKİYE

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The activities related to the preparation of this Report were carried out by the “Commission for the Examination and Reporting of Human Rights Violations Committed by the Bashar al-Assad Regime in Syria” which was established by Decision No. 2024/1317 of the Human Rights and Equality Board of Türkiye during its meeting dated 30 December 2024 and numbered 2024/238. The report was written by the Academic Committee specified below.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	: Anadolu Agency
AD	: Anno Domini
art.	: Article
ATCA	: Alien Tort Claims Act
CAT	: Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment / Convention Against Torture
CEDAW	: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CIHL	: Customary International Humanitarian Law (a study by the ICRC)
CRC	: Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	: Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DAESH	: Al-Devlet Al-Islamiyya Fil Irak Wel Şam / Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
DIA	: Encyclopedia of Islam, Türkiye Diyanet Foundation
ECtHR	: European Court of Human Rights
ed.	: Editor
FFM	: Fact-Finding Mission
GCR2P	: Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
GDP	: Gross Domestic Product
HRC	: Human Rights Council (HRC)
HREIT	: Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye
HRW	: Human Rights Watch
ICC	: International Criminal Court
ICCPR	: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICJ	: International Court of Justice
ICMP	: International Commission on Missing Persons

ICRC	: International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	: Internally Displaced Persons
IHH	: Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief
IIIM	: UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria
IIMP	: Independent Institution on Missing Persons
IIT	: Investigation and Identification Team
JIM	: Joint Investigation Mechanism
OCHA	: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPCW	: Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
p.	: Page
PHR	: Physicians for Human Rights
RCD	: Rally Constitutional Democratic (a political party in Tunisia)
SETA	: Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research
SNHR	: Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
TAC	: Temporary Accommodation Centers
TDV	: Türkiye Diyanet Foundation
TESEV	: Türkiye Economic and Social Studies Foundation
UK	: United Kingdom
UN	: United Nations
UNHCR	: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSMIS	: United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria
US	: United States of America
WB	: World Bank

FOREWORD



Prof. Dr. Fahrettin ALTUN

President of the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye

Humanitarian crises around the world have made it necessary to establish universal human rights norms to protect human dignity. The destruction caused by wars has, in turn, made it inevitable to secure these rights at the international level.

The Paris Principles, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, define the duties and powers of national human rights institutions. In the global context, we witness that these institutions have become key actors in the protection and promotion of human rights.

As the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye, we carry out significant duties aimed at implementing universal human rights norms at the national level, ensuring the right of individuals to equal treatment, and preventing torture and ill-treatment. In this regard, we regularly monitor international developments in the field of human rights and prepare reports on various thematic areas.

All these studies, clearly demonstrate that serious violations continue to occur in various parts of the world today. Indeed, among the countries where systematic and widespread human rights violations against the civilian population take place is, undoubtedly, Syria. The events that began peacefully in 2011 turned into a civil war as a result of the attacks carried out by the Bashar al-Assad regime.

At this point, Syria has witnessed one of the greatest humanitarian crises in modern history. During this period, hundreds of thousands of innocent people have lost their lives, more than 7.5 million civilians have been displaced, and thousands of innocent civilians who were forced to leave their homes have lost their lives in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas while searching for a new home. In addition, cities, places of worship, and historical structures have been destroyed, and the country has been the scene of ruthless proxy wars.

The acts of severe violence carried out by the regime in Syria have targeted civilians who must be protected under international humanitarian law, leading to a grave humanitarian crisis.

International reports have documented findings indicating that grave violations and war crimes—such as the use of chemical weapons, arbitrary detentions, torture, sexual assaults, the bombing of civilian settlements, and attacks on healthcare facilities—have been committed in a systematic manner.

On December 8, 2024, with Damascus falling out of the regime's control, the Ba'ath Party's 61-year oppressive rule in Syria came to an end. Following the revolution, it has become imperative for international judicial mechanisms to investigate and prosecute the human rights violations committed by Bashar al-Assad and regime officials in order to ensure justice. In this context, the systematic documentation of human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the regime holds great significance.

Within the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye, a special Commission has been established to shed light on the human rights violations committed by the regime of Bashar al- Assad in Syria and to contribute to the pursuit of justice.

During the reporting process, our Commission established direct contact with public institutions, consulted with academic experts, conducted field visits to examine human rights violations, and documented the testimonies of victims.

The developments in our neighboring country, Syria, with which we share deep ties, have once again demonstrated that Türkiye's foreign policy, which prioritizes humanitarian values, stands on the right side of history.

With this report, we aim not only to document the figures but also to record the tragedies and human stories behind the destruction within the framework of international human rights and humanitarian law.

We hope that the report in question will contribute to the struggle for rights and justice in Syria, by supporting the preservation of peace, stability, and territorial integrity, as well as the process of building a democratic, pluralistic, peaceful, and prosperous country.

On this occasion, I would like to extend my gratitude to the esteemed members of the Commission, the academic experts, and all colleagues who contributed their knowledge and expertise to the preparation of this report.

Legal Basis

Article 3 of the Principles Relating to the Status of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (Paris Principles) stipulates the duties of National Human Rights Institutions as follows: *“To submit to the Government, Parliament and any other competent body, on an advisory basis either at the request of the authorities concerned or through the exercise of its power to hear a matter without higher referral, opinions, recommendations, proposals and reports on any matters concerning the promotion and protection of human rights.”*¹

Article 9, paragraphs (l) and (m), of the Law No. 6701 on the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye, published in the Official Gazette No. 29690 dated April 2016, sets out the Institution’s duties as follows: (l) *“Providing information to the public opinion, publishing special reports on matters falling under its mandate in addition to regular annual reports when deemed necessary”*; (m) *“Following and assessing international developments in areas of human rights and non-discrimination, cooperating with international organizations working in the field within the framework of relevant legislation.”*

In line with the above regulations, the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye, at its meeting No. 238/2024 of 30 December 2024, adopted Decision No. 1317/2024 to establish a Commission tasked with preparing a thematic report on human rights violations committed by the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Purpose and Scope

The popular uprisings which erupted in Tunisia and Egypt in January 2011 heralded one of the most significant turning points in modern Middle Eastern history. The inability of long-standing leaders, such as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, to withstand the will of the people, coupled with the silence of official authorities during the revolutionary process, signaled the beginning of a rapid transformation in the region. In particular, the end of Mubarak’s era in Egypt triggered a widespread awakening across the Arab world, prompting people living under similar regimes to take to the streets demanding a democratic system. Authoritarian regimes, which had been established by taking advantage


¹ UN General Assembly, Principles Relating to the Status of National Institution, Resolution A/RES/48/134, 1993, art. 3.

of the political environment of the Cold War and continued to exist largely by acknowledging the hegemony of the United States (US) following the collapse of the Soviet Union, faced an unprecedented challenge during this new period. Although numerous uprisings and act of resistances had occurred against these governments in the past, they had not been sufficient to trigger significant change. Protests, often led by a single political or ideological group, were quickly suppressed by governments with strong central authority due to their inability to mobilize mass participation. What made the 2011 uprisings distinct, powerful, and effective was that all segments of society came together around a common value, taking decisive action against oppressive regimes.

In Syria, one of the key focal points of the desire for change in the Middle East, the process unfolded in the opposite direction of expectations due to the regime's harsh crackdown on protesters and the massacres it carried out. The methods employed by the regime to preserve its own existence in the face of the people's demands for democratization resulted in to one of the greatest human tragedies in history. From March 2011 onward, hundreds of thousands of people were killed through airstrikes, chemical weapons, and torture, while millions of Syrians were forced into displacement. The open support of Russia and Iran for the Damascus regime, coupled with the failure of the United States and certain European countries to demonstrate genuine will to change the regime due to regional political balances, further deepened the suffering in the country. Exploiting the international community's inaction, the Bashar al-Assad administration showed no hesitation to destroy its own people and devastate its own country through all forms of rights and legal violations in order to secure the future of the regime.

The traditional codes of the regime in Syria provide important clues regarding the background of state-led terror that followed the uprisings. After the Ba'athist elite seized power through a coup on March 8, 1963, a radical transformation occurred in Syrian political life. This development, which eliminated the possibility of establishing a pluralistic and democratic governance in Syria, evolved into a new era as army officers from the Nusayri minority, who were members of the Ba'ath Party, quickly increased their political influence. In 1966, the Nusayri Ba'athist generals took power through an internal party coup, laying the foundations of a repressive minority rule. This process culminated in November 1970 with the establishment of one of the most powerful authoritarian regimes in the region.

Hafez al-Assad established a regime in Syria that left no room for opposition. Consolidating his power through the 1973 Constitution, Assad pursued a strict strategy, relying on a security bureaucracy predominantly composed of Nusayris, to eliminate any form of dissent or opposition to the regime. Initially targeting leftist groups that did not align with his rule, he then suppressed liberals and, finally, conservatives and religious groups, carrying out



numerous massacres during the first decade of his rule. In particular, from the second half of the 1970s onward, his systematic campaign of extermination against members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimin) resulted in the indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands of innocent people. In this context, the 1982 Hama Massacre stands out as one of the most harrowing events, illustrating the extent of the Assad regime's repression of its opponents. Even the information available regarding the fate of public officials who opposed the Hama massacre alone, following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime on December 8, provides a clear framework for understanding the scale of violations perpetrated by the regime.

Hafez al-Assad's approach of eliminating any element perceived as a threat to his one-man rule was inherited by his son and became clearly evident during the uprisings that began in 2011. The regime's army bombarded opposition-held areas with the heaviest weapons from the air and the ground, and did not hesitate to kill people indiscriminately, including through the use of chemical weapons. Alongside the massacres carried out with the support of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, numerous human rights and international law violations occurred in Syria during the period leading up to the fall of the regime on December 8, 2024. Prominent among these violations were forced displacement, deliberate starvation, seizure of property, arbitrary detention and torture, as well as harassment and sexual assault. The Syrian crisis, representing one of the largest state-led repression and massacre strategies of the modern era, serves as an example of how a ruler and his inner circle can trample moral, humanitarian, and legal values in order to maintain a one-man regime.

The developments following 2011, which reflect the history and internal codes of the Assad regime, are events that require detailed examination within the framework of human rights and international law, and are crucial for understanding the forms of victimization caused by the regime. In this regard, the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye (HREIT) seeks to fulfill a vital mission in exposing the human rights violations in Syria and documenting them for the historical record. This report, which attempts to classify and substantiate the human rights violations that occurred in Syria under the Bashar al-Assad regime during the early uprisings and the subsequent civil war, is also a reflection of Türkiye's principled stance on the Syrian issue. From the very first day of the events, Türkiye actively defended the expression of the people's will and consistently engaged in efforts in the international arena to put an end to the regime's inhumane attacks and practices. While opening its doors and providing support to the large number of Syrians who were displaced or faced the threat of death, Türkiye also undertook an active mission

to cleanse the country of terrorist organizations and restore stability. With the fall of the Assad regime and the commencement of the transitional process under the leadership of Ahmed al-Shara, it has become necessary to present and substantiate to the international community the human rights violations committed by the former regime. Within this framework, HREIT has prepared this report to bear witness to this historic period in Syria, to support the honorable struggle of the Syrian people, to help alleviate their suffering, and to expose the violations carried out by the Assad regime.

The first of the report's four main sections provides a general overview of modern Syrian history and examines the dynamics that facilitated the rise of the Ba'ath Party. It then illustrates how Hafez al-Assad established his rule and how his son Bashar al-Assad subsequently took measures to preserve the regime and maintain a one-man rule. This section also outlines the impact of the uprisings in the Arab world on Syria and the reasons behind the regime's repressive policies in response to demands for democratization.

The second section of the report provides a detailed examination of human rights and humanitarian law violations in Syria. This part discusses violations against civilians, the destruction of infrastructure, the use of prohibited weapons, and enforced disappearances, with examples and from a legal perspective. Other violations against civilians, such as torture, extrajudicial killings, displacement, and obstruction of humanitarian aid, are also comprehensively presented in this section.

The third section of the report presents direct observations and testimonies to provide a clearer account, based on primary sources, of the violations in Syria. References to interviews conducted with political elites during fieldwork are cited with the individuals' names. However, in interviews with victims and witnesses, names are not used directly. Although consent was obtained prior to the interviews, names were coded to mitigate potential security risks and to prevent additional trauma arising from the situations experienced.

The final section of the report, which highlights human rights violations in Syria, focuses on the international and national accountability of the Assad regime. Within this framework, the regime's responsibility before the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the associated judicial mechanisms are discussed in detail. Additionally, this section comprehensively addresses national criminal responsibility, including universal jurisdiction, transitional justice practices, and criminal proceedings before courts in other countries. Finally, various recommendations are presented for UN member states and the Syrian administration.

Methodology and Limitations

While utmost care was taken during the writing process to ensure that the report is grounded in a strong academic and legal framework, three field visits were also conducted, providing a significant advantage in accessing primary sources.

Within this scope, the first field study was conducted in Gaziantep on January 20-21, 2025. As part of the visit, meetings were held with representatives of the Civil Law Association (Association of Prisoners and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison), and the testimonies of victims residing in the city regarding the violations were heard.

Between February 5 and 7, 2025, visits were conducted with a focus on Aleppo and Idlib. Within this framework, on February 5, 2025, our delegation visited three informal camps and two formal camps in Azaz. During these visits, observations were made within the camps, and interviews were conducted with forcibly displaced individuals.

On February 6, 2025, under the guidance of Aleppo Chief Prosecutor Juma Hussein al-Ahmed, a visit was made to the Han Asel mass grave in Aleppo, where an estimated 16,000 people are believed to be buried. During the visit, examinations were carried out at the site, and photographs were taken.

On February 7, 2025, our delegation conducted visits to Han Shaykhun and Maaret al-Numan in Idlib, as well as to Hraytan in Aleppo. During these visits, the destruction caused by the regime was photographed, and meetings were held with victims and local officials.

During the visits, meetings were also held with local administrators and political elites. Within this scope, on February 5, 2025, a meeting took place in Azaz, Aleppo, with Ahmet Zeydan, the former Police Chief of Azaz. During this meeting, information was provided about our Institution and the ongoing report, and Ahmet Zeydan's knowledge was consulted regarding the human rights violations caused by the Assad regime in the region.

On the same day, a meeting was also held in Azaz, Aleppo, with Muhammed Hamdan Yusuf, the Chair of the Azaz Local Council. During the meeting, information was provided about our Institution and the report in progress.





As part of the report preparations, information was obtained regarding the human rights violations committed by the Assad regime in the region and the activities of the Council.

On February 6, 2025, a visit was paid to Ahmet Abdulrahman Mujiri al-Muhammed, Head of the Aleppo Court. During the visit, information was obtained regarding individuals who had been subjected to torture, enforced disappearances, and confiscation of property by the Assad regime, and it was shared that more comprehensive studies would be conducted in the future to investigate these human rights violations.

On February 6, 2025, our delegation also paid a visit to Hakan Cengiz, Consul General in Aleppo, and obtained information regarding the current situation in the city.

Finally, a field visit centered in Damascus was conducted between 21 and 28 February 2025. During this visit, in addition to the capital Damascus, the governorates of Rif Dimashq, Homs, and Hama were also visited. Members of the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye, HREIT experts, and academic staff involved in the report preparation were present during the fieldwork. In order to conduct effective observations, as many locations as possible were visited, with particular attention given to symbolic sites of regime violations—most notably Sednaya Prison. Identified mass grave sites were also visited and documented.

Within this scope, on 24 February 2025, a visit was conducted to the city of Douma in Syria's Eastern Ghouta region. During the visit, examinations were carried out in Douma, which had been subjected to intense bombardments, a siege, and chemical attacks. Interviews were conducted with individuals who were among the first responders during the chemical attack, as well as with victims of the assault. In addition, information was obtained from witnesses who had observed the use of chemical weapons. The delegation also inspected the underground tunnels used by the local population during the siege. On the same day, 24 February 2025, the Damascus suburbs of Jobar and Hayyal Asel were also visited. During these visits, examinations were conducted in areas depopulated as a result of conflict and bombardments. The extensive destruction caused by the bombings in these districts was observed and documented through photographs.

On February 25, 2025, Sednaya Prison near Damascus was visited, and interviews were conducted with victims who had been held there for extended periods. During the visit, the conditions within Sednaya Prison were examined in detail, and victims described the inhumane torture methods employed by the Assad regime. Evidence of human rights violations carried out by the regime was also observed on site. Another location visited on February 25, 2025, was the Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp in Damascus. During this visit, living conditions in the camp were thoroughly assessed, and individual interviews were conducted with forcibly displaced victims.

On February 26, 2025, Al Balouna Prison in Homs was visited, and examinations were carried out. During the visit, the conditions within the prison were thoroughly examined, and meetings with officials were held to gather information about the facility. On the same day, a visit was also made to the city center of Homs. During this visit, the delegation obtained information about the affected population and the region due to conflicts and bombardments, and observed that thousands of homes had been destroyed by the Assad regime. The destruction in the city was documented through photographs, and interviews were conducted with victims affected by the bombings.

During the visits, meetings were held with senior officials and bureaucrats appointed by Syria's new administration. Within this framework, on 23 February 2025, discussions took place with Ali Keda, Minister of Interior, and Shadi al-Waisi, Minister of Justice, of the newly established Syrian government, as well as with Raid Salih, President, and Munir Mustafa, Vice President, of the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets). In addition, a meeting was held with Burhan Köroğlu, Chargé d'Affaires of Türkiye's Embassy in Damascus. During these meetings, information was provided about our Institution and the report in progress. Furthermore, as part of the report preparations, information was obtained regarding human rights violations and crimes committed by the Assad regime, the situation of forcibly displaced persons, mass graves across Syria, and the use of chemical weapons, as well as ongoing efforts for the reconstruction of the country.



*Visit of the HREIT Delegation to Burhan Köroğlu, Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy in Damascus.
Photo: HREIT, 2025.*



*Visit of the HREIT Delegation to Minister of Interior Ali Keda.
Photo: HREIT, 2025.*



*Visit of the HREIT Delegation to Minister of Justice Shadi al-Waisi.
Photo: HREIT, 2025.*



*Visit of the HREIT Delegation to Raid Salih, President of the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets).
Photo: HREIT, 2025.*

On February 24, 2025, a visit was made to Amir al-Sheikh, Governor of Rif Dimashq. During the visit, information was obtained regarding the population and areas affected by the conflicts and bombardments. It was reported that residential areas in the region had been destroyed by bombardments carried out by the Assad regime, and that remaining intact buildings had been seized by regime forces, resulting in the forced displacement of the local population.

The field studies conducted in Syria in February 2025 took place during a period when security could not be fully guaranteed. The visits were carried out in a risky environment, just two months after the revolution in December 2024. During the period of the fieldwork, the presence of armed actors operating in different regions of the country further increased security risks. In Aleppo, visits were conducted under security threats due to the continued presence of the PYD/YPG terrorist organization. Certain areas in the Homs and Hama governorates could not be accessed because of the potential security risks posed by armed supporters of the ousted Assad regime. Additionally, visits had to be completed early in the day as security risks intensified after dark. Following the completion of the fieldwork, violent clashes that began in the Latakia and Tartus governorates quickly spread to other cities, further highlighting the fragile security situation in Syria during the early period after December 8.

During the field studies, interviews were conducted with victims and government officials to collect data that would contribute to the report. These interviews were also supported by direct observations. The interviews were conducted with two main groups of individuals: victims who were directly subjected to human rights violations, and Syrian officials and bureaucrats actively working at various levels in the field of human rights in Syria.

During the interviews, issues that came to the forefront included widespread human rights violations against civilians, the use of prohibited weapons, detention, torture and ill-treatment, and enforced disappearances. In total, interviews with 30 victims provided meaningful data, highlighting how these violations caused destruction both at the individual and societal levels.





I.

THE HISTORY AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA

General Overview of Syrian History 

The Foundation and Rise of the Baath Party 

Establishment of the Assad Regime and the
Authoritarian Turn in Syria 

Popular Uprisings in the Arab World 

Uprisings, Regime Massacres, Civil War, and
Displacement in Syria 

1. THE HISTORY AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA

The geopolitical significance of the Middle East has historically attracted the attention of numerous global powers. Situated at the heart of this region, Syria stands out due to its changing political structures, the social diversity which reflects the traces of different civilizations, and the transformation of its legal system. The modern state-building process began in the early 20th century with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and continued within a framework dominated by authoritarian rule until 2011. However, a brief overview of Syrian history is useful for understanding subsequent developments.

1.1. General Overview of Syrian History

In religious sources, this geography, known as Bilād al-Shām, is believed to be the site where the great war described as al-Malḥama al-Kubrā took place.² According to religious interpretations, this battle – referred to by Western civilization as Armageddon – heralds the apocalypse. Moreover, the area where this battle is believed to take place does not include only Syria but also encompasses Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. Such beliefs naturally contributed to the region being a focus of diverse religious and sectarian interests.³

Syria became the center of the Caliphate following its conquest by the Umayyads in 634. However, when the Abbasids defeated the Umayyads in 750, the political and administrative center of gravity shifted to Baghdad. While the rivalries between the Damascus and Baghdad schools continued, the Crusades were confronted under the leadership of Saladin in 1175. After a brief Mongol invasion, the region came under the control of the Seljuks. Following the rule of the Turkmen Mamluks in Egypt and Timur's incursions, Syria became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1516.

During the Ottoman Empire, Syria was divided into provinces such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, and was administered under the empire's provincial governance system. During this period, Syrian territories developed a multicultural social structure, where various ethnic and religious groups lived together. Sunni Arabs, Shiites, Christians, Druze, and Kurds, among other groups, lived with a degree of administrative autonomy within their own internal dynamics under the traditional Ottoman *millet* system.

² Abdulkadir Şen, *The Longest Theatre of the Century: The Syrian Revolution in All Its Dimensions, 2011–2016*, 1st Edition, Yapi-Bozum Publications, Istanbul, 2016, p. 32.

³ Şen, *ibid.*, p. 33.

The aforementioned administrative autonomy was structured to accommodate religious, sectarian, and ethnic diversity, with the Ottomans refraining from interfering in the beliefs and identities of the different Syrian communities. Due to its fertile lands and agricultural production, Syria became a province that generated its own wealth and facilitated free trade. Economically, during the Ottoman period, Syria held a significant position in international trade through Mediterranean ports, and cities such as Damascus and Aleppo maintained their cultural and economic vitality as key crossroads of trade routes.

Syrians maintained their connections with major urban centers such as Damascus, Cairo, Aleppo, and Istanbul, while also holding positions within the Ottoman state hierarchy. This situation laid the groundwork for Syria to develop a more integrated relationship with the Ottoman administrative and social order. By the late 19th century, with the Ottoman Empire's centralization policies, tendencies toward modernization and centralization in Syria's social structure became increasingly evident.



A scene from the Hamidiye Bazaar in Damascus during the Ottoman period, 1900s.

Arab nationalism grew stronger as Arabs educated in France, like the Young Turks, embraced liberal intellectual movements. The elite, caught between the concepts of Ottomanism and an Arab homeland, gradually turned more firmly toward Arab nationalism following the provocations of the British and the French during World War I – in other words, they adapted to the zeitgeist of the period. Meanwhile, the idea of “Arab nationalism,” encouraged by Christian Syrians through the promotion of the Arabic language, entered a new phase after the correspondence between Sharif Hussein of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt. Considering himself worthy of the title of Caliph and seeking to appoint his sons Abdullah and Faisal as the Kings of Jordan and Syria respectively, Hussein failed to see through the schemes of the British and the French.



Damascus streets during the Ottoman Empire Period, 1905.

At the end of World War I, with the collapse of the empires, Syria entered a period in which a new political order began to take shape. Under the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, Britain and France decided to divide the Arab territories separated from the Ottoman Empire into their respective spheres of influence. According to this agreement, Syria and Lebanon were placed under French control, creating fertile ground for the emergence of Arab nationalist ideas. The society, which initially embraced linguistic nationalism⁴ and later turned toward nationalism imported from Europe, focused on Arab nationalism rather than Syrian nationalism⁵. In fact, this distinction constitutes one of the main differences between contemporary Syrian identity and the sense of “Syrianness” that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1918, following the withdrawal of the Ottoman army from the region, a provisional Arab government was established in Syria under Faisal, the son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca. However, at the 1920 San Remo Conference, the League of Nations approved French mandate rule over the territory. The French divided the administrative structure along religious

4 Philip Shukry Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945*, 1st Edition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

5 Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study in Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958*, 1st Edition, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987.

and ethnic lines, splitting Syria into six separate units.⁶ This artificial division delayed the development of a cohesive national identity in Syria. Through the agreement between Britain and France, the fate of Syria was effectively placed under French control.

The British mandate over Jordan and Palestine was conceived as part of a broader project to transport oil from Iraq and Iran to the Mediterranean and establish a direct connection with India. This policy contributed to the permanent separation between Jordan and Syria and enabled the French to detach Syria from Lebanon in favor of the Maronites, marking the beginning of a new cultural and political era that continues to have effects today. Additionally, Faisal's "heartfelt welcome" to Jewish immigration in exchange for the recognition of his kingdom laid the groundwork for the Palestinian issue, which persists to the present day. Following these developments, as in other Arab countries, identity and political composition began to take shape within nation-state borders through rhetorical claims based on so-called Arab nationalism.⁷ Before World War II, sympathy for Germany increased as a reaction to French colonialism, and after the war, the weakening of French power allowed the process of independence to begin.

Under the French mandate, the idea of independence in Syria was embraced by different segments of society, based on diverse ideological grounds, giving rise to a multidimensional national movement. The Great Syrian Revolt of 1925-1927 was recorded as a mass uprising against the mandate regime. Following the suppression of the revolt, France implemented administrative reforms but did not provide a substantial response to the demands for independence.

After World War II, with France being forced to withdraw from the region, Syria became an independent state on April 17, 1946. However, in the post-independence period, political stability could not be achieved, the military continually intervened in politics, and Syria became subject to a tradition of coups starting in 1949. Following power struggles in Damascus and polarization stemming from the Soviet Union-U.S. rivalry, the frequency of coups increased, and ethnic and sectarian diversity turned from a source of richness into a factor of competition. While a unified Syrian identity was pushed to the background, sectarian and ethnic sub-identities came to the forefront, and the dominant identity within the military sought to control the state through coups.⁸

As in other Arab states, with the spread of the idea of Arab nationalism in the 1950s as a response to colonialism, the Baath Party became the most powerful political force in Syria.⁹ With the coup of 1963, the Baath Party seized power, implementing socialist economic policies, establishing a centralized state structure, and creating a strong security apparatus.

6 Khoury, *ibid.*

7 Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, Zed Books, London, 2003.

8 Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

9 Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139207720>.

During this period, political opposition was suppressed, the state of emergency was institutionalized, and fundamental rights such as freedom of expression were severely restricted. The Baath regime completely restructured the state–society relationship within a hierarchical and repressive framework. Drawing lessons from past experiences, the Baath movement, which infused nationalism with a socialist spirit, aimed to elevate the lower classes to power but was ultimately exploited by the military elite seeking to share power through coups. With the “Corrective Movement” carried out by Hafez al-Assad in 1970, the political structure in Syria took on an even more authoritarian character.¹⁰ Assad built a system centered on Baath ideology, expanded the security apparatus, and established a surveillance network that penetrated every sphere of society.

1.2. The Foundation and Rise of the Baath Party

Baath idea is a leading movement that emerged in an environment marked by the rise of anti-colonial movements and the strengthening of Arab nationalism, leaving a profound impact on the social and political structure of the Middle East. In response to the post-Ottoman status quo under British and French control, the strong political manifestation of intellectual resistance within Arab societies gave rise to the Baath idea and facilitated its rapid spread among the educated classes. Founded in Syria in 1943 by Michel Aflaq and Salahuddin Bitar, the Baath movement began to gain traction among the educated nationalist circles in the country, with the early contributions of Zaki Arsuzi playing a significant role. The backgrounds of these key figures also reflected Syria’s demographic diversity: Aflaq came from a Christian family, Bitar was a Sunni Muslim, and Arsuzi belonged to a Nusayri family. What united them was that, after completing their university education in France, they returned to Syria, worked in the field of education, and refined Baath thought into an ideological framework that would leave a lasting mark on Syrian political history.¹¹

During the formation of the Baath Party, a key motivating factor for Michel Aflaq and Salahuddin Bitar was a new conception of identity that emerged in the late Ottoman period and continued under the French Mandate. The harmony between the politically framed Arab nationalism spreading from Egypt and the nationalism in Syria that emphasized language and culture, drew the founding figures of the Baath closer to the ideal of uniting Arabs.¹² Despite the region’s ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, Aflaq and Bitar sought to build a system based on a shared Arab identity, while grounding Baath ideology in traditional

10 Lisa Wedeen, “Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria”, *Critical Inquiry* 39, No: 4, 2013, (841-73), <https://doi.org/10.1086/671358>; Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*.

11 John F. Devlin, *The Ba’th Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976, p. 7.

12 M. Hüseyin Mercan, “Baathism in the Arab World: From a Romantic Political and Social Imagination to an Authoritarian Reality,” in *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Contemporary Muslim Thought in the Arab World*, ed. Lütfi Sunar, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities Publications, 2023, p. 66.

codes to transform it into an organic intellectual current for the Arab world. In this context, Aflaq's speech commemorating the "Arab Prophet" on April 5, 1943, marked a significant step in the Baath founders' integrative and inclusive strategy, aimed at resonating with society and avoiding legitimacy issues. The praise for Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in this speech was an important indicator of the sources that the Baath referenced in its early quest for an Arab political identity. Aflaq, by stating, "He represented all Arabs, and today all Arabs continue to represent Him," defined the Prophet as a symbol of Arab identity and emphasized that Christian Arabs, too, should understand and absolutely revere him in the formation of the new political identity.¹³

The emphasis on a single Arab identity in the formation of Baath thought not only motivated its founding figures but also inspired the idealistic segments of Syrian society. Aflaq and Bitar advocated¹⁴ for the unification of the region under a shared Arab identity that was not confined to localism and not limited by cultural or religious differences. In subsequent years, the main reason why nearly all influential leaders promoting nationalist ideas in the Arab world referenced the dream of a single Arab state stemmed from the impact of the foundational principles laid down by the Baath Party.

The perspective embraced by Aflaq positioned the Baath Party not merely as a force to organize social and political life within Syria, but as a movement with a mission to reshape the entire Arab world. In this context, Aflaq described¹⁵ the Baath as a progressive movement that would build a shared national consciousness among Arabs, conduct the struggle against colonialism, liberate the region, and establish a new order. Based on these principled objectives, the founders of the Baath, who issued the first official declaration on July 24, 1943, aimed to gain broad resonance within Syria and exert influence over the political sphere through a strong discourse. In this official statement, which contained the movement's initial messages, the general framework and ideological structure of the Baath were explained as follows:

- | "We represent the Arab spirit against materialist communism.
- | We represent the living Arab history against dead backwardness and artificial progress.
- | We represent the entire Arab nation against verbal nationalism that contradicts actions and remains limited to mere words.
- | We represent the message of Arabism against the craft of politics.
- | We represent the new Arab generation."¹⁶

13 Mishal Aflaq, *Fi Sebil'il Ba'as: el-Kitabat es-Siyasiyye el-Kamile*, Bağdad: el-Mektebe el-Vataniyye, 1987, Vol 1, pp. 141- 44.

14 Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab People*, trans. Latif Boyacı ve Hüseyin Yılmaz, İnsan Publications, İstanbul, 2014, p. 387.

15 Aflaq, *ibid.*, p. 44.

16 El-Kiyade el-Kavmiyye, Nidal Hizb el-Ba'as el-Arabi el-İştiraki 1943-1975: Dirase Dateiyye Tahliliyye Mevceze (Dimeşk: Hizb el-na'as el-Arabi el-İştiraki el-Kiyade el-Kavmiyye, 1978, p. 15.

Considering the social context of the early 1940s, when the Baath emerged as a political movement, it was not easy for its ideals to be rapidly embraced by broad segments of society. The atmosphere created by World War II, the rapid changes in regional and global political dynamics, and the emergence of alternative political formations influenced by Islamist, conservative, or liberal thought meant that, despite its claims, the Baath initially found only limited support. Officially institutionalized as a party at its first congress in April 1947, the Baath secured its place in Syrian political life, completing its transformation from a social movement into a fully-fledged political organization.¹⁷ Despite the appeal generated by the emphasis on Arab nationalism and the idea of uniting Arabs under a single identity, Aflaq's lack of charisma to consolidate society was a major reason the party received very few votes in its first elections.¹⁸ Although the party did not command significant political support in its early years, the subsequent growth of the urban, educated population, the spread of nationalist ideas among this group, and the inclusion of various social segments within Baath ranks significantly accelerated the party's march toward power in Syria.

The coups that took place in Syria in 1949 not only prevented the country's post-independence politics from stabilizing but also opened the door for the military to strengthen its hand in political and social affairs.¹⁹ In the following years, the failure of governments to deliver the expected prosperity and to establish a long-term governance model significantly enhanced the resonance of Baathist rhetoric among the public. The regional impact of the policies pursued by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser fostered a rapprochement between Baath leaders and Nasser. The support Baathist figures gave to Nasser, who boldly promoted anti-Israel policies and the unification of Arabs under a single political framework, culminated in the union of Egypt and Syria in 1958 under the name of the United Arab Republic.²⁰ Although this first radical step toward Arab unity raised expectations, the attitudes of both Egyptian and Syrian political elites during the process prevented the union from lasting. In September 1961, a coup in Syria led the country to reject Egyptian influence and withdraw from the United Arab Republic. Alongside the growing political influence of this development, the Baath Party, which had achieved high-level organization within the military, mobilized its members to fill the resulting power vacuum. A new era in Syrian politics began with the coup carried out by Baathist officers on March 8, 1963.

The coup's occurrence did not merely signify an expansion of the Baath Party's sphere of power in Syria. Notably, the visible increase in the number of Baathist Nusayri and Druze members within the military heralded a new transformation in the country's governance.

17 Devlin, *ibid.*, p. 15.

18 Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba'th 1963- 66: The Army- Party Symbiosis*, Israel Universities Press, Jerusalem, 1972 p. 8.

19 Mercan, *ibid.*, pp. 72-73

20 Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren M. MacLean, and Benjamin L. Read, *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 349.

Indeed, among the 14 officers on the military committee that carried out the March 8 coup, five were of Nusayri origin, marking one of the clearest indicators of a rupture within the Baath.²¹ The increasing influence of military members within the party and their occupation of key positions pointed toward the establishment of an authoritarian system, far removed from the pluralistic vision that had guided the Baath's founding principles.²² Moreover, the weakening of Aflaq and Bitar's positions within the party, and the diminishing consideration given to their ideas despite their status as founding ideologues, indicated an intellectual deviation within the Baath. Contrary to the path adopted by Aflaq and Bitar – who remained committed to the country's cultural codes and their conservative identity – a pronounced trend toward secularization had begun to emerge.²³

The Nusayri cadres' purging of former Baath leaders to create a new faction culminated in the 1966 intra-party coup which transferred control from the civilian wing to the generals. Led by Salah Jadid, Muhammad Umran, and Hafez al-Assad, this new phase clearly signaled a significant transformation in Syria's institutional and ideological political structure. While these new Baathist cadres initiated a restructuring of the country, they also took preemptive measures to neutralize potential threats from opposing factions within the party. Although the Nusayri faction gained the upper hand against groups supporting Aflaq and Bitar, this did not mean that the struggle for power within the party and across the country had ended. The crisis following the 1967 defeat against Israel further deepened the power struggle between Jadid and Assad.²⁴ During this nearly three-year-long contest, Jadid attempted to develop strategies to thwart Assad's moves, but the strengthening of Assad's supporters within the party and the erosion of Jadid's political charisma ultimately enabled Hafez al-Assad to seize power in November 1970 and embark on the establishment of a new order.²⁵

21 Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, trans. Semih İdiz- Aslı Falay Çalkıvık, İletişim Publishings, Istanbul, 2000, p. 65.

22 Devlin, *ibid.*, p. 281.

23 Mercan, *ibid.*, p. 75.

24 Rabinovich, *ibid.*, p. 216.

25 Muhammed Hüseyin Mercan, *Syria: Regime and Foreign Policy*, Açılım Kitap, Istanbul, 2012, p. 64.



1.3. Establishment of the Assad Regime and the Authoritarian Turn in Syria

Following independence, the coups and frequent government changes hindered the establishment of a stable administration in Syria. In a country where instability had, in a sense, become the norm, Hafez al-Assad's consolidation of power by eliminating all rivals marked a significant turning point in Syrian history. Shaken by the chaotic environment of the 1950s and the intra-Baath power struggles of the 1960s, Assad undertook radical measures to establish a strong and long-lasting system once he assumed power. To begin with, he took several steps to avoid confronting issues of legitimacy. Starting with a religious ruling "*fatwa*" affirming that the Nusayri sect was a branch of Islam, Assad began laying the foundations of a one-man regime by suppressing internal party opposition and minimizing potential threats. By forging close ties with the Sunni bourgeoisie and bringing economic elites to his side, and by appointing Nusayris to sensitive positions within the security bureaucracy, Assad sought to prevent the regime from facing any existential challenges.²⁶

The full consolidation of Assad's rule into an authoritarian structure occurred in 1973 with the enactment of the new constitution. While the constitution sought to create the impression of a political system built around the core principles of the Baath, the practical reality was quite different. To avoid a crisis stemming from ideological deviation, Assad's strategy was to demonstrate to society that the constitution was grounded in Baathist principles. Michel Aflaq had defined the founding principles of the Baath as "unity, freedom, and socialism."²⁷ These principles were cited in the preamble of the constitution to create the perception that the new regime was operating on the basis of ideological continuity. By including

26 *ibid.*, pp. 69- 71.

27 Aflaq, *ibid.*, pp. 60- 61.

articles such as “The religion of the President of the Republic is Islam” and “Islamic law is a main source of legislation,”²⁸ Assad constructed his one-man regime within a strategy that appeared compatible with Syria’s religious codes.

Hafez al-Assad gradually implemented a strong and centralized governance model during the early years of his rule with a core team composed of long-time acquaintances, close friends, and relatives.²⁹ Constantly referencing Baathist ideology, Assad leveraged the party’s institutional identity as a facilitating tool in the formation of his authoritarian regime. The statement in Article 8 of the constitution – “The Arab Socialist Baath Party is the leading party in the state and society” – clearly reflected Assad’s vision for the design of the regime. From the all-encompassing Baathist vision laid down by Aflaq and Bitar emerged a dictatorship in Syria, cloaked in subtle nationalism and a vague emphasis on social justice, leaving no space for any other political movement.³⁰

The Baath regime tightly controlled political participation and civil society, to the extent of virtually eliminating independent social structures. Rather than seeking social legitimacy, the regime built a totalitarian intelligence and police state based on fear. The widespread presence of informants and the activities of secret services fostered mutual distrust in social relations and discouraged political discussion, creating a fundamental obstacle to the reemergence of civil society structures.³¹ The Baath Party officially established and expanded a network of “popular organizations (munazzamat sha’biyya)” that controlled all social functions within the country. These organizations encompassed almost all social groups, from peasants and women to youth and athletes. Their primary function was not to represent the interests of their members but to maintain the oath of “eternal loyalty to our leader” and to serve the party’s ideology and objectives. Party membership and participation in these popular organizations increased significantly during the Baath era. By 1984, one in every eleven adults was a member of the Baath Party. This system evolved into a patronage network used to allocate various state services, from scholarship distribution to loan approvals. In decision-making processes, personal loyalty and the discretionary authority of officials, rather than ideological commitment, became the determining factors. Even relatively independent interest groups, such as trade unions, were gradually transformed into corporatist associations, serving to impose state interests “from the top down” rather than representing the interests of their members “from the bottom up.”³²

28 Dated March 13, 1973, *Dustur el-Cumhuriyye el-Arabiyye es-Suriyye* (1973 Syrian Constitution), Article 3.

29 Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, I.B.Tauris, London, 2007, pp. 8- 9.

30 Mercan, *ibid.*, p. 77.

31 Hans Günter Lohmeyer, “Syrien: Das Reich des Leviathan”, Ferhad Ibrahim and Heidi Wedel (ed.), *Problems of Civil Society in the Middle East*, (trans.) Erol Özbek, Istanbul, İletişim Publications, 1997, p. 95, 101; Köse, *ibid.*, p. 9.

32 Lohmeyer, *ibid.*, p. 95, 96, 97, 98, 99.

When the Baath Party came to power, it aimed to establish a single-party state and excluded other political forces from the political arena.³³ However, particularly during Hafez al-Assad's era, the "National Progressive Front (al-Jabha al-Taqaddumiyya al-Wataniyya)" was established in 1972 to give the political system the appearance of a multi-party framework.³⁴ This front consisted of six political parties under the leadership of the Baath Party. Although these legal parties formed a sort of coalition with the Baath, they remained entirely ineffective. Their existence primarily served to give the authoritarian regime a veneer of democracy. While a People's Assembly (Parliament) elected by the public every five years did exist, it had no ability to alter the Baath Party's absolute majority. More importantly, in practice, the parliament exercised no legislative authority and served only in an advisory capacity. Institutions of this type remained largely nonfunctional.³⁵

Even the Baath Party itself gradually lost significance. The political system became centered entirely on Assad personally. Party congresses, too, were transformed into unity and solidarity meetings where Assad's "wise policies" were unquestioningly approved, eliminating any space for political critique.³⁶

Compared to other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, this new system was designed around absolute loyalty across all institutional structures, with Hafez al-Assad using a powerful intelligence network to maintain complete control over the population. Prioritizing the survival of the regime above all else, Assad implemented a policy of severe repression and massacres to eliminate any potential threats in the political or social arena. A systematic strategy was employed to eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood, the most organized opposition to Assad's one-man rule. Throughout this period, the regime resorted to all forms of violence, including legal violations and inhumane treatment.³⁷

The policy of repression against members of the Muslim Brotherhood entered a new phase, particularly in the summer of 1980. On July 7, 1980, Law No. 49 was passed by parliament, effectively paving the way for the execution of Muslim Brotherhood members. The law, enacted to preserve Assad's one-man regime and target the Muslim Brotherhood as a perceived threat, stipulated: "Anyone belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood organization is guilty and shall be punished by death." Through this measure, Assad opened the door to a process that denied members of the Muslim Brotherhood the right to live in Syria. In the systematic strategy of massacres targeting the Muslim Brotherhood, Assad involved not only state security units but also Baath Party members, enabling the killings to be carried out through civilian participation as well. During this period, party members and supporters were armed to actively enforce repression and violence against Muslim Brotherhood members.³⁸

33 Hinnebusch, *ibid.*, p. 180.

34 Ataman, *ibid.*, p. 13; Lobbmeyer, *ibid.*, p. 95.

35 Lobbmeyer, *ibid.*, p. 95, 104; Ataman, *ibid.*, p. 13.

36 Lobbmeyer, *ibid.*, p. 95.

37 Ömer Faruk Abdullah, *The Syria File*, (trans.) Hasan Basri, Akabe Publications, Istanbul, 1985, pp. 93- 103.

38 Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p. 327.

While the violence against the Muslim Brotherhood continued, Assad simultaneously launched a smear campaign to undermine their reputation in the eyes of the public. Portraying the Muslim Brotherhood as agents of imperialism or puppets of foreign powers, he framed the organization as a threat to Syria's national security in order to maintain his authority over the population.³⁹ Unhesitant to violate law and human rights to sustain the regime, Assad, in 1982, massacred tens of thousands of innocent civilians in Hama, driven by his political ambitions and obsession with preserving his hold on power.

The nationwide repression and bloody acts carried out by Hafez al-Assad against the Muslim Brotherhood culminated in an uprising against the regime in Hama on February 2, 1982. To suppress the revolt, defense brigades and special units under the command of Assad's brother, Rifaat al-Assad, besieged the city and subjected it to heavy bombardment. Over the course of a 21-day operation, the city faced coordinated attacks by ground and air forces, resulting in thousands of deaths and extensive physical destruction. Estimates of the death toll range from 9,000 to 30,000, including children, women, and older persons.⁴⁰

During the attacks, indiscriminate bombardment was carried out against civilians, medical assistance was obstructed, and the wounded were left to die. Bodies trapped under the rubble remained unrecovered for days, burials were prohibited, and some victims were reportedly buried in mass graves, with even instances of live burials occurring. In addition, mosques and churches in the city suffered severe damage, with many places of worship being completely destroyed.

Following the events in Hama, Hafez al-Assad, leaving no room for organized opposition in Syria, became the absolute authority over society through a politics of fear. Positioned at the very center of the political system, Assad directly controlled not only the executive branch but also the legislative and judicial powers, establishing a comprehensive surveillance and control mechanism over all Syrians through the army and the *Mukhabarat* (Syrian Intelligence Service). Tolerating not even the slightest sign of opposition to his one-man regime, whether from within or outside the party, Hafez al-Assad exiled his brother Rifaat in 1984, who had commanded the military units during the Hama massacre and was perceived by him as a potential rival. Hafez al-Assad exiled his brother Rifaat in 1984, who had commanded the military units during the Hama massacre and was perceived as a potential rival.⁴¹ By consolidating his system – legitimized through Baathist ideology – with a loyal Nusayri security bureaucracy, Assad maintained the structures he had established until his death in June 2000.

39 Mercan, *ibid.*, p.74.

40 Ahmet Emin Dag, *The Tragic Story of Syria: Bilad al-Sham*, Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, 2013, pp. 112- 115.

41 Van Dam, *ibid.*, p. 173.



Images from the 1982 Hama Massacre.⁴²

42 <https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/1982-Hama-Katliam%C4%B1>

Following Hafez al-Assad, his son Bashar al-Assad assumed power in the early 2000s, and due to the profound changes in global politics at the time, he initially conveyed a message centered on openness, creating the perception that there might be relaxation, particularly in the political and economic spheres.⁴³ This development, referred to in the Western world as the “Damascus Spring,” raised expectations that the new leader might take steps toward democratization in Syria. Bashar al-Assad’s lack of a military background and his entry into politics only after being called back to the country in 1994 following his brother’s death in a traffic accident while he was pursuing medical specialization in the United Kingdom were key factors that fueled hopes for normalization and democratization in Syria. However, although Bashar expressed intentions to implement certain reforms with a younger generation of Baathists who, like him, had been educated abroad, the continued dominance of his father’s core cadres and the reluctance of the regime’s senior generals to embrace change prevented Bashar al-Assad from developing a concrete strategy for reform.⁴⁴

Bashar al-Assad, continuing the system established during his father’s rule under pressure from the hardline wing of the Baath, pursued somewhat freer steps in foreign policy but maintained the regime’s tradition of denying the opposition any space to exist within Syria. In a country where the presence of the regime was constantly reinforced through intelligence networks, extrajudicial practices continued as much as they had during Hafez al-Assad’s era. In this system, reports from Mukhabarat members were considered definitive and accurate, and the understanding that the regime’s security and interests took precedence over the safety and interests of the Syrian people was further entrenched. Indeed, following the outbreak of popular uprisings that began in Tunisia and spread across the region in early 2011, the Assad regime’s disproportionate response to peaceful demonstrations in Syria served as clear evidence that the survival of the regime remained the sole priority.

43 Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, New York: Zed Books, London, 2003, p. 31.

44 Eyal Zisser, “Bashar al-Assad: In or Out of the New World Order?”, *The Washington Quarterly* 28, Issue:3, 2005, p. 117, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0163660054026506>.

1.4. Popular Uprisings in the Arab World

The Arab uprisings refer to a wave of social movements that began in Tunisia in 2010 and quickly spread to numerous countries across the Middle East and North Africa. Shaped by demands for democracy, human rights, and political reform, these movements led to regime changes in some countries, while in others, they resulted in prolonged civil wars. Syria became one of the countries where the process produced the harshest and most destructive outcomes. The Syrian crisis was not confined to internal dynamics alone but evolved into a multidimensional conflict involving both global and regional powers. This section of the report addresses the emergence of the Arab Spring, its spread across the region through social media networks, its effects on Syria, the transformation of the crisis, and its repercussions at both global and regional levels.

The movement that began in December 2010 with the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi quickly escalated into mass protests demanding political reform, social justice, and an end to the authoritarian rule.⁴⁵ While initially perceived as an individual act, this event rapidly transformed into widespread mobilization, ultimately shaping the fate of the region – a process that can be analyzed through multiple interrelated factors. At first glance, one might simply point to a young Tunisian’s self-immolation as the catalyst for regime transformations across Arab countries. However, the Arab Spring reflects a far deeper phenomenon. At its core, the Arab Spring was rooted in political, social, and chronic economic problems.⁴⁶ In nearly all of the countries affected, long-standing authoritarian regimes suppressed the majority of the population, allowing political grievances to persist. Leaders such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya effectively dismantled democratic processes through suspended elections, violent policing, and the suppression of civil society.⁴⁷ These regimes relied on authoritarian institutions to crush opposition while enriching a narrow elite through kleptocratic networks, thereby rendering the vast majority of the population as victims of economic and social crises.⁴⁸ The absence of political pluralism manifested differently in each country: in Egypt, through prolonged states of emergency; in Syria, through curfews and restrictions on public assembly; and in Tunisia, under the single-party dominance of the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD). These measures were employed to legitimize the systematic exclusion of opposition voices.⁴⁹ In other words, while each country had its own unique historical and political dynamics, it can be said that similar policies were implemented across all Arab Spring countries.

45 Philip N. Howard and M. Hussain Muzammil, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave? Digital Media and The Arab Spring*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

46 Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, Crown Currency, 2013.

47 Jason Brownlee, Tarek E. Masoud, Andrew Reynolds, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

48 Frédéric Volpi, “Explaining (And Re- Explaining) Political Change in The Middle East During the Arab Spring: Trajectories of Democratization and of Authoritarianism in The Maghreb.”, *Democratization*, Vol: 20, No: 6, 2013, pp. 969- 990.

49 Ellen Lust, “Why Now? Micro Transitions and the Arab Uprisings.”, *Comparative Democratization*, Vol: 9, No: 3, 2011, pp. 3- 8.

Secondly, one of the most significant causes of the Arab uprisings was undoubtedly the structural economic conditions. The countries where these protests, starting in Tunisia, quickly spread had long been subjected to harsh economic conditions.⁵⁰ Over the years, unemployment rates in these countries increased, while per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates declined. As a result, unemployment gradually became chronic.⁵¹ By 2011, youth unemployment in Tunisia was around 30%, while in Egypt, the unemployment rate among young people aged 15-29 had risen to 25%.⁵² In many countries, particularly Tunisia, shortages of basic foodstuffs and commodities led to growing public discontent. Moreover, unforeseen factors such as climate change and the drought in Syria further exacerbated the situation.⁵³

Finally, as a consequence of the two major factors mentioned above, social fractures emerged as another key cause of the uprisings. Many researchers examining why these uprisings did not occur in earlier years identify social phenomena as a key explanatory factor. Among these, the most important is the frustration of the youth.⁵⁴ In many Arab countries, particularly among young people, growing disillusionment developed toward corrupt governments that failed to meet basic needs or ensure economic stability. This frustration was further intensified by rising living costs and limited access to essential services such as healthcare and education, which amplified social discontent. Additionally, because many Arab citizens lived under authoritarian regimes that suppressed opposition and restricted public participation, this disillusionment was compounded by the lack of political freedoms.⁵⁵ Consequently, Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia became a symbol of widespread social unrest, transforming into protests across the region via social media networks, driven by demands for greater social justice, equality, and political reform.

Beyond the causes and consequences of protests and popular uprisings in the Arab world, one of the most debated aspects has been the speed and impact with which the demonstrations that began in Tunisia spread to other countries in the region. Some studies suggest that, when examining the rapid dissemination and reach of these protests, what can be described as a "butterfly effect" can be observed.⁵⁶ In this context, traditional and social media platforms undoubtedly played the most significant role. The initial protest in Tunisia, sparked by Bouazizi's self-immolation, first gained traction through traditional media outlets such as Al

50 Şuay Nilhan Açıkalın and Cemal Alpgiray Bölücek, *Understanding of Arab Spring with Chaos Theory - Uprising or Revolution*, Banerjee, S., Erçetin, Ş., Tekin, A. (ed.) *Chaos Theory in Politics. Understanding Complex Systems*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2014.

51 Adeel Malik and Bassem Awadallah, "The Economics of the Arab Spring", *World Development*, Vol: 45, 2013, pp. 296-313.

52 Ufiem Maurice Ogbonnaya, "Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya: A Comparative Analysis of Causes and Determinants", *Alternatives: Türkiye Journal of International Relations*, Vol: 12, No: 3, 2013, pp. 4-16.

53 Marco Lagi, Karla Z. Bertrand and Yaneer Bar-Yam, "The Food Crises and Political Instability in North Africa and The Middle East", *Arxiv Preprint Arxiv:1108.2455*, 2011.

54 Nader Hashemi, "The Arab Spring, US Foreign Policy, and The Question of Democracy in the Middle East.", *Denv. J. Int'l L. & Pol'y*, Vol: 41, No: 1, 2012.

55 Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef, ed. *Generation In Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in The Middle East*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

56 Açıkalın and Bölücek, *ibid.*, p. 2.



Jazeera, prompting the youth to increasingly turn to social media platforms.⁵⁷ Immediately following this event, Facebook usage in Tunisia surged by 50% at the beginning of 2011.⁵⁸ Alongside Tunisia, the most pronounced impact of social media on the expansion and spread of protests was observed in Egypt during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square. The hashtags #Egypt and #Jan25 (the Egyptian revolution's hashtag) became the most widely shared worldwide, with more than 1.4 million tweets referencing Egypt between January 26 and 31, 2011.⁵⁹ Similar patterns can be observed in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria.

In light of this data, two realities regarding the impact of social media on the Arab Spring should be emphasized. For the first time during the Arab Spring, a new form of mass communication emerged⁶⁰ through the combination of traditional and digital media platforms. On the other hand, criticisms have arisen regarding social media's influence on the uprisings. Notably, a significant portion of the content was shared from IP addresses registered abroad, which not only contributed to the spread of disinformation but also caused unverified news circulating on social media to unexpectedly intensify sectarian tensions.⁶¹

In conclusion, the Arab uprisings had varying short-, medium-, and long-term impacts in each country where protests occurred, alongside their regional and global consequences. Some of these countries experienced political transformations, while in others, the process evolved into prolonged conflicts. Syria is undoubtedly among the Arab Spring countries where the conflicts have been the most prolonged. The next section will examine the Syrian crisis in terms of its actors and implications.

57 Onur Aydın, "The Myth of the Social Media Revolution and the Arab Uprisings," in *Rethinking the Arab Uprisings: Processes and Actors*, eds. M. Özcan and H. M. Mercan, 1st ed., Küre Publications, 2020.

58 Konstantin Aal, Marén Schorch, Esma Ben Hadj Elkilani, and Volker Wulf, "Facebook and the Mass Media in Tunisia", *Media in Action. Interdisciplinary Journal on Cooperative Media*, Vol: 1, 2018, pp. 135-168.

59 Chulhwan Chris Bang, Jaewon Lee and H. Raghav Rao, "The Egyptian Protest Movement in The Twittersphere: An Investigation of Dual Sentiment Pathways of Communication", *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol: 58, 2021, 102328.

60 Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

61 Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, Hachette UK, 2013.

1.5. Uprisings, Regime Massacres, Civil War, and Displacement in Syria

Although there are many similarities between the Syrian people, who have lived under the repressive Ba'ath regime since Hafez al-Assad, and other Arab Spring countries, the uprisings in Syria were initially considered unexpected⁶² events because the 1982 Hama uprising had been violently suppressed. Another striking aspect from Syria's perspective is that, while protests that began in Tunisia led to regime changes in countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, they evolved into a prolonged civil war in Syria. The peaceful protests that started in Daraa in 2011 quickly escalated into armed conflict due to the harsh interventions of the Bashar al-Assad administration. The regime's repressive policies, the violence perpetrated by security forces against demonstrators, and its disregard for demands for political reform became the primary factors driving the country into civil war.⁶³ The fundamental reason why the Arab Spring unfolded differently in Syria compared to other countries in the region lies in the preexisting sectarian and ethnic vulnerabilities within the country.⁶⁴

Syria has one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse societies in the region. The Assad family and its elite, who are Nusayris making up only about 11% of the population, have governed the Syrian people – composed of roughly 75% Sunni Muslims, along with Christian and Druze minorities – through a repressive regime since the 1970 coup.⁶⁵ Additionally, Syria has long been home to various ethnic groups, including Kurds, Turkmen, ethnic Armenians, Arabs, and Circassians.⁶⁶ This ethnic and religious diversity contributed to the rapid escalation of conflicts in the country. Moreover, the severe drought between 2006 and 2010, the largest in the country's modern history, plunged hundreds of thousands of farming families into poverty, prompting mass migration from rural areas to urban slums, which further intensified the severity of the uprisings in Syria.

In southern Syria, in the impoverished rural area of Daraa, the first major protests began in March 2011. The arrests and torture of a group of children who had written anti-regime graffiti prompted local residents to take to the streets. During the initial security crackdown, 14 civilians were killed.⁶⁷ As security forces responded harshly with mass arrests and, at times, by opening fire on demonstrators, the unrest spread within weeks to cities across

62 Kathrin Nina Wiedl, *The Hama Massacre-Reasons, Supporters of the Rebellion, Consequences*, 2006.

63 Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol: 90, No: 3, 2011, pp. 2-7.

64 Bassam Haddad, "Syria, the Arab Uprisings", *Middle East Policy*, Vol: 19, No: 4, 2012, pp. 125-132.

65 Ignacio Alvarez-Ossorio, "The Sectarian Dynamics of the Syrian Conflict", *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol: 17, No: 2, 2019, pp. 47-58.

66 Kevin Mazur, "State Networks and Intra-Ethnic Group Variation in the 2011 Syrian Uprising", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol: 52, No: 7, 2019, pp. 995-1027.

67 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/28/syria-security-forces-fire-protesters> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

the country, manifesting as largely nonviolent protests. Following these events, on March 18, after Friday prayers, anti-regime demonstrations were held in central regions of Syria, resulting in the deaths of at least 37 protesters.⁶⁸

In April 2011, the Assad regime began a military intervention in the city of Daraa, whose population was predominantly Sunni. The regime's siege of the city and the bloody suppression of rising popular protests escalated the unrest, laying the groundwork for the conflict to evolve into a full-scale civil war.⁶⁹ The methods employed by Bashar al-Assad to quell the demonstrations marked the onset of the Arab Spring in Syria.⁷⁰

In May 2011, as clashes intensified in Syria, the tanks which were deployed, advanced on protesters in the governorates of Daraa and Homs. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay reported that operations involving tanks, artillery, and heavy weapons, particularly in Hama, resulted in at least 120 deaths.⁷¹ Those killed were not only unarmed protesters who posed no threat to security forces but also medical personnel attempting to assist the wounded and civilians forced to leave their homes to meet basic needs during the siege. During this period, attacks on protests and funeral processions caused numerous civilian casualties⁷²; for instance, at least 13 people were killed on April 19 at Homs' New Clock Tower Square, and 16 people died on July 19 near the Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque during a funeral.⁷³

During this period, certain brigades under Bashar al-Assad's direct control, alongside the Shabiha militias and intelligence units, committed severe human rights violations against anti-government protests in Syria.⁷⁴ Government forces carried out extrajudicial killings, applied systematic and increasingly severe violence, and conducted large-scale arrests. Military operations and city sieges were used as methods of collective punishment against civilians, while access to hospitals was largely restricted or completely blocked.⁷⁵

The fact that the protests were predominantly carried out by Sunni groups, while the security forces enforcing the Assad regime's violent suppression were mainly Nusayri, pushed the situation to the brink of civil war within just nine months.

68 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/24/syria-security-forces-kill-dozens-protesters> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

69 Umut Koldaş and Nur Köprülü, "Arab Intifada? The Internal, Regional, and International Dynamics of Social Movements in the Arab World," *Academic Middle East*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2011, p. 34.

70 Murat Köylü, "The PYD/YPG Structure in Syria and Operation Olive Branch", *ASSAM International PeerReviewed Journal*, Issue 11, 2018, s. 70-8

71 OHCHR, *The World Is Watching the Carnage in Syria Despite Attempts to Sever Access*, Says Pillay, Report, 8 February 2011.

72 Human Rights Watch, "Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces", pp. 1-2.

73 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/11/11/we-live-war/crackdown-protesters-governorate-homs-syria> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

74 "Bashar Al Assad: Criminal Against Humanity-Report of human rights violations committed in Syria", FIDH Report, www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/reportsyria2807eng.pdf, pp.5-7.

75 "Bashar Al Assad: Criminal Against Humanity", FIDH Report, p. 5.

In July 2011, defectors from the Syrian army formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which assumed leadership role of the armed opposition in Syria.⁷⁶ Throughout 2012 and 2013, clashes intensified, particularly in Aleppo, while ceasefire and peace efforts led by the Arab League and other international actors largely failed. Two pivotal moments in the trajectory of the conflict occurred in 2013 and 2015. In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, announced the merger of his forces with the Nusra Front under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (DAESH). This move initiated a struggle for dominance in eastern Syria, centered around Raqqa and extending along the Iraq-Syria border, intensifying the civil war and altering its course.⁷⁷ DAESH's rapid expansion and the group's targeted violence against specific ethnic and religious communities drew heightened international attention, prompting global actors to intervene more decisively. In the summer of 2015, Russia deployed troops and military equipment to its Hmeymim Airbase near Latakia, commencing airstrikes against opposition forces in September.⁷⁸ Although Russian officials initially claimed the strikes targeted DAESH under the pretext of counterterrorism, the majority of attacks focused on rebel groups opposing Assad, including civilians.⁷⁹ These air campaigns, combined with Russia's strategic support, allowed the Assad regime to regain control of critical areas such as Aleppo and Idlib, shifting the momentum of the war decisively in favor of the government.

Additionally, in regions such as Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Palmyra (Tadmor), attacks carried out by the Assad regime, DAESH, and the YPG (People's Protection Units) resulted in severe human rights violations and extensive destruction. During this period, areas captured by DAESH witnessed massacres targeting civilians, while the Assad regime conducted aerial bombardments against the population. Civilians were effectively trapped under a dual siege,⁸⁰ leaving them stranded and vulnerable. In Deir ez-Zor, under DAESH's siege, approximately 400,000 civilians suffered from the Assad regime's airstrikes and were cut off from access to food, medicine, and other essential supplies, as the regime deliberately obstructed humanitarian aid.⁸¹

On the other hand, the U.S. and its Western allies, under the pretext of combating DAESH, supported groups such as the PYD (Democratic Union Party), YPG, and SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) in eastern Syria, effectively contributing to the de facto fragmentation

76 Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Middle East Security Report 9: The Free Syrian Army*, DC: Institute for the Study of War, Washington, 2013.

77 Luna Shamieh and Zoltan Szenes, "The Rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (DAESH)", *AARMS-Academic and Applied Research in Military and Public Management Science*, Vol: 14, No: 4, 2015, pp. 363-378.

78 Çağlar Hekimoğlu, K. (2021). Russia's Syria policy in the context of the Syrian crisis. *Atatürk University Journal of Economics and Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 35, No. 4, p. 1405-1422.

79 Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2016, p. 78-85.

80 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2018: Syria* | <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

81 Atlantic Council, *Of Barrel Bombs and Jeans*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/of-barrel-bombs-and-jeans/> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

of the country.⁸² At the regional level, Türkiye, with its 900 km- long border with Syria, became a key country both in addressing the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict and in leading the fight against terrorist organizations, particularly DAESH.⁸³ Furthermore, the U.S.-led International Coalition Forces conducted extensive airstrikes against DAESH in eastern Syria, resulting in significant civilian casualties. During the Raqqa Operation, which concluded in October 2017, much of the city was destroyed. According to records from Amnesty International, over 80% of Raqqa was leveled and more than 1,600 civilians lost their lives as a result of the intense aerial bombardment carried out under the banner of “liberating” the city.⁸⁴

The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2011 and quickly spread to other Arab countries, marked a turning point that profoundly affected the political structures and social dynamics of the region. Although these movements initially emerged with demands for democracy and freedom, their trajectories varied across countries, with some escalating into complex and protracted civil wars. Syria was among the countries that experienced the effects of the Arab Spring most intensely. Unlike in some other Arab states, the popular uprisings in Syria rapidly escalated into a violent civil war, which was not confined to the country’s internal politics but became far more complex due to the involvement of regional and global powers.

The Syrian crisis has inevitably reshaped regional balances and left long-term impacts on the future of the Middle East. This process has led to the reconfiguration of geopolitical dynamics in the region and compelled global powers to develop new military and political strategies. These strategies have not been limited to military interventions but have also manifested through economic sanctions, diplomatic maneuvers, and humanitarian aid. At the same time, the rise of terrorist organizations in the region has created a global security threat, further complicating international efforts to resolve the conflict in Syria. In other words, over the past 14 years, the Syrian crisis has unexpectedly transformed both regional and global dynamics.

The Syrian civil war stands out not only for its actors and scale of conflict but also for the severe humanitarian crisis it has generated. The resulting refugee crisis has become one of the largest humanitarian emergencies in modern history. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 6.8 million Syrians have fled the country due to the war, while millions more have been displaced within Syria.⁸⁵ It is

82 Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, Washington Institute, Washington, 2018, pp. 40-45.

83 Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş, *Power and Stability in the Middle East*, SETA, Ankara, 2017, pp. 150-160.

84 Amnesty International and Airwars, *Syria: Unprecedented investigation reveals US- led Coalition killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa ‘death trap’* (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

85 UNHCR, “Syria Emergency”, <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> (Access Date: 20/04/2025).

crucial to emphasize that the long-term human rights violations by the Assad regime, the use of chemical weapons, and attacks on civilians by Russian and Iranian forces have been major drivers of this crisis. The refugee influx has directly impacted Türkiye,⁸⁶ Lebanon, Jordan, and European countries. The refugee crisis carries undeniable economic, social, and political dimensions,⁸⁷ making it one of the major global issues.⁸⁸ The attacks, bombings, and conflicts in the region have produced the largest refugee crisis since World War II.

The displacement of Syrians has had a profound impact not only on those who fled abroad but also on the millions internally displaced within the country. The suffering endured by these internally displaced populations has made their plight one of the most significant episodes in the history of human migration worldwide. On-site investigations conducted by HREIT have shown that cities such as Khan Shaykhun⁸⁹ and Maaret al-Numan⁹⁰ in Idlib, Hraytan in Aleppo, and the Hay el-Asale and Cobar districts in Damascus have been depopulated and turned into ghost towns due to conflicts and bombardments. These locations exemplify the profound material and psychological destruction caused by the regime. Such large-scale devastation has led to mass forced displacement, with women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities facing particularly tragic circumstances during their migration due to their vulnerable positions.

The process in which Syrians sought safe havens has also served as a testing ground for the international community in terms of human rights, justice, and fairness. The ways in which states have approached migrants and the efforts they have made during this period have acted as a litmus test, revealing how willing they are to address and resolve the challenges that arise.⁹¹

At the same time, this mobility has sparked a period in which migration has been increasingly framed within the concept of security, particularly in Europe and other parts of the world. Europe's securitized policies toward Syrian asylum seekers have resulted in human rights violations, including the right to life. Between 2020 and 2021, and in the first three months of 2022, a total of 5,189 asylum seekers or irregular migrants rescued from pushbacks originating

86 As of 2024, Türkiye has become the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, with more than 3.6 million people, positioning itself as a key actor in humanitarian assistance and refugee governance. See: Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, Migration Statistics Report, 2024. In this context, Türkiye has spent over 40 billion USD on assistance to refugees, providing temporary protection status as well as health and education services. See: Senem Cevik, Efe Sevin, "A Quest for Soft Power: Türkiye and the Syrian Refugee Crisis", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol: 21, No: 4, 2017, pp. 399-410. Despite the challenges, Türkiye continues to advocate for international support and safe return policies.

87 Şuay Nilhan Açıklan and others, "Measurement of Social Integration: Syrian Women in Türkiye", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol: 34, No: 3, 2021, pp. 2960- 2983.

88 HREIT, 2023 Annual Report on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, Ankara, 2025, p. 29.

89 On-site observations revealed that the city's population before the war was approximately 80,000.

90 On-site observations revealed that the city's population before the war was approximately 130,000.

91 In 2021, the number of Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye was 3,737,369. According to the latest data, the number of Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye is 2,605,508. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638> (as of 17/7/2025) (Access Date:22/7/2025)

from Greece in Aydın included 1,043 Syrian nationals.⁹² Under the shadow of Europe's security-focused approach and pushback practices, asylum seekers who managed to reach the continent have been subjected to Islamophobia and xenophobia. The biggest obstacle that continues this crisis and prevents the forcibly displaced from returning to their homeland is the existence of the Assad regime.

Amid these transformations and crises, the Damascus Revolution on 8 December 2024 brought an end to the long-standing Assad regime and the protracted civil war that had engulfed the country in violence. Political bans in Syria were lifted, and initial steps were taken to establish a more inclusive new governance structure in Damascus, representing all segments of society. Naturally, alongside the formation of the new Damascus administration, investigating the severe human rights and humanitarian law violations perpetrated by the Assad regime over the years has become a matter of paramount importance.

92 HREIT, The Report on Evaluation of Pushback Actions Against Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants from a Human Rights Perspective, p. 36.








II.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW VIOLATIONS IN SYRIA

Civilian Deaths 

Attacks on Civil Infrastructure and
Public Property 

Right to education 

Use of Prohibited Weapons (Barrel Bombs,
Cluster Munitions, Chemical Attacks) 

Enforced Disappearances and Arbitrary
Deprivation of Liberty 

Torture and Ill-Treatment 

Displacements (The Situation of Refugees
and Internally Displaced Persons) 

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling 

Human Rights Violations Against Health
Personnel and Media Workers 

Humanitarian Aid Challenges 

Freedom of Religion and Belief 

2. HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW VIOLATIONS IN SYRIA

With the spread of the Arab Spring protests to Syria, peaceful demonstrations that began in March 2011 in the city of Dera quickly spread across the country after reports emerged that regime forces had tortured a group of people, including two children aged 13 and 14, whose dismembered bodies were returned to their families following their deaths. One of these children, Hamza al-Hatib, was subjected to torture, and his mutilated body was delivered to his family weeks after his detention in May 2011. For decades, the Baath regime in Syria had disrupted the social balance through poverty, corruption, political arrests, and a pervasive atmosphere of fear. In response, the Syrian people took to the streets to demand their rights.⁹³ Unlike in other countries, where regime changes occurred (even though situations later evolved there as well), the escalating events in Syria eventually transformed into a full-scale civil war. Rather than addressing the reasonable demands of the people, the Assad regime launched a violent crackdown against civilians. The civil war resulted in the deaths of over five hundred thousand civilians, the displacement of millions, the disappearance of thousands, and the exposure of countless individuals to crimes such as torture. Yet, the demands of the Syrian people were grounded in fundamental freedoms already enshrined in the 1973 Constitution. The fourth principle in the preamble of the Constitution stated: “Freedom is a sacred right, and popular democracy is an ideal formula that enables citizens to exercise their freedom in a manner worthy of human dignity, producing, building, and defending their homeland, and making sacrifices for their nation. The freedom of a homeland can only be preserved by free citizens. The freedom of a citizen can only be completed through economic and social emancipation.” This constitutional guarantee underscored the legitimacy of the people’s demands, highlighting that their pursuit of freedom and rights was consistent with the country’s legal framework.⁹⁴

Legal guarantees enshrined in constitutions do not automatically translate into practice. Indeed, the principle outlined in the 1973 Syrian Constitution did not reflect the realities on the ground. There was neither a political environment befitting human dignity nor policies leading to economic and social emancipation. Although the Assad regime promised certain reforms since 2000, its long-standing failure to meet the population’s demands and its increasing repressive measures had pushed Syria onto an irreversible path. In 2012, the Assad

93 United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, No. 54 (2021), A/HRC/46/54, 21/7/2021, p. 2.

94 1973 Syrian Constitution. The English version of Article read as follows: “Freedom is a sacred right and popular democracy is the ideal formulation which insures for the citizen the exercise of his freedom which makes him a dignified human being capable of giving and building, defending the homeland in which he lives, and making sacrifices for the sake of the nation to which he belongs. The homeland’s freedom can only be preserved by its free citizens. The citizen’s freedom can be completed only by his economic and social liberation.”

regime attempted to address the issue by amending the Constitution, believing that merely incorporating human rights into the legal text could halt the uprising. However, human rights are not just theoretical concepts – they must be implemented in practice. The preamble of the 2012 Constitution included principles such as: the completion of the Constitution represents the ultimate victory of the people’s struggle for freedom and democracy. It was intended to embody concrete achievements, respond to societal transformations, regulate the state’s future trajectory, oversee institutional functioning, and serve as a source of legislation. The Constitution emphasized a system grounded in independence, sovereignty, and people’s will through elections; political and party pluralism; national unity; cultural diversity; public freedoms; human rights; social justice; equality; equal opportunity; citizenship; and the rule of law. Society and the citizen are the ultimate goal of all national efforts. Protecting the dignity of citizens and society is a hallmark of a nation’s civilization and a fundamental measure of state credibility.⁹⁵ Yet, as will be detailed in the following sections, the Assad regime not only failed to uphold the promises of the Constitution but also violated the most fundamental principles of international law and Syria’s obligations under international treaties, causing significant harm to civilians. Ultimately, the regime collapsed on 8 December 2024, and Assad, along with his family, fled to Russia. On 29 January 2025, the new leadership under Ahmed al-Shara suspended the current Constitution to draft a new one. Despite the Constitution being in force and binding during Assad’s rule, the following sections demonstrate that the regime disregarded both constitutional and international legal obligations, resulting in extensive civilian harm.

This section provides a comprehensive assessment of the human rights and international humanitarian law violations committed by the Syrian regime. It covers: civilian deaths; attacks on civilian infrastructure and public property; use of barrel bombs, cluster munitions, and chemical weapons; enforced disappearances and arbitrary restrictions on liberty; torture and ill-treatment of detainees; forced displacement, attacks on healthcare personnel and media workers; obstruction of humanitarian aid; violations of freedom of religion and belief.

95 Syrian Constitution (dated 26/2/2012). The English version of article read as follows: “The completion of this Constitution is the culmination of the people’s struggle on the road to freedom and democracy. It is a real embodiment of achievements, a response to shifts and changes, evidence of organizing the march of the state towards the future, a regulator of the movement of its institutions and a source of legislation. All of this is attainable through a system of fundamental principles that enshrines independence, sovereignty and the rule of the people based on election, political and party pluralism and the protection of national unity, cultural diversity, public freedoms, human rights, social justice, equality, equal opportunities, citizenship and the rule of law, where the society and the citizen are the objective and purpose for which every national effort is dedicated. Preserving the dignity of the society and the citizen is an indicator of the civilization of the country and the prestige of the state.”

2.1. Civilian Deaths

In international law, both human rights and humanitarian law obligations arise from binding treaties between states. Following the establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, multilateral human rights treaties proliferated, with the UN playing a central role in their drafting and implementation. Dozens of such treaties have since been concluded, ranging from conventions related to civil and political rights to those addressing economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as conventions concerning genocide, torture, and the rights of women, children, and persons with disabilities. The rules of international humanitarian law were codified in 1949, resulting in four separate Geneva Conventions, among which the Fourth Convention governs the protection of civilians in armed conflict. It is important to note that both international humanitarian law and human rights law apply to the conflict between regime and opposition forces in Syria. During armed conflict, humanitarian law takes precedence in regulating conduct, while human rights law continues to operate concurrently.



A child who lost his life during an airstrike carried out by Syrian government warplanes on residential areas in the town of Kafr Batna, Damascus, on September 30, 2016. Photo: Anadolu Agency⁹⁶

96 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/1-176-civilians-killed-in-syria-in-september-ngo/656318> (Access Date: 15/4/2025).

The conflicts that have taken place in Syria between the forces of the Assad regime and opposition groups are classified as “non-international armed conflicts.” According to Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, the provisions of the Conventions are also applicable in non-international armed conflicts. Accordingly, when a non-international armed conflict occurs on the territory of a State Party, each party to the conflict is, at a minimum, obliged to comply with the following provisions:

1. Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.

To this end, the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above-mentioned persons:

- a. Violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;
 - b. Taking of hostages;
 - c. Outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment;
 - d. The passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.
2. The wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for. An impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict. The Parties to the conflict should further endeavour to bring into force, by means of special agreements, all or part of the other provisions of the present Convention. The application of the preceding provisions shall not affect the legal status of the Parties to the conflict.⁹⁷

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that, based on data obtained from eight separate sources between 1 March 2011 and 31 March 2021 in Syrian territory, a total of 350,209 documented and identifiable deaths were recorded. The Assad regime did not permit the OHCHR to enter Syrian territory or conduct investigations; therefore, the report relied on data collected from eight different field sources. According to the report, for a death to be considered “identifiable,” the record must include the full name of the deceased, the date of death, and the governorate in which the death occurred. Any record missing one of these elements was excluded from the analysis.

⁹⁷ Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 1949. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/icrc/1949/en/32227> (Access Date: 17/2/2025).

During this period, 27,126 children lost their lives, meaning that one in every thirteen deaths involved a child. Similarly, 26,727 women and girls were killed, indicating that one in every thirteen deaths involved a female. The highest number of casualties was recorded in the Aleppo governorate, with 51,731 deaths. Other regions with high death tolls were as follows: Rural Damascus with 47,483 deaths, Homs with 40,986 deaths, Idlib with 33,271 deaths, Hama with 31,993 deaths, and Tartus with 31,369 deaths.⁹⁸

According to the report, of the 350,209 recorded deaths, 143,350 (40.9%) were identified as civilians. However, these civilian-designated records represent a verifiable minimum, meaning the actual number of civilian deaths is likely higher. In addition, it is estimated that an additional 163,537 civilian deaths went undocumented. Based on a 95% confidence interval, the total number of civilian casualties is projected to be 306,887. This implies that, assuming the accuracy of the data collection model, there is a 95% probability that the true number of civilian deaths lies between 281,443 and 337,971. This figure corresponds to an average of 83 civilian deaths per day over the ten-year period, of which 15 were women (including girls) and 18 were children. These civilian losses over the decade represent approximately 1.5% of Syria's total population at the start of the conflict, raising serious concerns regarding the failure of the state and certain armed groups to comply with international humanitarian law norms on the protection of civilians.⁹⁹

In addition to the United Nations, several other organizations have also attempted to estimate the number of deaths recorded during the war in Syria. According to the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P), at least 580,000 people lost their lives in Syria between 2011 and the end of 2024.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that approximately 617,910 people were killed in Syria, including 164,223 civilians.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, according to the 2024 report of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), at least 231,238 civilians have been killed in Syria since 2011. Among them, 30,193 were children and 16,451 were women.¹⁰² The same report indicates that 87.02% of all civilian deaths were caused by the forces of the Assad regime. As the reports suggest, it is not possible to determine the exact number of deaths. The discovery of documents, secret prisons, and mass graves following the fall of the Assad regime has further increased the uncertainty surrounding the actual figures. On average, it can be estimated that around 600,000 people have died in total, nearly half of whom—approximately 300,000—were civilians.

98 United Nations Human Rights Council, Report on Civilian Deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, No. 68, A/HRC/50/68, 2022, p. 6.

99 UN, Report on Civilian Deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic, pp. 7-8.

100 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/syria/> (Access Date: 18/2/2025).

101 SOHR, Syrian Revolution 13 years on: Nearly 618,000 persons killed since the onset of the revolution in March 2011, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/> (Access Date: 18/2/2025).

102 SNHR, On the 13th Anniversary of the Start of the Popular Uprising, 2024, pp. 5- 7. <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/R240209E-1.pdf> (Access Date: 18/2/2025).

A large portion of the civilian deaths that occurred between the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 and the end of the regime in 2024 took place in the form of mass killings. For instance, in February 2012, it is estimated that around 4,000 people were killed when the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs was besieged and subjected to tank attacks.¹⁰³ On May 26, 2012, at least 110 civilians, including 50 children, lost their lives in the al-Houla district of Homs as a result of artillery and rocket attacks, followed by a mass killing carried out by soldiers and Shabiha militias.¹⁰⁴

In 2013, the regime continued its attacks against civilians' right to life. In January, an airstrike carried out by a fighter jet on Aleppo University killed 87 students. That same month, the bodies of 230 civilians detained by the regime were found in the Bustan al- Qasr neighborhood of Aleppo.¹⁰⁵ In May, the villages of Bayda and Banyas, located in the Banyas district of Tartus, were besieged, and homes were set on fire under heavy gunfire, resulting in the deaths of a total of 248 civilians.¹⁰⁶ In April, a raid conducted in the Sanamayn region of Daraa led to the deaths of over 100 civilians, most of whom were women, children, and older persons.¹⁰⁷ In the same month, footage later revealed in April 2022 showed that more than 40 civilians in the Tadamon neighborhood of Damascus were executed and collectively burned by regime forces.¹⁰⁸ In May 2014, a barrel bomb attack in Aleppo killed 40 civilians, while in October, another barrel bomb strike on the Abidin refugee camp in Idlib claimed the lives of 60 civilians.¹⁰⁹

In 2015, the regime continued its attacks against civilians.¹¹⁰ In January, a barrel bomb dropped on the city of Hasakah killed 160 civilians. In February, 48 civilians were executed by firing squad during an attack on the village of Hardetnin. In June, an airstrike carried out by regime forces on the town of Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib region killed more than 50 civilians. In August, two barrel bombs dropped on the Douma district of Damascus resulted in the deaths of 127 civilians.¹¹¹

Through its actions, the Assad regime violated the right to life as enshrined in the international human rights treaties to which Syria is a party. Chief among these is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Syria acceded to the Covenant on April 21, 1969, but did not recognize the individual complaint mechanism. Article 6(1) of the ICCPR, which guarantees the right to life, provides as follows: "Every human being has the inherent right to life This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily

103 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/baas-rejiminin-temsalcisi-esed-ailesi-katliamlarla-hafizalara-kazindi/3418840> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

104 https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_147_26-mayis-2012_-suriye-yonetimi_nin-humus_un-el-hule-ilcesi-halkina-karsi-gerceklestirdigi-katliam-hk_.tr.mfa (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

105 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/baas-rejiminin-temsalcisi-esed-ailesi-katliamlarla-hafizalara-kazindi/3418840> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

106 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/esed-rejiminin-katliamlarindan-banyasin-taniklari-ilk-kez-konusurken-aa-vahsetin-izlerini-goruntuledi/3424985> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

107 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/baas-rejiminin-temsalcisi-esed-ailesi-katliamlarla-hafizalara-kazindi/3418840> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

108 <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/esed-rejiminin-2013teki-katliam-goruntuleri-ortaya-cikti-676842.html> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

109 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/baas-rejiminin-temsalcisi-esed-ailesi-katliamlarla-hafizalara-kazindi/3418840> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

110 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/syria> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

111 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/baas-rejiminin-temsalcisi-esed-ailesi-katliamlarla-hafizalara-kazindi/3418840> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

deprived of his life.¹¹²” Similarly, the Assad regime violated Article 3 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (a provision common to all Geneva Conventions), which ensures the protection of civilians during armed conflicts. Article 3 explicitly prohibits the killing of civilians who do not take part in hostilities.¹¹³ Moreover, the widespread and systematic killing of civilians constitutes crimes against humanity. Such crimes are recognized as peremptory norms (*jus cogens*) of international law. By definition, a *jus cogens* norm is one accepted and recognized by the international community of states as a whole, permitting no derogation and modifiable only by a subsequent norm of the same character. Accordingly, officials of the Assad regime, along with all others involved in the commission of these crimes, bear responsibility for crimes against humanity.

2.2. Attacks on Civil Infrastructure and Public Property

Violence against civilians manifests in various forms and is often understood as infliction of physical harm upon individuals. However, such violence also encompasses the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the disruption of food supply chains, water and sanitation services, as well as communication and social systems. These types of attacks profoundly affect the lives, livelihoods, health, and well-being of civilian populations. International law mandates the protection of civilian settlements, essential civilian infrastructure, and the environment during armed conflicts. Nonetheless, in Syria, the deposed Assad regime and its affiliated militia forces—supported by Iran and Russia—recaptured vast territories, including strategically important cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. During these operations, they turned towns and villages into ruins.

112 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (1966), p. 171, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1966/en/17703> (Access Date: 18/2/2025).

113 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Art. 3.



Yarmouk Refugee Camp, predominantly inhabited by Palestinian refugees, Damascus. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

According to the SNHR report, since March 2011 there have been 897 attacks on healthcare facilities, 1,453 on places of worship such as mosques and churches, and 1,675 on schools. Eighty-six percent of these attacks were carried out by Assad regime forces and other actors supporting the regime.¹¹⁴ As evidenced by the 2013 attack on the historical Aleppo Great Mosque (also known as the Umayyad Mosque of Aleppo), the Assad regime deliberately targeted certain religious and historical structures. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented attacks conducted over an eleven-month period by Assad regime and Russian-backed forces on Idlib, recording damage to hundreds of civilian settlements, schools, markets, and hospitals.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, in 2022, the World Bank (WB) prepared a Damage Assessment Report for fourteen cities that suffered the most destruction – Afrin, Aleppo, Daraa, Darayya, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, Homs, Idlib, Manbij, Palmyra, Raqqa, Rastan, Tell Abyad, and Zabadani. According to the report, as of January 2022, total damage across the assessed cities and sectors was estimated to be between \$8.7 and \$11.4 billion. Approximately

¹¹⁴ SNHR, On the 13th Anniversary of the Start of the Popular Uprising, p. 22.

¹¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, Targeting Life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

68% of this, or \$5.8-7.8 billion, was attributed to physical infrastructure sectors; 30%, or \$2.7-3.3 billion, to social sectors; and 2%, or \$175-278 million, to other sectors. Agriculture and food supply chains were among the most severely affected areas. Syria's wholesale vegetable markets sustained significant damage, with 82% of the assessed markets either partially damaged or completely destroyed. Moreover, other conditions affecting sector functionality played a crucial role. For instance, while much of the physical infrastructure in the water and sanitation sector remained intact, the functionality of 51% of assets decreased, and 11% became completely non-functional – posing a major challenge for the most affected cities.¹¹⁶

On the other hand, the targeting of power plants by regime attacks has severely disrupted civilian life throughout the country.¹¹⁷ In its 2014 report on facilities vital to civilians, the SNHR stated that on October 14, 2014, the regime shelled the power plant in the al- Wa'ar district of Homs, causing significant damage. Later, on October 26, 2014, the regime targeted the power plant in the town of Hreitan, Aleppo, with a barrel bomb, resulting in widespread power outages across the northern countryside of Aleppo.¹¹⁸

Due to the attacks on the country's electrical infrastructure, civilians' access to electricity has been severely restricted. This situation has led to the implementation of electricity quota system across the country.¹¹⁹ Another SNHR report stated that these disruptions in electricity supply also made it difficult to obtain water from pumping stations, thereby limiting civilians' access to water. Consequently, the report noted a rise in fuel and bread prices, further worsening the daily living conditions for civilians.¹²⁰

The destruction of civilian property or institutions intended for civilian use in violation of military necessity constitutes a war crime. The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols prohibit damage to civilian property during armed conflicts. Specifically, Article 52 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions forbids direct attacks on civilian objects and classifies the destruction of civilian property outside of military necessity as a war crime.

116 Syria- Joint Damage Assessment of Selected Cities. Washington, D.C., World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099173502272397116> (Access Date: 19/02/2025).

117 <https://www.aa.com.tr/dunya/elektrik-kesintilerinin-zirve-yaptigi-samda-muma-ragbet-artti/2795833> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

118 <https://snhr.org/public-html/wp-content/pdf/english/Targeting-October.pdf> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

119 <https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The-Most-Notable-Human-Rights-Violations-in-Syria-in-September-2021-en.pdf> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

120 <https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The-Most-Notable-Human-Rights-Violations-in-Syria-in-September-2021-en.pdf> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

In addition, Article 8 of the Rome Statute, adopted in 1998 and entered into force in 2002, classifies the widespread, unlawful, and arbitrary destruction of property as a war crime.¹²¹ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has also developed key rules in this context. The ICRC's Study on Customary International Humanitarian Law (CIHL), published in 2005, comprises 161 rules, several of which directly concern the protection of property and public facilities. In particular, Rule 50 prohibits direct attacks on civilian objects and forbids the destruction of property outside military necessity.¹²²



Hay al-Asale District, Damascus, completely destroyed by the regime. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

Right to education

The right to education is among the human rights violated by regime forces during the civil war. As a result of attacks on civilian infrastructure, depopulation policies, and assaults on areas perceived as opposing the regime, many civilians lost their lives. Additionally, schools in residential areas were destroyed, and numerous students and teachers were killed in these attacks.

Many internally displaced persons were deprived of their right to education due to insufficient infrastructure and resources, financial hardships, and lack of identity documents.

121 The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (1998), <https://www.refworld.org/legal/constinstr/unga/1998/en/64553> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

122 Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Vol:1, Cambridge University Press, 2005, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/research/icrc/2005/en/98261> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

Consequently, as a result of the regime's actions, an entire generation was deprived of the right to education, which is recognized as a fundamental human right in all international human rights instruments.

The ongoing conflicts, restrictions on access to humanitarian aid, and the destruction of medical facilities, homes, and schools have affected not only the right to life and the right to health but also the right to education for Syrian civilians.¹²³ The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, in its report A/HRC/44/61, noted investigations into attacks on schools. The research found that between 2019 and 2020 alone, 58 schools in the Aleppo and Idlib regions were attacked, 55 of which were carried out by regime forces.¹²⁴ The Commission reported that in January 2020, an attack by government forces on a school in Sarmin resulted in the deaths of 12 civilians, five of whom were children. Additionally, investigations into attacks conducted by the regime on February 25, 2020, revealed that a morning rocket attack damaged three schools, killing or injuring teachers and students present during the explosions. On the same day, an airstrike on Muneeb Qmayshah Primary School in the eastern part of Marat Misrin killed 11 civilians, including six children, and injured 30 people, 14 of whom were children. These attacks rendered the schools unusable.¹²⁵

According to the investigations conducted by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic regarding attacks on schools in Aleppo, multiple attacks were carried out on a school in Atarib, made the schools inoperable. The attacks resulted in the deaths of two adults and injuries to eight children. In February 2020, a ground assault directly targeted Yarmouk School in Kafrantin, which had at least 75 students and three teachers, as well as a nearby mosque. As a result, the school building became unusable.¹²⁶ The deaths of numerous students and teachers, the ongoing lack of safety for many others, and the destruction of schools effectively deprived Syrian civilians of their right to education.

Another critical aspect regarding the exercise of the right to education and access to education is the economic collapse caused by the ongoing conflict in the country. According to a 2017 World Bank study, 60% of the population was struggling with poverty. The study reported that 6.1 million Syrians were neither attending work nor school and were deprived of any form of education.¹²⁷ Particularly, harsh living conditions, economic hardship, and the regime's obstruction or restriction of cross-border humanitarian aid in certain areas

123 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report A/HRC/46/54, para. 39. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/54>

124 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report number A/HRC/44/61, para. 48. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/44/61>

125 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report number A/HRC/44/61, para. 53.

126 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/44/61>

127 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report number A/HRC/46/54, para. 54. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/54>

– along with fuel shortages and rising prices for many basic necessities – severely limited access to education for internally displaced persons in camps and many others.¹²⁸ Moreover, due to these economic difficulties, many boys were forced to leave school to work, while numerous girls were compelled into early marriage.¹²⁹

Difficulties in accessing civil documents such as identity cards, birth records, and student information have also adversely affected individuals across the country seeking to exercise their right to education.¹³⁰ The UNHCR has emphasized that children without birth certificates risk being unable to prove their citizenship, potentially leaving them stateless. According to the report A/HRC/46/54 published in 2021 by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2.8 million children were not attending school. The report highlights that children deprived of their right to education are likely to face limitations in accessing many fundamental rights in the future.¹³¹

2.3. Use of Prohibited Weapons (Barrel Bombs, Cluster Munitions, Chemical Attacks)

Rules of international humanitarian law prohibit the use of certain weapons in armed conflict. The primary reason for banning these weapons is that they cause unnecessary suffering and are unable to distinguish between civilians and combatants. In this sense, some weapons are considered contrary to the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. These principles form the foundation of international humanitarian law and aim to minimize the humanitarian effects of war. The three core principles of international humanitarian law are expressed as follows:

1. **Principle of Distinction:** Parties to armed conflicts must always distinguish between civilians and combatants. Attacks must be directed solely at combatants; attacks against civilians are strictly prohibited (ICRC, Rule 1).
2. **Principle of Proportionality:** Attacks that would cause civilian casualties, injuries, or damage to civilian objects that are excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated are prohibited (ICRC, Rule 14).

128 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report number A/HRC/55/64, para.15. <https://docs.un.org/en/a/hrc/55/64>

129 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report number A/HRC/49/77, para.13. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/49/77>

130 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report number A/HRC/46/54, para.62. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/54>

131 UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report number A/HRC/46/54, para.61. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/54>

3. **Principle of Precaution:** Parties to conflicts are obliged to take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population and civilian objects under their control from the effects of attacks (ICRC, Rule 22).¹³²

Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria, indiscriminate attacks by Assad regime forces on densely populated areas have been a prominent feature of the hostilities. These attacks were frequently carried out using artillery fire, mortars, rockets, tanks, and airstrikes, and also involved munitions not directly targeted at specific objectives (such as “barrel bombs” dropped from helicopters, improvised unguided rockets, cluster munitions, thermobaric bombs, and other high-explosive weapons with wide-area effects), causing excessive injuries and unnecessary suffering. After the Russian Federation intervened in the conflict on the side of the Assad regime in September 2015, the use of prohibited weapons further diversified. Indeed, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, reporting to the UN Human Rights Council, has documented in multiple reports that the Assad regime used various weapons that inflicted unnecessary suffering on civilians and lacked the ability to distinguish between combatants and civilians. These include, in particular, GBU-39 bombs and Hellfire missiles, RBK-250 and RBK-500 cluster bombs, improvised rocket-assisted munitions, OFAB-250/KAB-500 bombs, OTR-21 “Tochka” ballistic missiles, BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launcher systems, Uragan 9M27K-type cluster munitions, and Krasnopol guided artillery munitions.¹³³



Children affected by the chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta. Photo: Anadolu Agency¹³⁴

¹³² Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck, Customary International Humanitarian Law.

¹³³ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Reports: A/HRC/36/55, A/HRC/37/72, A/HRC/39/65, A/HRC/43/57, A/HRC/43/57, A/HRC/44/61, A/HRC/44/61, A/HRC/49/77. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/documentation> (Access Date: 19/2/2025).

¹³⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/ab-suriyede-rejimin-kimyasal-silah-saldirisi-gibi-suclarinin-pesini-birakmayacagini-bildirdi/2216376>

The SNHR reported that chemical weapons were used in Syria for the first time on 23 December 2012. Since then, a total of 222 chemical attacks have been carried out, 98% by the Assad regime and 2% by DAESH.¹³⁵ Additionally, the SNHR documented that, over a 12 – year period, the Assad regime conducted 217 chemical attacks, resulting in 1,514 deaths, including 1,413 civilians – 214 of whom were children and 262 women – and 11,080 injuries.¹³⁶ These chemical attacks occurred primarily in Damascus and its countryside, as well as in Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and Deir ez – Zor.¹³⁷

HRW analyzed the evidence of chemical weapons attacks carried out in Syria between 21 August 2013 – the date of the deadliest chemical attack – and 25 February 2018, when the regime used chlorine gas in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region.¹³⁸ The SNHR documented that on the night of Wednesday, 21 August 2013, the regime carried out chemical attacks on densely populated areas in Eastern and Western Ghouta, in the Damascus countryside, resulting in the deaths of 1,144 people due to asphyxiation that night.¹³⁹

Immediately following the allegations, the UN Secretary-General appointed an investigative mission to examine claims of chemical weapons use in Syria. The UN Mission found that there was compelling evidence indicating the use of chemical weapons in the ongoing conflict in Syria. In particular, clear and convincing evidence was obtained in cases such as Ghouta, whereas in other instances, such as Khan al-Asal and Jobar, reliable but incomplete evidence prevented definitive conclusions. The findings of the UN Mission can be summarized as follows:

1. **Ghouta (21 August 2013):** The UN Mission found clear and convincing evidence that sarin gas was used on a large scale against civilians and children. The mission determined that rockets, capable of carrying chemical warheads and exploding upon impact with the ground, contained sarin. Environmental contamination from sarin was also detected within the rockets' impact zones. More than 50 interviews with survivors and medical personnel corroborated the medical and scientific findings, with blood and urine samples testing positive for sarin, constituting the strongest evidence of a chemical attack.
2. **Khan al-Asal (19 March 2013):** The UN Mission, on the basis of reliable information, determined that, chemical weapons had been used against both soldiers and civilians. Testimonies from medical personnel and military rescue teams confirmed signs of organophosphate poisoning. However, due to the absence of independent and environmental samples from the site, definitive verification could not be achieved.

135 As at 30 November 2024. See: SNHR, *Between Pain and Agony: 12 Years of Chemical Weapons Crimes in Syria*, 2024, p. 2, <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/S241110E.pdf> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

136 SNHR, *Between Pain and Agony: 12 Years of Chemical Weapons Crimes in Syria*, p. 2, <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/S241110E.pdf> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

137 SETA, *The Role, Position, and Future of Assad in the Syrian Civil War (Suriye İç Savaşında Esed'in Rolü, Konumu ve Geleceği)*, Istanbul, 2018, p. 12.

138 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/04/syria-year-chemical-weapons-attacks-persist> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

139 <https://snhr.org/blog/2024/08/20/the-11th-anniversary-of-the-two-ghoutas-attack-despite-perpetrating-its-largest-most-lethal-chemical-weapons-attack-on-syrian-citizens-the-syrian-regime-is-still-protected-by-its-impunity/> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

3. **Jobar (24 August 2013):** The UN Mission collected evidence suggesting the possible use of chemical weapons on soldiers, and blood samples tested positive for sarin gas. However, of the samples collected by the UN four days later, only one tested positive for sarin. Due to incomplete evidence and environmental samples, a definitive link between the victims and the site could not be established.
4. **Saraqib (29 April 2013):** The investigation suggested that chemical weapons were likely used on a small scale, possibly against civilians. However, the UN Mission could not definitively establish a link between the incident, the site, and the deceased victims. Organ samples taken during autopsies tested positive for sarin gas, but the absence of environmental evidence prevented a conclusive determination.
5. **Eshrafiyeh- Sahnaya (25 August 2013):** Possible evidence of small-scale chemical weapon use against soldiers was found, and blood samples verified by the UN tested positive for sarin gas. However, samples collected by the UN one week and one month later were negative, preventing a definitive conclusion.
6. **Bahariye (22 August 2013):** The UN Mission was unable to verify the alleged use of chemical weapons on this date, as blood samples collected by the UN tested negative for traces of chemical agents.
7. **Sheikh Maksoud (13 April 2013):** Due to insufficient information regarding this incident, the UN Mission was unable to verify the alleged use of chemical weapons.¹⁴⁰

Apart from UN bodies and civil society organizations, media outlets have also conducted investigations into chemical weapon attacks.¹⁴¹ Regarding the Khan Shaykhun attack, which was reportedly linked to an alleged chemical weapons stockpile held by opposition forces, an Anadolu Agency (AA) team that reached the site documented that there were no military facilities in Khan Shaykhun and that only grain silos were present at the targeted location.¹⁴² In June 2017, AA submitted witness statements and visual evidence regarding the use of chemical weapons to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the UN IIIM, and the International Criminal Court (ICC).¹⁴³

140 United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, Final Report, A/68/663-S/2013/735, 2013, pp. 21-23. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_735.pdf (Access Date: 20/2/2025)

141 During on-site investigations conducted as part of the report, an interview was held with A.Y., who lost 42 members of his family in the chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun, and testimonies regarding the use of chemical weapons were collected. Detailed information on the matter can be found in the section titled “Annex II: Interviews with Victims”.

142 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriye-insan-haklariagi-dogu-gutadaki-kimyasal-silah-saldirisinin-sorumlulari-yargilansin/1561433> (Access Date: 12/6/2025); <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/aa-ekibi-han-seyhun-a-girdi/789915> (Access Date: 13/6/2025).

143 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriye-insan-haklariagi-dogu-gutadaki-kimyasal-silah-saldirisinin-sorumlulari-yargilansin/1561433> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

Assad family remains synonymous with Baath regime massacres

During the rule of the Baath Party and the Assad family, massacres carried out across Syria have left a lasting mark



Chemical weapons attacks

Since the start of the civil war in Syria, the Assad regime has carried out **217** chemical weapons attacks



At least **1,630** people killed

1982

Hama massacre

At least 30,000 civilians were killed in the massacre that took place on Feb. 2-28; 17,000 civilians went missing

February 2012

Baba Amr massacre

Around 4,000 people were killed in one month by regime forces in the Baba Amr district of Homs

May 25, 2012 Homs

Hola massacre

A total of 108 civilians were killed, including 49 children and 34 women

Aug. 21, 2013

Eastern Ghouta chemical massacre

Over 1,400 civilians were killed

April 4, 2017

Khan Shaykhun chemical attack

More than 100 civilians were killed and over 500 injured

April 7, 2018

Douma massacre

78 civilians were killed in the Assad regime's chemical weapons attack

July 12, 2012
Hama, Termite

200

Aug. 20-25, 2012
Damascus

500

Dec. 23, 2012
Homs, Elbise

100

Jan. 11, 2013
Hasakah, Sul

50

Jan. 15,
Aleppo University

87

April 2013
Daraa

100

May 4, 2013
Tartus

126

June 2, 2013
Aleppo

191

May 1, 2014
Aleppo

40

Oct. 29, 2014
Idlib

60

Jan. 20, 2015
Hasakah

160

May 12, 2015
Aleppo

47

Aug. 16, 2015
Damascus

67

Sept. 16, 2015
Aleppo

45

June 8, 2015
Idlib

50

■ Number of people killed in massacres

The prohibition of chemical weapons under international law was formally established through the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, to which 193 states are currently parties. Syria acceded to the Convention on 14 September 2013.¹⁴⁴ Although Syria became a party after the incidents mentioned above, the ban on chemical weapons had already been recognized under customary international humanitarian law and the 1949 Geneva Conventions. In addition, an international organization was established to oversee the implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which entered into force on 29 April 1997, is tasked with implementing the Convention. The OPCW also established a Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) to investigate allegations of chemical weapon use in Syria. The Mission is responsible for determining whether toxic chemicals have been used as weapons in the Syrian conflict. Between 2014 and 2025, the FFM has published 21 reports covering 74 separate allegations of chemical weapon use. The Mission found that chemical weapons were “highly likely” used in 20 cases, identifying chlorine in 14 instances, sarin in three, and mustard gas in three cases.¹⁴⁵ These reports have been submitted to States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention and to the UN Security Council. However, neither UN reports nor OPCW investigations have resulted in any significant legal proceedings against those responsible.

2.4. Enforced Disappearances and Arbitrary Deprivation of Liberty

One of the most significant dimensions of the Syrian conflict, and a pressing post-conflict issue, concerns individuals whose whereabouts remain unknown due to enforced disappearances. Enforced disappearances were frequently employed by the Assad regime both prior to and during the Syrian civil war. The intelligence agency known as the Muhaberat became particularly notorious for carrying out such actions.

In this context, individuals detained in facilities such as Sednaya Prison and other detention centers – who have not been heard from for years – represent only a fraction of the issue. Thousands of people in Syria still remain unaccounted for. According to data from the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), 130,000 individuals are missing in Syria, with no information regarding their fate. These missing persons include not only Syrians but also people from over 60 other countries, as some disappeared while fleeing the country. In many cases, the surviving family members of the missing individuals do not know whether their loved ones disappeared inside Syria or abroad. In certain instances, multiple relatives may have gone missing in different locations.¹⁴⁶

144 Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, 1997. (Fact-Finding Mission, Reports), 2014-2024. <https://www.opcw.org/fact-finding-mission> (Access Date: 20/2/2025).

145 OPCW, Fact-Finding Mission, Reports, 2014-2024. <https://www.opcw.org/fact-finding-mission> (Access Date: 20/2/2025).

146 International Commission on Missing Persons, Syria- MENA. <https://icmp.int/what-we-do/geographic-programs/syria-mena/> (Access Date: 20/2/2025).



Photographs of missing persons hung by people searching for their disappeared relatives at Merjeh Square in Damascus.

Photo: Anadolu Agency.¹⁴⁷

According to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, more than 100,000 people are missing in Syria. The Commission notes that this conclusion is based on data from organizations working on the ground in Syria and identifies the deposed Assad regime as primarily responsible. Evidence indicates that the Syrian government (Assad regime) was aware of those it detained and meticulously recorded information about them. However, instead of investigating crimes committed in detention centers, the government continued to withhold this information from family members. By doing so, it deliberately prolonged the suffering of hundreds of thousands of families and left urgent legal issues related to civil status and property unresolved. This situation has severely affected families' daily coping abilities and their capacity to fully exercise human rights, particularly impacting households headed by women. Enforced disappearances represent a national trauma that will affect Syrian society for decades to come. Moreover, thousands of individuals remain missing, not only as a result of incommunicado detention but also for a variety of other reasons. The ongoing conflict, combined with large-scale destruction and mass displacement on the ground, has made it extremely difficult for families to locate missing or presumed-deceased relatives.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ https://www.aa.com.tr/pg/foto-galeri/20241216111254_suriyeliler-samin-merce-meydanina-astiklari-ilanlarla-yakinlarini-ariyor (Access Date: 20/02/2025).

¹⁴⁸ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Syria's Missing And Disappeared: Is There A Way Forward? Recommendations for a Mechanism with an International Mandate, Report, 2022, pp. 23. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/PolicyPaperSyriasMissingAndDisappeared_17June2022_EN.pdf (Access Date: 20/2/2025).

The resolution referred to the findings of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry published in March 2021. According to the Commission's latest findings, Syrian regime forces continued to deliberately conceal the fate and whereabouts of those forcibly disappeared, knowingly prolonging the suffering of hundreds of thousands of families. Evidence indicates that the Syrian regime possessed a detailed bureaucratic system and a high level of centralized control over the detention of individuals. The General Assembly also took note of the Commission's recommendation to establish a separate mechanism to address enforced disappearances.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, by its resolution 77/301, the General Assembly established the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP). The Independent Institution was created in response to the urgent calls for action from the families of missing persons, with the aim of determining the fate and whereabouts of thousands of missing individuals in Syria. The founding document of the IIMP grants the Institution the following mandates: 1) To clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons in Syria, 2) and to provide adequate support to victims, including survivors and the families of the missing. The work of the IIMP is carried out with the full and meaningful participation of victims, in continuous cooperation with Syrian civil society, and in close coordination and complementarity with all relevant actors. The Institution's mandate covers all missing persons in Syria, regardless of the cause, time, political affiliation, or nationality of their disappearance. The mandate is of a truth-seeking nature and aims to support the right of families to know the fate of their loved ones.¹⁵⁰

As mentioned above, the Institution has two mandates: the first is the search for missing persons, and the second is providing support to victims. The General Assembly, through resolution 78/627, has established the principles governing the conduct of both activities. Accordingly, the principles to be followed and the activities to be carried out regarding the first mandate can be summarized as follows:

- a. Mapping the actors in the Syrian Arab Republic who hold information or data regarding missing persons, or who are engaged in related activities, taking into account the type of data and concerns regarding its protection;
- b. Designing an information and data management system that enables the integration and disaggregation of information and data, giving particular attention to informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality;

149 UN General Assembly, Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2021, pp. 14- 19.

150 UN General Assembly, Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, A/RES/77/301, 2023.

- c. Developing systems and procedures to address the protection and security concerns of individuals who make contact with the Institution;
- d. Developing methods to ensure that victims, survivors, and families can easily access the information;
- e. Establishing appropriate procedures to register new cases of missing persons, as well as those previously reported to other authorities or institutions;
- f. Prepare and implement a comprehensive search plan that consolidates information on missing persons using all available technologies and includes the detection and protection of mass graves;
- g. Establish cooperation agreements with relevant actors to facilitate the exchange of information and data, and to delegate specific activities to other institutions;
- h. Conduct structural and contextual analysis of information and data to inform the Institution;
- i. Develop methods to facilitate the reunification of families with missing persons who are found to be alive, and to assist in securing the release of persons who have been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty.
- j. Take all necessary measures to identify the identities of persons determined to have died and to promptly return their remains to their families.
- k. Design appropriate systems for the long-term preservation and archiving of information and data concerning missing persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, ensuring the integrity and security of these data.¹⁵¹

On the other hand, the principles to be followed and the actions to be taken regarding the support activities for victims can be summarized as follows:

- a. Conduct mapping to identify the needs of the families;
- b. Analyze all relevant actors at the national and international levels, along with the types of support they currently provide, in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses;
- c. Design an effective, practical, accessible, and transparent referral system that guides families to existing services, ensuring their participation in the process;

151 UN General Assembly Implementation of the resolution on the establishment of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, A/78/627, 2023, pp. 12-13.

- d. Shape the Institution's cooperation agreements with relevant actors based on the information obtained from these mapping processes and enable the referral of cases to appropriate entities for types of support that the Institution cannot directly provide;
- e. Establish clear protocols allowing individuals to access forms of support other than those directly provided by the Institution;
- f. Provide psychosocial and legal support to families and refer them to other actors for complementary assistance;
- g. Support families in obtaining the necessary documents (e.g., documents regarding the status of the missing person) and assist them in accessing other related rights, such as education, housing, land, and other property rights, through these documents;
- h. Organize regular meetings with actors providing support to families in order to enhance collaboration and coordination.¹⁵²

In this regard, the Institution has played a role in the search for hundreds of individuals and has provided support to their families.

A method through which the Assad regime frequently violates fundamental legal norms is the arbitrary detention, arrest, and execution of individuals. This practice sometimes results in enforced disappearances, while in other cases, even when the victim's whereabouts are known, arbitrariness produces the same outcome. The most basic defense rights of victims are disregarded, politically motivated detentions are prolonged, and communication with relatives is denied. Even worse, victims are subjected to torture in detention centers or prisons, often resulting in death. Even if a person regains their freedom after a long period, the violations suffered during detention or imprisonment cause lasting physical and psychological trauma for both the survivors and their families. Additionally, relatives of those who died, disappeared, or became unaccounted for after being detained have endured severe suffering. These violations have created a societal trauma and, regardless of sex or age, have transformed into practices that exploit social and cultural norms to humiliate opponents and subject them to inhumane treatment.

A report submitted to the Human Rights Council (HRC) at the end of January 2025 primarily addresses the arbitrary detentions and arrests carried out by the ousted Assad regime since 2011. According to the report, the former institutions responsible for detention and arrest operations under the old Syrian government can generally be divided into four categories.

¹⁵² UN General Assembly, Implementation of the resolution on the establishment of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, pp. 13-14.

The first and most prominent group consists of intelligence agencies, including the Military Intelligence Directorate, Air Force Intelligence Directorate, General Intelligence Directorate, and Political Security Directorate. The second category comprises military forces not affiliated with intelligence agencies but engaged in detention activities. This group includes the elite Fourth Division and Republican Guard, regular military units stationed at checkpoints or participating in detention operations, military police responsible for operating detention facilities, and military hospitals. The third category is composed of civil police organizations, such as the Criminal Security Branch. Finally, there is a group consisting of other pro-government actors. This includes armed groups known as “Shabiha,” later integrated into the “National Defense Forces” and other pro-government militias referred to as “People’s Committees.” It should be noted that this entire four-part structure was loyal to the former President Bashar al-Assad. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the President sits at the top of the government’s security apparatus. According to Article 103 of the 1973 Constitution and Article 105 of the 2012 Constitution, the President serves as the Commander-in-Chief of the army and armed forces. The National Security Bureau, which plays a central coordinating role among intelligence and security services, also reported directly to the President.¹⁵³

The unlawful detentions and arrests by the former regime began on the very first day of the events. Pro-government forces conducted the first large-scale joint detention operation known to the Commission on April 25, 2011, in the Daraa area. Assad regime units initially entered the residential areas of Daraa city, after which intelligence personnel were deployed to the region. Government forces encircled the area, cutting off electricity, water, and communication lines. During the operation, more than 500 individuals, including children, were detained and later transferred to various security branches in Damascus for interrogation. One week later, a similar-scale operation was carried out in the early hours of May 14, 2011, in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib Governorate. Following a large demonstration the previous day, security forces detained more than 400 people during nighttime raids. According to the report, estimates of the total number of people held in detention by former government forces at any time from 2011 onwards reach up to 90,000, though some estimates exceed this figure. Data collected by the Commission and from external sources indicate that detentions peaked in 2012 but remained at high levels throughout the conflict. The former government did not publicly disclose comprehensive data on individuals detained and released across the various parts of the detention system, nor did it respond to the Commission’s information requests on this matter since 2011. However, available evidence indicates that all individuals deprived of their liberty were meticulously recorded. Indeed, in one of the rare government statements on the matter, the Syrian Ambassador informed

153 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, “Web of Agony”: Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and ill-treatment by former Government forces in the Syrian Arab Republic (Companion Report to A/HRC/46/55) A/HRC/58/CRP.3, 2025, s. 7-10.

the UN General Assembly in 2014 that the former government had “investigated 30,000 cases.” In a 2021 statement, the government reported that between 2011 and 2020, a total of 344,684 detainees and convicts benefited from various amnesties.¹⁵⁴ This demonstrates that at least 300,000 people were deprived of their liberty for political reasons over a ten-year period. Following the overthrow of the former regime, the new authorities opened numerous prisons and released political prisoners on December 8, 2024. Nevertheless, thousands of people remain missing, with their fate still unknown.

Syria is not a party to the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. However, the enforced disappearances and arbitrary deprivation of liberty carried out by the former Syrian regime violate customary international humanitarian law. ICRC Rule 98 prohibits enforced disappearances in both international and non- international armed conflicts. Similarly, ICRC Rule 99 also prohibits arbitrary deprivation of liberty in both international and non- international armed conflicts.

2.5. Torture and Ill-Treatment

Esed The record of torture and ill- treatment under the Assad regime has not been revealed solely through the images obtained from Sednaya Prison. Prior to this, both civil society organizations and UN commissions had already documented the regime’s practices of torture and ill-treatment. The Independent International Commission reporting to the Human Rights Council conducted interviews with 7,874 victims of torture and ill-treatment, attempting to uncover the Assad regime’s record of abuses. However, the limited number of accessible interviewees, the unknown number of deaths in detention, and the reluctance of many sexual assault survivors to speak posed significant challenges to presenting a fully accurate picture. Nevertheless, the report demonstrates that the Assad regime employed some of the most severe methods of torture and committed crimes against humanity.

According to the report covering the period from 2011 to 2020, men, women, and children held in detention were subjected to inhumane treatment and torture, including rape and other forms of sexual violence. Among the interviewed individuals, a total of 474 were directly victims of torture, 463 experienced inhumane treatment, and 1,170 either witnessed such violations or provided reliable information about them. In this context, the former government systematically employed at least 20 different brutal methods of torture. These

¹⁵⁴ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, “Web of Agony”: Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and ill- treatment by former Government forces in the Syrian Arab Republic Accompanying report to A/HRC/46/55, pp. 19- 21.

included electric shocks, burning body parts, pulling out nails and teeth, mock executions, confining detainees inside car tires, and suspending individuals by one or two limbs for extended periods. These methods were often combined with severe beatings using various implements, such as sticks or cables. Torture was both physical and psychological, leaving long-term severe effects on victims and frequently resulting in death. The inhumane conditions documented in government detention facilities alone constitute torture. Incidents of sexual violence are largely underreported due to fear arising from social and cultural stigma. Nevertheless, the Commission conducted interviews with 91 sexual violence survivors, and 211 individuals either witnessed sexual abuse or provided credible information regarding such acts in government detention centers. Rape and other forms of sexual violence, sexual assault, and sexual humiliation were systematically employed against women, men, and children for purposes of intimidation, punishment, or to degrade victims and their families. Among the victims of these abuses were children as young as 11 years old.¹⁵⁵

In the hundreds of documented cases, the violations resulted in deaths in detention. Former detainees reported that their cellmates were beaten to death either during interrogations or in their cells, and that others died from severe injuries caused by torture or ill-treatment. Additional prisoners lost their lives due to inhumane living conditions, such as extreme overcrowding, lack of food, and insufficient clean drinking water. Detainees received inadequate or no medical care, and preventable illnesses – such as diarrhea and other contagious diseases spreading in unsanitary and overcrowded cells – led to further deaths. The Commission collected a total of 462 testimonies concerning deaths in government detention facilities. Of the individuals interviewed, 32% personally saw the bodies or directly witnessed the deaths, 12% received a death certificate, 2% obtained both the death certificate and the body, and the remaining 54% acquired information through reports or witness accounts. The exact number of detainees who died in custody is unknown. Even the most conservative estimates indicate that tens of thousands of people have died under the supervision of government units since 2011. These estimates are corroborated by testimonies from numerous former security personnel. According to various sources, deceased prisoners were registered at military hospitals before being transported to and buried in mass graves. Based on information from former government officials, a decade of satellite imagery, and data obtained from the families of the deceased, two specific mass grave sites have been identified in the outskirts of Damascus, in Nehjeh and Quteifa. Since 2011, all units of the Syrian security forces have been involved in the above-described violations.

155 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, “Network of Suffering”: Arbitrary Detention, Torture and Ill-treatment by Former Government Forces in the Syrian Arab Republic, Accompanying Report to A/HRC/46/55, p. 9.

Former officers of the Syrian intelligence services have stated that torture and ill-treatment of detainees were systematic and involved senior officials.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the Commission's report covering 2020-2023 confirmed that the former government forces continued these acts of torture and ill- treatment during that period.¹⁵⁷

The regime established numerous torture centers across different provinces of the country, both official and unofficial. According to a report prepared by the IIIM based on victim testimonies, out of 111 identified centers nationwide, 94 were confirmed to have been used for torture purposes.¹⁵⁸ An examination of torture centers in Syria shows that most of these facilities were categorized as military intelligence centers, air force intelligence centers, general intelligence centers, civilian prisons, military police centers, political security branch centers, military units, military hospitals, military prisons, and police stations. Additionally, interviews conducted by the Human Rights and Equality Commission (HREIT) with Syrian torture survivors revealed that civilian- looking buildings without any official markings were also used as torture centers by the Baath regime. The main torture centers heavily used by the Assad regime include:

Damascus

- | Sednaya (No. 1) Military Prison
- | Military Intelligence 235th "Palestine" Branch
- | Tishreen Military Hospital
- | Al- Kabun (Qaboun) Military Police Facilities
- | Mezzeh Air Base - Air Force Intelligence Facilities
- | Military Intelligence 215th Raids/Operations Branch
- | Air Force Intelligence Bab Tuma Branch
- | Al-Hatip General Intelligence 251st Internal Branch
- | General Intelligence 285th Investigation Branch
- | Military Intelligence 227th Damascus Branch

156 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Web of Agony": Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and ill- treatment by former Government forces in the Syrian Arab Republic Accompanying report to A/HRC/46/55, p. 10.

157 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "No End in Sight": Torture and ill- treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020- 2023, A/HRC/53/CRP.5, 2023.

158 The Syrian Government Detention System as a Tool of Suppression Report Annex B Detention Facility Names and Geocoordinates, Geneva, 2024, https://iiim.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/IIIM_DetentionReport_Public_Annex-B_Mapping-Geolocation-1.pdf (Access Date: 13/06/2025).

- | Military Intelligence 248th Investigation Branch
- | Military Intelligence 291st Damascus Branch
- | Martyr Yusuf al-Azma Hospital

Rif Dimashq (Damascus Countryside)

- | Adra Central Prison

Aleppo

- | Aleppo Central Prison
- | Military Intelligence 290th Aleppo Branch

Idlib

- | Military Intelligence 271st Idlib Branch

Hama

- | General Intelligence 320th Hama Branch

Homs

- | Military Intelligence 261st Homs Branch
- | Al Balouna Military Prison

Latakia

- | Military Intelligence 223rd Latakia Branch

Raqqqa

- | Raqqqa Criminal Security Branch
- | General Intelligence 335th Raqqqa Branch
- | Raqqqa Detachment Unit

Deir ez- Zor

- | Military Intelligence 243rd Deir ez- Zor Branch



Photos from the wards of Sednaya Prison. Photos: HREIT, 2025.

In the context of documenting the war crimes committed by the Assad regime, the global agenda was shaken in January 2014 by news that caused a major public outcry.¹⁵⁹ According to reports, an official forensic photographer of the regime’s Military Police, codenamed “Caesar,”¹⁶⁰ fled Syria with 55,000 photographs depicting 11,000 victims.¹⁶¹ The photographs, taken over a two-year period by Caesar and his colleagues, were systematically stored on a flash drive.¹⁶² Caesar then contacted the Syrian National Movement and handed the images over to the opposition.¹⁶³



*Bodies of individuals tortured to death by the Assad regime. Photos: Anadolu Agency.*¹⁶⁴

HRW examined the photographs in the Caesar file under three categories. According to this classification, the first category consists of 28,707 photographs of individuals who were found to have died while in government custody, in one of the various detention centers, or after being transferred to a military hospital. The second category includes images of the corpses of army personnel or security forces, while the third category covers various incidents such as explosions, assassinations of security officers, and fires taken at crime scenes following the attacks.¹⁶⁵

159 The relevant photographs were first published by Anadolu Agency (AA) on 20 January 2014. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/suriye-de-savas-sucu-belgeleri/189119> (Access Date: 13/6/2025).

160 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

161 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriyede-insanlik-sucu-yeni-fotograflarla-belgelendi/157365> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

162 SETA, *The Loss of Humanity: The Human Rights Dimension of the Syrian Civil War*, p. 35.

163 *ibid.*

164 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriyede-insanlik-sucu-yeni-fotograflarla-belgelendi/157365> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

165 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

The horrifying photographs that most clearly reveal the regime's history of human rights violations brought to the forefront the issue of criminal responsibility for Assad and other senior officials of the regime, as well as the need for international mechanisms to take action within the scope of their mandates and authorities.¹⁶⁶ Speaking before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee on July 2014 ,31, Caesar stated: *"The people you saw in those photographs... No one here can bring them back to life. But I am here to tell you that there are still more than 150,000 people held in Bashar al-Assad's prisons, and their fate will be the same as that of those whose photographs I took."*¹⁶⁷

Caesar kept his identity secret until an interview he gave to Al Jazeera in 2025.¹⁶⁸ Farid al-Mazhan, known by the codename "Caesar", stated that the order to photograph the bodies of the murdered detainees had come from the highest levels of authority.¹⁶⁹ These photographs serve as evidence documenting the human rights violations committed by the Assad regime.

The actions carried out by the former Syrian regime fundamentally violate numerous provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Chief among these are the right to life, the right to a fair trial, and the right to personal liberty and security. Furthermore, these actions also contravene the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT).¹⁷⁰ Due to the actions of the Assad regime, Canada and the Netherlands even brought a case against Syria before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on June 2023 ,8, for violating the Convention against Torture. Relying primarily on the reports of the Independent Commission submitted to the Human Rights Council, Canada and the Netherlands claimed that Syria had breached the Convention. According to the applicant states, who asserted their right to bring the case under erga omnes obligations, the Syrian government's justification of "combating terrorism" is invalid. This is because the prohibition of torture is a peremptory norm (jus cogens) of international law and cannot be violated under any circumstances. In their application, the plaintiffs detailed the conditions of detention and imprisonment in Syria, the methods of torture, and its effects, frequently referring to UN reports. They requested that the Court rule that the respondent had violated the Convention against Torture, acknowledge its responsibility for the violations, provide assurances of non- repetition, and ensure remedies for the suffering endured by individuals.¹⁷¹ At the same time, the plaintiffs also requested

166 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/iskencenin-fotograflarini-anlatti/135412> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

167 *ibid.*

168 <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/newsfeed/2025/2/7/syrian-whistleblower-caesar-reveals-himself-to-al-jazeera> (Access Date: 13/6/2025).

169 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ayrimcilikhatti/ayrimcilik/esed-rejiminin-iskencelerini-duyuran-sezar-oldurulenlerin-fotograflanmasi-emri-en-ust-kademedengeliyordur/1823582>

170 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1984/en/13941> (Access Date: 22/2/2025).

171 Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic), ICJ, Joint Application, Instituting Proceedings) 8/06/2023. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/188/188-20230608-REQ-01-00-EN.pdf>

the Court to order provisional measures. Accordingly, Syria must cease and prevent acts of torture and inhuman treatment, end arbitrary detentions and release individuals held unlawfully, put an end to incommunicado detention practices, prevent the destruction or concealment of evidence related to torture, and disclose the burial sites of those who died as a result of torture.¹⁷²

As with every order on provisional measures, the Court first assessed whether it had prima facie jurisdiction, whether there was a risk of irreparable harm, and whether urgency existed. The Court found that it had prima facie jurisdiction and issued the following provisional measures:

1. *The Syrian Arab Republic, under its obligations pursuant to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, must take all measures within its power to prevent acts constituting torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and ensure that public officials, institutions, or persons under its authority, direction, or control do not commit such acts.*
2. *The Syrian Arab Republic must prevent the destruction of evidence related to allegations of acts falling within the scope of the Convention against Torture and take effective measures to ensure its preservation.*¹⁷³

As previously noted, the Assad regime continued acts of torture and ill- treatment until it was overthrown by opposition forces on December 2024 ,8. In this sense, it did not comply with the Court's provisional measures. However, a new era and a new government now exist in Syria. Indeed, the new authorities have ended the practices of the Assad period and have released individuals who were detained in torture prisons for political reasons. Consequently, the future and outcome of the ongoing case before the Court remain matters of interest.

172 Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic), ICJ, Joint Application, Institution of Proceedings.”, p. 8, para. 33.

173 International Court of Justice (ICJ), Application of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Canada and the Netherlands v. Syrian Arab Republic, para. 83. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/188/188-20231116-pre-01-00-en.pdf>

2.6. Displacements (The Situation of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons)

One of the most tragic aspects of the Syrian conflict has been the forced displacements both within and outside the country. Syria's population, which was around 22.5 million in 2010, rapidly declined following the civil war, with millions of people being displaced. Some of these displacements took the form of seeking asylum in other countries, while others involved moving to safer locations within the country. According to UNHCR data, since 2011, more than 14 million Syrians have been forced to leave their homes in search of safety. Over 7.4 million Syrians are internally displaced, with 70% of the population in need of humanitarian assistance and 90% living below the poverty line. Syrians who fled abroad have sought refuge in more than 130 countries. Approximately 5.5 million Syrian refugees are hosted in neighboring countries, including Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Germany, with more than 850,000 Syrian refugees, is the largest host country outside of the neighboring states.¹⁷⁴ Globally, the number of Syrians living in camps is 259,475.¹⁷⁵

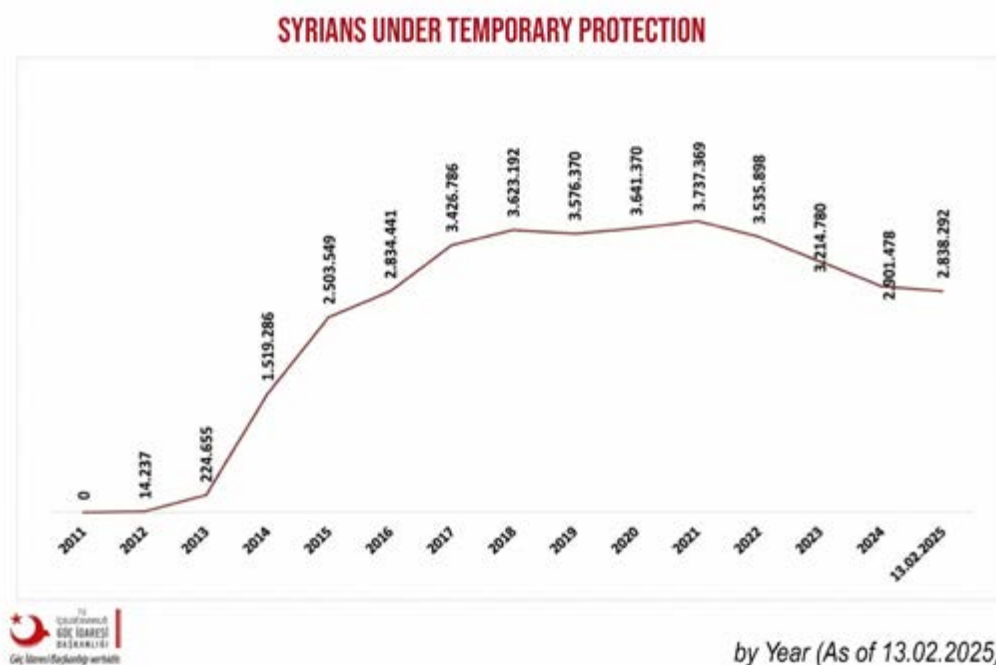
Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, Türkiye has been the country providing the greatest support to the Syrian people and hosting the largest number of refugees. Syrians who arrived in Türkiye through mass migration were granted “temporary protection” status¹⁷⁶ as regulated under Article 91 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection. According to data provided by the Directorate General of Migration Management of the Ministry of Interior, the total number of Syrians in Türkiye peaked in 2021 at 3,737,369. After that date, the number began to decline, reaching 2,838,292 as of February 13, 2025.¹⁷⁷

174 UNHCR, Syria Refugee Crisis Explained, 2024. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/> (Access Date: 23/2/2025).

175 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> (As of 31/5/2025) (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

176 The provision set out in Article 91, titled “Temporary Protection,” is as follows: (1) Temporary protection may be provided to foreigners who have been forced to leave their country, cannot return to the country they left, and have arrived at or crossed our borders in mass influxes in order to seek urgent and temporary protection. (2) The procedures regarding the admission of such persons to Türkiye, their stay in Türkiye, their rights and obligations, the procedures to be followed upon their departure from Türkiye, the measures to be taken against mass movements, cooperation and coordination between national and international institutions and organizations, and the determination of the duties and powers of the relevant institutions and organizations at the central and provincial levels shall be regulated by a regulation to be issued by the President. Law on Foreigners and International Protection (Law No. 6458), Date of Adoption: 4/4/2013, Published in the Official Gazette: 11/4/2013 No: 28615.

177 Presidency of Migration Management <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638> (Access Date: 23/2/2025).



Türkiye has implemented an open-door policy for Syrians arriving at its borders, acting under the principle of non-refoulement, which ensures that no one is returned against their will. These individuals were placed under protection through accommodation in tent cities, container cities, and other facilities across the country. Subsequently, on November 9, 2015, the “Directive on the Establishment, Management, and Operation of Temporary Accommodation Centers” was issued, and initially, 26 Temporary Accommodation Centers (TACs) were established in 10 cities. According to current data, there are 13 TACs across 11 provinces.¹⁷⁸ In these centers, the needs of Syrians – including hygiene, security, infrastructure, shelter, in-kind assistance, technical services, firefighting, laundry, healthcare, psychosocial support, education, vocational training, social and religious services, and interpretation—are fully provided free of charge.¹⁷⁹

As the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide, Türkiye has undertaken significant efforts not only in terms of providing shelter but also to ensure the social integration of refugees, to create employment opportunities, and to provide necessary support in the areas of education and healthcare. Indeed, Türkiye’s initiatives in this field have been internationally praised. In this regard, Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the UN

¹⁷⁸ <https://www.goc.gov.tr/kurumlar/goc.gov.tr/Mali-Tablolar/2024/03-MART/10-Mart/2024-Yili-Gecici-Barinma-Merkezleri-Ozel-Hesap-Giderleri-ve-Odenek-Tablosu.pdf> 2024 Fiscal Year Expenditure Report on the Appropriation Transferred to the “Special Account” through the Presidency’s Budget for the Operation and Management of Temporary Accommodation Centers (Access Date: 8/7/2025)

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/images/uploads/dosyalar/Gu%CC%88venli-Liman-Dijital-1.pdf> p.20 (Access Date: 8/7/2025)

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), stated: “Türkiye’s hosting of refugees from different parts of the world is an extraordinary example for other countries.”¹⁸⁰ Similarly, in 2013, António Guterres, then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said: “Today, Türkiye is an exemplary country in terms of how refugees should be protected. It opened its doors to a large number of Syrian refugees and provided all of them with high-standard assistance. Our contribution as UNHCR is just a drop in the ocean compared to what Türkiye has done.”¹⁸¹

In countries affected by the Syrian crisis, prolonged displacement and ongoing socio-economic challenges have had devastating effects. According to UN reports, 90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are now living in extreme poverty. Since June 2021, food prices have risen by 332%, and 94% of refugee households have had to go into debt to meet basic needs. In Jordan, two-thirds of refugees reported a deterioration in their financial situation over the past 12 months. According to the latest analyses by UNHCR, the average household debt can be as high as 1,261 Jordanian Dinars (approximately 1,778 USD). Similarly, the economic difficulties faced by Türkiye society have also affected Syrian refugees living in Türkiye.¹⁸² Factors such as COVID-19, regional crises, and the European Union’s delayed or insufficient aid have contributed to this situation. Nevertheless, states hosting Syrian refugees, primarily Türkiye, have not implemented forced return policies in response to human rights and humanitarian law violations by the Assad regime. On the contrary, many countries have developed integration policies and worked to facilitate the integration of Syrians. Türkiye and Germany are the most notable examples in this regard. These countries have not considered the return of Syrians possible as long as a safe environment does not exist in Syria.



Informal camps located in Azaz. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

180 <https://www.aa.com.tr/dunya/turkiye-insani-yardimlarda-olaganustu-bir-ornek/1235386> (Access Date: 8/7/2025).

181 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/bmden-turkiyeye-ovgu/266808> (Access Date: 8/7/2025).

182 3RP: Regional, Refugee & Resilience Plan, Regional Strategic Overview 2024. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-regional-refugee-and-resilience-plan> (Access Date: 24/2/2025).

In Syria, more than 2 million people – constituting 31% of the over 7.4 million internally displaced persons and mostly women and children – live in camps designed for short-term shelter as a last resort. These temporary settlement areas, including informal settlements, planned camps, and collective accommodation centers, often face issues such as inadequate camp management systems, insufficient housing conditions, overcrowding, and unequal access to basic services. This situation increases the risk of gender-based violence for women and children and leaves displaced persons in the camps highly vulnerable and dependent on humanitarian assistance. On the other hand, over 5 million internally displaced persons, making up 69% of the total, live outside of camps.

According to the Population Task Force data from June 2024, the majority of those living outside camps are concentrated in the governorates of Aleppo (20%), Rural Damascus (19%), Idlib (15%), Damascus (12%), and Latakia (9%). This group mainly consists of individuals displaced by conflict, many of whom have been displaced for extended periods or multiple times. Internally displaced persons living outside camps experience psychosocial distress due to disruptions in daily life, exposure to forced evictions, lack of access to land ownership, and the breakdown of social structures.¹⁸³

Refugee camps have been repeatedly attacked by the Assad regime, resulting in violations of the human rights of displaced persons. In the context of ongoing conflict in the country, attacks on internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking shelter in camps across various regions of Syria in hopes of finding a safer place have created a climate of fear within the camps. The Assad regime's obstruction¹⁸⁴ of basic supplies such as medicine and food from entering these camps has further deepened the existing crisis. Camp residents have also had to contend with natural disasters.¹⁸⁵ During field visits conducted by our institution, discussions with local authorities in Azaz highlighted the problems faced by IDPs.

According to SNHR, between March 2011 and November 2019, the number of attacks on IDP camps reached 79, with some camps potentially being targeted multiple times.¹⁸⁶ Bombardments on IDP camps have heightened fear among IDPs and significantly worsened the humanitarian situation.¹⁸⁷ An example of such attacks is the drone strikes carried out on refugee camps in the Idlib governorate of Syria.¹⁸⁸

183 OCHA, Humanitarian Response Priorities: Syrian Arab Republic, January- March 2025, 2025. <https://www.unocha.org/attachments/f52c8967-2d37-4d7e-9137-6123313b2c24/Humanitarian%20Response%20Priorities-Jan%20-%20Mar%202025%20%20Syrian%20Arab%20Republic%20%281%29.pdf> (Access Date: 2/3/2025).

184 See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriyedeki-rukban-kampi-bir-ramazani-daha-esed-rejimi-guclerinin-kusatmasinda-geciriyor/2871839> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

185 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/idlibde-yerinden-edilen-50-bin-sivilin-cadiri-sular-altinda-kaldi/2113566> (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

186 SNHR, The Syrian Regime Is Most Likely Responsible for the Bombing of an IDP Camp in Idlib and the Killing of 11 Syrian Children 2019, 2019, p. 14.

187 *ibid.*, p. 16.

188 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/idlibde-multeci-kamplarina-saldiri/810754> (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

One of the areas considered relatively safe by IDPs has been the camps in Idlib.¹⁸⁹ In northern Idlib, near the Türkiye border, Atme¹⁹⁰ has evolved into a growing camp region since its establishment at the end of 2012.¹⁹¹ Thousands of Syrians fleeing¹⁹² conflict and striving to survive have migrated to the area, and the number of residents has rapidly increased in recent years. While SNHR's report dated December 13, 2019, mentioned approximately half a million camp residents,¹⁹³ a news report by Anadolu Agency on February 28, 2025, indicated that nearly 2 million civilians were living in the region.¹⁹⁴

Humanitarian aid has been vital for civilians in Atme, as in other refugee camps, the majority of whom are women and children.¹⁹⁵ Deprivation of basic services in the Atme camps has created a long chain of violations,¹⁹⁶ while airstrikes and bombardments in the area have constantly triggered the fear of death among refugees.¹⁹⁷ For civilians living in tents, difficulties in finding employment have compounded these challenges with economic hardships.¹⁹⁸

One of the camps established in northern Idlib at the end of 2012 is the Kah Camp.¹⁹⁹ The area has also been subjected to attacks, compromising its security.²⁰⁰ An attack on the camp by the Assad regime and its supporters on November 20, 2019, caused approximately 80% of the camp residents to be displaced due to fears of further attacks.²⁰¹

Despite the ongoing conflict in Syria, there were limited returns to the country during the Assad era. However, according to UN reports, human rights and humanitarian law violations continued against Syrians returning to Syrian territory, and the guarantees promised by the Assad regime were not upheld. As of November 30, 2023, UNHCR has verified the return of more than 388,679 Syrians from neighboring countries since 2016. Interviews and field data collected by UNHCR with returnees indicate that the Assad regime has violated nearly all core human rights treaties to which Syria is a party. Syria is a party to eight core human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

189 ibid.

190 The camp is located across from Bükülmez Neighborhood in Reyhanlı district of Hatay. See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/pg/foto-galeri/atme-kampinda-yaklasik-80-bin-suriyeli-hayatini-surduruyor-> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

191 SNHR, The Syrian Regime Is Most Likely Responsible for the Bombing of an IDP Camp in Idlib and the Killing of 11 Syrian Children 2019, p. 2.

192 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/pg/foto-galeri/atme-kampinda-yaklasik-80-bin-suriyeli-hayatini-surduruyor-> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

193 SNHR, The Syrian Regime Is Most Likely Responsible for the Bombing of an IDP Camp in Idlib and the Killing of 11 Syrian Children 2019, p. 2.

194 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ramazan-2025/idlibde-yuzbinlerce-cadir-kamp-sakini-bir-ramazani-daha-evlerinden-uzakta-karsilamaya-hazirlaniyor/3495842> (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

195 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/idlibdeki-kamlarda-yasayan-sivilleri-acilik-korkusu-sardi/2284921> (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

196 SNHR, The Syrian Regime Is Most Likely Responsible for the Bombing of an IDP Camp in Idlib and the Killing of 11 Syrian Children 2019, p. 2.

197 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/atme-kampinda-bombardiman-endsesi/16862> (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

198 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/idlibdeki-kamlarda-yasayan-sivilleri-acilik-korkusu-sardi/2284921> (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

199 SNHR, The Syrian Regime Is Most Likely Responsible for the Bombing of an IDP Camp in Idlib and the Killing of 11 Syrian Children 2019, p. 4.

200 s (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

201 SNHR, The Syrian Regime Is Most Likely Responsible for the Bombing of an IDP Camp in Idlib and the Killing of 11 Syrian Children 2019, p. 10.

(CERD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Moreover, the Assad regime violated not only international human rights treaties but also the 2012 Syrian Constitution in relation to returning Syrians. The constitutional rights include protection against discrimination, the right to enter the country and freedom of movement, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, protection against arbitrary detention, torture, or degrading treatment, and the state's obligation to ensure the dignity and security of all citizens. Article 38 of the 2012 Constitution explicitly provides that citizens unless otherwise provided by and that citizens have the right to move freely within the country or leave it unless restricted by a competent court or prosecution decision or under laws concerning public health and safety.²⁰²

One of the greatest challenges faced by Syrians returning to their country is the violation of property rights. Although structural issues related to land ownership and property rights existed in Syria before 2011, large-scale property destruction, mass displacement, the proliferation of informal settlements, loss of documents related to housing, land, and property, and the adoption of additional legislation such as Laws No. 10/2018 and 26/2023 have significantly deepened these problems. These violations have had particularly severe effects on refugees and IDPs, who, due to their displacement, were deprived of the ability to manage and protect their properties and were also subjected to the consequences of demographic engineering policies implemented by the parties to consolidate control over Syrian territory. Many returnees interviewed reported that their homes had been destroyed or looted due to the conflict. Although some attempted repairs, the vast majority of those interviewed were unable to return to their residences and had to seek alternative housing. All returnees stated that they had not received financial assistance from local authorities to rebuild, repair, or acquire new housing.²⁰³

202 UNHCR, The Dire Human Rights Situation Facing Syrian Returnees, 2024, pp. 4-8 <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/ohchr/2024/en/147588> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

203 UNHCR, The Dire Human Rights Situation Facing Syrian Returnees, pp. 17- 18 <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/ohchr/2024/en/147588> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling

In the context of human rights violations in Syria, issues of human trafficking and migrant smuggling must also be addressed in relation to displacement. Human smugglers and traffickers have exploited the vulnerable situation of Syrians, creating conditions that have led to the violation of numerous rights and freedoms, foremost among them the right to life.

Under Article 3, titled “*Definitions*,” of the UN Protocol²⁰⁴ against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, migrant smuggling is defined as “*the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.*”²⁰⁵

Lesser-known routes may be used in cases of migrant smuggling targeting Syrians. For example, travel from Syria to Libya via Sudan or the United Arab Emirates, followed by passage to Algeria and then Spain, can be cited as such routes. Syrians, seeking refuge in countries where they could protect their fundamental rights due to the crisis in their country, faced numerous violations during this process. Migrants attempting to reach other countries in pursuit of better living conditions, often leaving their families behind, have been subjected to multiple abuses.

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, tragic news about victims of human smuggling has captured public attention. One of these stories is that of baby Aylan. On September 2, 2015, a rubber boat carrying Syrians attempting to flee the war and reach Greece capsized, resulting in the deaths of five people, including 3-year-old Aylan, his older brother, and his mother.²⁰⁶ The image of Aylan’s lifeless body washed up on the shore shocked the world and became a symbol of the suffering experienced by Syrian refugees. The Aylan case also holds symbolic significance as it highlights the severe consequences of human smuggling and its most devastating effects on Syrians.

One of the issues related to human human smuggling concerns pushback practices. In studies conducted under our institution’s report titled “Evaluation of Pushback Actions Against Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants from a Human Rights Perspective,”²⁰⁷ interviews were held with asylum seekers and migrants in İzmir. The individuals on the boat, including Syrians, reported that they “*wanted to cross to Greece by boat, that the human smuggler they*

204 This 2000 Protocol is considered one of the “Palermo Protocols.” See: International Organization for Migration, Glossary on Migration, Second Edition, eds. Richard Perruchoud and Jillyanne Redpath-Cross, p. 69.

205 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/15-individuals-arrested-for-allegedly-smuggling-migrants-from-syria-to-eu-europol/2936765> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

206 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/dunyayi-sarsan-aylan-bebegin-olumunun-dorduncu-yili/1570828> (Access Date: 16/6/2025).

207 HREIT(Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye), Evaluation of Pushback Actions Against Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants from a Human Rights Perspective, 2022, <https://www.tihk.gov.tr/kategori/pages/siginmacilar-ve-duzensiz-gocmenlere-yonelik-geri-itme-cylemlerinin-insan-haklari-perspektifinden-degerlendirilmesi-raporu> (Access Date: 16/6/2025). 207

had arranged with – whom they believed to be of Syrian nationality – was in Istanbul, and that they paid 3,000 euros to cross to Greece. They attempted to reach Greece on a large boat carrying approximately 250 asylum seekers and irregular migrants, including many children and women. They stated that Greek police who boarded their boat beat them with batons, forcibly took most of their phones, created large waves at sea to prevent their crossing, and pushed them back. After the pushback, when one asylum seeker on the boat called the Türkiye Coast Guard Command, they reached them very quickly and saved their lives.”²⁰⁸

Syrians seeking safety in Europe have often had to pay large sums of money to human smugglers, and in many cases, even go into debt.²⁰⁹ One of the greatest risks for Syrians is that their situation as smuggled migrants can escalate into human trafficking.²¹⁰

At this point, it is necessary to provide the definition of human trafficking. Article 3(a) of the United Nations Protocol²¹¹ to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, defines human trafficking as: *“the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another, for the purpose of exploitation.”* The provision further states that: *“Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs.”*

Between 2017 and 2021, Syrians ranked first among human trafficking victims in Türkiye by nationality, with 455 individuals (34.1%).²¹² The distribution of this statistical data by year is as follows:²¹³

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
86	15	37	159	158

208 HREIT, The Report on Evaluation of Pushback Actions Against Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants from a Human Rights Perspective, p. 46

209 <https://www.icmpd.org/news/press-releases/the-least-bad-option-for-many-syrians-exploitation-is-the-only-way-to-survive> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

210 *ibid.*

211 This 2000 Protocol is considered one of the “Palermo Protocols.” See: International Organization for Migration), Glossary on Migration, p. 69.

212 HREIT, National Report of Türkiye on Combating Human Trafficking, Ankara, 2023, p. 37.

213 HREIT, National Report of Türkiye on Combating Human Trafficking, p. 37..



There is also a link between human trafficking and the economic downturn caused by the civil war in Syria. Indeed, the economic downturn has made Syrians more vulnerable to child labor, gender-based violence, and other forms of exploitation.²¹⁴ Due to insufficient income earned by parents, Syrian children have been exposed to risks such as child labor and sexual abuse.²¹⁵ Organizations such as UNHCR and UNICEF have highlighted the threats of child labor, sexual exploitation, and potential human trafficking faced by internally displaced children in Syria.²¹⁶ The report titled “Children and Armed Conflict: Child Trafficking and Armed Conflict”, prepared by the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, addresses cases of human trafficking affecting children in Syria.

214 <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#WhatisthecurrentsituationinSyria> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

215 <https://www.icmpd.org/news/press-releases/the-least-bad-option-for-many-syrians-exploitation-is-the-only-way-to-survive> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

216 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/million-children-are-now-refugees-syria-crisis> (Access Date: 12/6/2025).

2.7. Human Rights Violations Against Health Personnel and Media Workers

One of the groups severely affected by the Syrian conflict has been health personnel. According to a Chatham House report, by June 2021, approximately 600 attacks had been carried out on healthcare facilities, resulting in the deaths of a total of 930 healthcare workers.²¹⁷ Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has documented the deaths of medical personnel in Syria since March 2011, based on open-source data and field reports. According to PHR, as of March 2024, the former Syrian government and its Russian allies are responsible for 92% of medical personnel deaths throughout the conflict. During the conflict in Syria, the government systematically targeted medical facilities and health personnel, killing doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers providing care in hospitals, clinics, and field settings. Health personnel were also subjected to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial execution. PHR has documented the deaths of 949 healthcare workers from the start of the conflict in 2011 through March 2024. Mass fatalities were recorded during the early years of the conflict. In 2012 alone, 190 healthcare workers were killed. The highest death rates occurred within the first four years of the conflict, with deaths resulting primarily from bombings, airstrikes, gunfire, as well as the abduction and detention of healthcare workers, leading to their torture or execution. In 2015, it was reported that over 95% of doctors in Aleppo had either fled, been detained, or killed. The decline in healthcare worker deaths after 2015 does not reflect a reduction in the intensity of the conflict, but rather a decrease in the total number of healthcare workers remaining in the country. According to PHR, Aleppo, Idlib, and Rif Dimashq governorates recorded the highest rates of medical personnel deaths. The former Syrian government conducted large-scale operations in these regions. For instance, Aleppo was subjected to intensive barrel bomb attacks between 2013 and 2015. Similarly, the Syrian government intensified its attacks from 2013 onwards in Rif Dimashq, surrounding Damascus, and in Idlib, resulting in the deaths of dozens of healthcare workers. sonuçlanmıştır.²¹⁸

217 Attacks on Healthcare in the Syrian Conflict, Global Health Programme, 2021. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/2021-11-23-attacks-on-healthcare-in-syria-ekzayez.pdf> (Access Date: 28/2/2025).

218 Physicians for Human Rights, Medical Personnel Are Targeted in Syria <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/medical-personnel-are-targeted-in-syria/> (Access Date: 28/2/2025).



Ambulances rendered unusable by the Assad regime. Maaret al- Numan. Photo: HREIT, 2025.



The Maaret al-Numan National Hospital, which was attacked by the Assad regime and subsequently turned into a military headquarters. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

Attacks on healthcare personnel constitute war crimes and violate the provisions of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Indeed, the UN Security Council has emphasized, with reference to the Conventions, the need to prevent attacks against healthcare workers.²¹⁹ The First and Second Geneva Conventions, which aim to protect and provide care for the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked, also extend protection to medical personnel.²²⁰ These individuals cannot be targeted in conflict zones and must be allowed to carry out their medical duties. This principle presumes a certain stability in the status of the personnel in question, and international humanitarian law recognizes both permanent and temporary medical personnel. In both cases, the personnel must be officially designated to this status by a party. Temporary personnel are protected only while performing their duties. Permanent medical personnel should not be considered prisoners of war if captured by the opposing party and may only be detained if needed to provide care for prisoners of war. The First and Fourth Geneva Conventions also protect civilians who provide care for wounded and sick combatants and other civilians.²²¹ This includes the right of civilians in conflict zones to collect and care for the injured and sick. Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions expanded the scope of persons protected due to their medical duties and eliminated distinctions between military and civilian personnel.²²² The former Syrian regime fundamentally violated the provisions of the Geneva Conventions relating to medical personnel. Officials of the Assad regime are responsible for the war crimes committed in this regard.

Crimes against media personnel constitute a significant category of offenses committed in Syria. The illegality of attacks on journalists and media workers derives from the protection granted to civilians and civilian objects under international humanitarian law. Even when media outlets are used for propaganda purposes, they generally cannot be considered military targets except in exceptional circumstances. In other words, although journalists and their equipment do not have a special legal status, they benefit from the general protection afforded to civilians and civilian objects as long as they do not directly contribute to military operations. This protection covers both independent journalists and war correspondents working for a party to the conflict. Similarly, media buildings are also protected; radio and television facilities are treated as civilian objects and enjoy the same general protection. The prohibition of attacks on civilian objects has been firmly established

219 UN Security Council, Security Council Resolution 2286 (2016) on the Protection of the Wounded and Sick, Medical Personnel, and Humanitarian Personnel in Armed Conflict, S/RES/2286, 3 May 2016. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unsc/2016/en/110092> (Access Date: 28/2/2025).

220 Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field (First Geneva Convention), 1949, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/icrc/1949/en/18884> (Access Date: 28/2/2025). Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea (Second Geneva Convention), 1949, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/icrc/1949/en/19862> (Access Date: 28/2/2025).

221 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention), 1949, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/icrc/1949/en/32227> (Access Date: 28/2/2025).

222 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12/8/1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), dated 12/8/1949, 1977, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/icrc/1977/en/104942> (Access Date: 28/2/2025).

in international humanitarian law since the early twentieth century and was reaffirmed in Additional Protocol I of 1977 and the Rome Statute.²²³

During the Assad regime, severe human rights violations were committed against journalists and media workers. Extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances, attacks on media buildings, and violations of freedom of expression were observed throughout all phases of the civil war. According to SNHR reports, between March 2011 and May 2024, 717 journalists and media workers were killed in Syria, including 9 foreign journalists and 53 who died as a result of torture. Additionally, 1,612 journalists and media workers remain detained. SNHR notes that the Assad regime, in violation of the 2012 Syrian Constitution, increased its pressure on journalists and media workers through a series of laws and presidential decrees, including Law No. 20/2022 and Presidential Decree No. 17/2012. Rather than alleviating these pressures, the regime further intensified them with the enactment of a new law on April 23, 2024. According to SNHR, Articles 4, 8, and 9 of Law No. 19/2024, which are unconstitutional, established a Ministry of Media tasked with controlling all journalistic activity in the country. Through this mechanism, the regime ensured the dissemination of its propaganda while prohibiting journalism that opposed its objectives. Consequently, all information production and dissemination activities – from print to visual media – were subjected to the Ministry’s oversight, constituting a severe violation of fundamental human rights and freedom of expression.²²⁴

2.8. Humanitarian Aid Challenges

The 13 – year – long Syrian civil war has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, pushing the need for aid to critical levels. The end of the conflict has not eliminated this need. However, the cessation of armed hostilities and the fall of the Assad regime have removed some of the barriers to humanitarian assistance. According to Amnesty International, during the war, the Assad regime restricted the passage of aid.²²⁵ As of February 2024, OCHA reports that 16.7 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance. The lack or loss of personal documents, as well as the absence, destruction, or loss of housing, land, and property records, poses a serious problem for hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, resulting in severe physical and psychological impacts. Moreover, since February 2023, the Syrian pound has lost approximately half its value against the U.S. dollar. Limited funding and the migration of skilled personnel further constrain the quality and accessibility of services,

223 Alexandre Banguy-Gallois, Protection des journalistes et des médias en période de conflit armé, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol:86, No:853, 2004, pp.37-67. (Translated, ICRC: <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/protection-journalists> (Access Date: 1/3/2025).

224 SNHR, On World Press Freedom Day: 717 Journalists and Media Workers Have Been Documented as Killed by the Parties to the Conflict and Controlling Forces in Syria Since March 2011, Including 53 Who Died due Torture, 2024. <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/S240419E.pdf> (Access Date: 1/3/2025).

225 Amnesty International, Syria 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/syria/report-syria/> (Access Date: 1/3/2025).

placing more people at risk. Additionally, the increase in camp populations highlights the urgent need to improve services and meet minimum standards to ensure adequate living conditions. The ongoing multidimensional crisis in Syria disproportionately affects the most vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities. Individuals deprived of basic services become increasingly vulnerable, creating additional social pressures. Without urgent and sustainable financing, essential services such as water, sanitation, healthcare, electricity, and education may further deteriorate. At this stage, investing in these basic services is critical to preventing a larger crisis from emerging.²²⁶

The humanitarian need did not end with the overthrow of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024. On the contrary, there are now no obstacles to Syria's reconstruction, economic development, and the restoration of access to basic needs. However, in post-war Syria, which remains in ruins, there is insufficient funding and human resources to achieve this. According to OCHA's Humanitarian Needs Overview report published in January 2025, 16.5 million people are still in need of humanitarian assistance. Between January and March 2025, 6.7 million of these people urgently require aid. To meet these needs, \$1.2 billion is required. This funding should be allocated to the following priority areas: general protection, child protection, gender-based violence, mine action, camp coordination and management, recovery and livelihoods, education, food security and agriculture, health, nutrition, shelter, non- food items, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), coordination and common services, emergency telecommunications, and logistics.²²⁷

According to UNHCR data dated 20 February 2025, approximately 292,150 Syrians have returned to Syria via neighboring countries since early December 2024. Additionally, as of 9 February 2025, the most recent data collected by UNHCR and OCHA indicate that 829,490 internally displaced persons have returned to their places of residence since the end of November 2024. In this context, over one million Syrians have returned to their homes since the fall of the Assad regime. UNHCR continues to provide essential protection assistance and services to returnees and other vulnerable Syrians through its network of community centers across Syria. In 2025, UNHCR reactivated four community centers, bringing the total number of operational centers in Syria to 106. According to UNHCR, the humanitarian and psychosocial support needs have increased alongside the return of Syrians to their homes. In particular, challenges in documenting civil status and property ownership, as well as difficulties in finding employment, pose significant obstacles. Furthermore, due to rising rental prices and limited housing options, many returnees are forced to share accommodations with other families or live with extended family members, often resulting in overcrowding, lack of privacy, and increased tensions.²²⁸

226 OCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2024-humanitarian-needs-overview-february-2024-enar> (Access Date: 2/3/2025).

227 OCHA, Humanitarian Response Priorities: Syrian Arab Republic, January-March 2025. https://www.unocha.org/attachments/f52c8967-2d37-4d7e-9137-6123313b2c24/Humanitarian%20Response%20Priorities_Jan%20-%20Mar%202025%20-%20Syrian%20Arab%20Republic%20%281%29.pdf (Access Date: 2/3/2025).

228 UNHCR, Regional Flash Update 15, Syria situation crisis, 2025. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-15> (Access Date: 2/3/2025).

Creating famine and using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited under customary international humanitarian law. According to Rule 53 compiled by the ICRC, “starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.” In connection with this, Rule 54 provides that “attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population is prohibited.” Prevention of the starvation of civilians is essentially possible through the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance. In this regard, customary international humanitarian law requires that humanitarian assistance and humanitarian personnel not be obstructed. Under Rule 55, “The parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction, subject to their right of control.” Finally, Rule 56 states that “The parties to the conflict must ensure the freedom of movement of authorized humanitarian relief personnel essential to the exercise of their functions. Only in case of imperative military necessity may their movements be temporarily restricted.”²²⁹ Moreover, norms considered peremptory (*jus cogens*) establish that systematically depriving a population of food amounts to a crime against humanity. A similar provision also appears in Article 7 of the Rome Statute, which addresses crimes against humanity.

Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria, the Assad regime has used starvation as a method of warfare, deliberately or arbitrarily restricting access to basic necessities such as food, water, medicine, electricity, fuel, and communication. The regime has besieged densely populated civilian areas and systematically prevented humanitarian organizations from accessing these regions.

During the conflict, more than forty settlements were placed under siege, most of which were located in the suburbs of Damascus and Homs. Over 1.3 million people lived under siege, and an additional 1.1 million faced the threat of siege.²³⁰ In Eastern Ghouta alone, it is estimated that approximately 400,000 civilians were trapped.²³¹ Some sieges lasted for extended periods, with the longest known siege being the Eastern Ghouta Siege, which persisted for five years (2013–2018).²³²

By blocking the entry of humanitarian aid to the besieged areas, the Assad regime cut off basic life resources such as food, medicine, electricity, water, and fuel in the region, forcing civilians to make a deadly choice between hunger, disease, and bombardment. While people in Eastern Ghouta tried to survive on a single meal per day, child deaths occurred

229 Jean-Marie Henckaerts & Louise Doswald-Beck, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Vol:1, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2005, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/research/icrc/2005/en/98261> (Access Date: 3/3/2025).

230 Czuperski, M., Itani, F., Nimmo, B., Higgins, E., & Beals, Breaking Aleppo, Siege Report, pp. 12- 15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03700.6>

231 <https://syriaaccountability.org/ghouta-siege-un-must-respond-to-government-sanctioned-starvation-and-civilian-harm/> (Access Date: 16/5/2025).

232 United Nations Human Rights Council - Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Sieges as a Weapon Of War: Encircle, Starve, Surrender, Evacuate, 2018, p. 3.

due to inadequate nutrition.²³³ As a result of the siege, at least 397 civilians lost their lives, particularly due to the lack of food and medicine. Of these deaths, 206 were children and 67 were women.²³⁴ In another place besieged by the Assad regime, the Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp, a total of 194 people died of hunger between 2013 and 2014, including 12 infants and children and 41 elderly people.²³⁵

In the areas in Syria besieged by the Assad regime, fatwas were issued stating that donkey, cat, and dog meat could be eaten. After the siege in the region, due to hunger, people tried to survive by eating mulberry leaves and wild herbs.²³⁶



The destruction carried out by the Assad regime in the Yarmouk area, where civilians were condemned to hunger.

Photo: HREIT, 2025.

233 <https://syriaaccountability.org/ghouta-siege-un-must-respond-to-government-sanctioned-starvation-and-civilian-harm/> (Access Date: 16/5/2025); <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/cehenneme-donusen-cennet-dogu-guta/1070583> (Access Date: 17/5/2025).

234 The Syrian Network for Human Rights, Damascus's Eastern Ghouta Siege is a Form of Collective Punishment, 2017, p. 2.

235 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/yarmouk-camp-starvation-siege-syria> (Access Date: 18/6/2025).

236 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/abluka-altindaki-suriyelilere-kedi-kopek-eti-yenilebilir-fetvasi/209764> (Access Date: 1/8/2025).

Syrian refugees have spread across 127 countries on 6 continents

Abdurrahman Mustafa, president of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SMDK), says that any political solution must guarantee the right of return for Syrians who were forced to leave their homes and have dispersed across 127 countries on six continents, and it must prevent new humanitarian crises



SYRIAN REFUGEES BY NUMBERS



13
Million

Total number of displaced Syrians

6,18
Million

6.18 million were internally displaced

6,65
Million

6.65 million sought refuge in other countries

127
Countries

Spread across 127 countries on 6 continents

85%

85% of displaced Syrians are still in the Middle East region

2.9. Freedom of Religion and Belief

Among the violations carried out by the Assad regime in Syria, freedom of religion and belief should also be included. These violations should be considered in the context of the Assad family's relationship²³⁷ with the Nusayris.²³⁸ Syrian society under the Ba'ath regime has historically had a fragmented and heterogeneous structure, characterized by deep divisions. This fragmentation has arisen not only from geographical features but also from ethnic, religious, and class differences.²³⁹

While Sunni Arabs traditionally held religious and political dominance, with the Ba'ath regime, the Nusayris became an influential force in the country's politics, military, and bureaucracy. Minority groups like the Nusayris have been overrepresented at the core of the Ba'ath regime. The regime positioned Sunnis as an untrustworthy social group, while portraying minority groups as under its protection to create dependency on itself. This situation generated a lasting environment of distrust and hostility in society, making the reconstruction of social peace more difficult. The Ba'ath regime deliberately deepened ethnic and sectarian divisions with the aim of weakening social solidarity.²⁴⁰

The Assad regime has placed Nusayris heavily in critical positions such as law enforcement, security, intelligence, and the military. In this way, despite being a minority in Syria, Nusayris gained dominance²⁴¹ in the country during the Assad regime. Indeed, the stability of Hafez Assad's rule from the 1970s to the 2000s was largely due to these personnel.²⁴² In this respect, governance in Syria has been shaped along ethnic and religious lines.²⁴³ Members of the Nusayri sect, who had limited relations with the outside world, considered themselves superior to other sects and beliefs.²⁴⁴ This sense of superiority is one of the main reasons for violations against the "other."

Following the period of Hafez al-Assad, sectarian violations committed by the Nusayris continued to generate tension in the country during the rule of Bashar al-Assad. The regime under Bashar al-Assad, centered on the Nusayri sect, displayed disrespect, intolerance, and

237 For detailed information on the subject, see: "1. Historical and Political Background of the Assad Regime in Syria" section.

238 The founder of Nusayrism is identified as Abū Shu'ayb Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr al-Namīrī (d. 270/883). See: TDV (Türkiye Diyanet Foundation), DİA, İbnü'n-Nusayr maddesi, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ibnun-nusayr> (Access Date: 9/7/2025).

239 Raymond A. Hinnebusch, Syria Under the Ba'th: State Formation in a Fragmented Society, Arab Studies Quarterly, Summer 1982, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 178; Muhittin Ataman, Power Struggle in Syria: The Baath Regime, Ankara: SETA Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, 2012, p. 10.

240 Ataman, *ibid.*, p. 10; Hinnebusch, *ibid.*, p. 181,182; Talha Köse, A Roadmap for Achieving Peace and Stability in Syria, 2025, p. 9.

241 SETA, The Role, Position, and Future of Assad in the Syrian Civil War, (The Role, Position, and Future of Assad in the Syrian Civil War), Istanbul, 2018, p. 19.

242 *ibid.*, p. 10.

243 *ibid.*, p. 9.

244 Türkiye Araştırmaları Vakfı, Ethnic and Religious Groups in Syria , 2025, p. 9.

hostility toward groups it perceived as “the other”, thereby paving the way for violations against different religious and ethnic communities. The fact that one group maintained power through coercion and systematic human rights violations became one of the main causes of the protests that erupted in Syria in 2011.²⁴⁵

In the aftermath of the protests, the Bashar Assad regime aimed to fuel hostility between Sunni and Nusayri communities through attacks on Sunnis carried out by the Nusayri Shabiha.²⁴⁶ Indeed, by deliberately using the term “Sunni terrorism” for the protests, the regime sought not only to manipulate international public opinion but also to intimidate the Nusayri minority.²⁴⁷ For similar purposes, the regime labeled the protesters as “radical Sunnis.”²⁴⁸ The regime’s manipulation efforts, external interventions, and conflicts in the region caused the existing fault lines in the country to break, leading the protests that began in 2011 to evolve into a sectarian war by 2013.²⁴⁹

The regime continued and intensified its violations based on religion and ethnicity after the outbreak of the civil war. Through the systematic acts it carried out against individuals belonging to different faiths and sects – as documented in this report–the regime violated fundamental rights and freedoms, including the right to life, the prohibition of torture, and the right to liberty and security. Moreover, the regime also obstructed the exercise of religious life by members of various faith and sectarian communities.

The bombing of places where religious practices are performed by the regime constitutes a violation that hinders the exercise of religious life in terms of freedom of religion and belief. Attacks on mosques,²⁵⁰ in which civilians were killed or injured, serve as examples of incidents where the regime violated multiple international norms through a single act, resulting in serious violations. Mosques, which hold great significance in terms of historical and cultural heritage, were partially or completely destroyed by the regime’s attacks.²⁵¹ One of the structures that suffered destruction due to bombing by the Assad regime, which is part of the cultural heritage of the city of Maaret al- Numan, was the Maaret al-Numan Grand Mosque.²⁵²

Due to the regime rendering thousands of schools unusable, many mosques were used not

245 SETA, *ibid.*, p. 10.

246 Türkiye Araştırmaları Vakfı, *ibid.*, p. 7.

247 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/gorus-idlib-in-bize-anlattiklari-/1764689> (Access Date: 9/7/2025).

248 Türkiye Araştırmaları Vakfı, *ibid.*, p. 6.

249 *ibid.*, p. 6.

250 <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/esed-rejiminden-hamada-camiye-saldiri-403843.html> (Access Date: 18/7/2025).

251 See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriyede-rejim-camileri-vuruyor/10748> (Access Date: 18/7/2025); <https://snhr.org/blog/2014/10/13/the-syrian-regime-targets-a-hospital-a-clinic-a-market-a-school-and-two-mosques-in-saraqeb/> (Access Date: 18/7/2025); <https://snhr.org/blog/2014/03/26/41626/> (Access Date: 18/7/2025).

252 <https://www.tihek.gov.tr/tihek-heyetinden-suriyede-bessar-esed-rejimi-tarafindan-gerceklestirilen-insan-haklari-ihlallerine-yonelik-raporlama-calismalari-kapsaminda-idlipe-bagli-maaret-el-numan-kentine-ziyaret/> (Access Date: 18/7/2025).



only for their primary function as places of worship but also as schools.²⁵³ Among the mosques converted into schools for the education of children was the Osman bin Affan Mosque in Hanano,²⁵⁴ which was attacked by regime forces on 4/2/2014. In a report prepared by SNHR, a list was shared of those who lost their lives in the bombing while attending school inside the mosque, including women and children.²⁵⁵

The regime carried out various attacks not only on mosques but also on Christian places of worship. According to the SNHR report, between March 2011 and September 2019, regime forces carried out 75 attacks on 48 Christian places of worship.²⁵⁶

Attacks on places of worship and civilians during periods of special significance for Muslims, such as Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, have exacerbated the impact of the violations.²⁵⁷ According to a report prepared by SNHR, the data on the number of civilians killed by the Assad regime during Ramadan and Eid al- Adha between 2011 and 2019 are as follows:

Sacred Time Period	Number of Civilians Killed
Ramadan (2011-2019) ²⁵⁸	16.114
Eid al-Adha (2011-2019) ²⁵⁹	1.475



The Maaret al-Numan Grand Mosque bombed by the regime.

Photos: HREIT, 2025

²⁵³ SNHR, Syria without Mosques, 2014, p. 1.

²⁵⁴ It is located in the eastern part of Aleppo and is one of the most populous neighborhoods of the city.

²⁵⁵ SNHR, Government Forces Deliberately Target Places of Worship (Shelling a Mosque that Contains a School), 2014.

²⁵⁶ SNHR, Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage, 2019, p. 5.

²⁵⁷ SNHR, 20678 Civilians were Killed During the Months of Ramadan and Eid al Fitr Holidays between 2011 and 2019 and Hundreds of Mosques Targeted, 2019, p. 1.

²⁵⁸ a.g.c., s. 5.

²⁵⁹ a.g.c., s. 8.

In interviews conducted by our institution with Syrian victims, it was also reported that people were subjected to torture for religious reasons and that the practice of religious rituals was obstructed.²⁶⁰ Accordingly, it was stated that prisoners who performed prayers were subjected to torture, that going to the mosque and praying were prohibited,²⁶¹ that those who prayed in the mosque or in prison lived in fear of torture,²⁶² and that people were detained on the grounds of growing a beard or performing prayers.²⁶³ Similarly, in these interviews, it was reported that the regime used insulting remarks regarding sacred values²⁶⁴ and forced detainees to renounce their religious beliefs.²⁶⁵

The violations of freedom of religion and belief experienced by Syrians are not limited to those occurring within the country. Displaced Syrians have also faced violations in the context of freedom of religion and belief. The large-scale refugee wave caused by the Syrian Civil War led²⁶⁶ to an increase in anti-Muslim racism in Europe, and Syrian refugees encountered various hardships due to Islamophobia in the European countries they arrived in.²⁶⁷

260 Record No. 25.

261 Record No. 9.

262 See: Record No. 5, Record No. 14, Record No. 25.

263 It was stated during the meeting held with former Azaz Chief of Police Ahmet Zeydan as part of the field visit conducted by our institution.

264 Record No. 5.

265 Record No. 14.

266 <https://www.setav.org/musluman-yasamayan-ulkelerde-bile-islamofobi-var> (Access Date: 17/7/2025).

267 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ayrimcilikhatti/musluman-karsitligi/fransada-toplum-disina-iten-suriyeli-multeciler-entegrasyon-sorunu-yasiyor/1815533> (Access Date: 17/7/2025).







III.

ON-SITE INVESTIGATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN SYRIA

Widespread Human Rights Violations Against Civilians 

Use of Prohibited Weapons 

Arrest, Torture and Ill-Treatment, and Enforced Disappearance 

Arbitrary Arrests And Extrajudicial Executions 

Torture and Ill-Treatment 

Enforced Disappearance 

3. ON-SITE INVESTIGATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN SYRIA

In order to identify human rights violations that occurred during Bashar Assad's period and to conduct on-site investigations, our institution carried out fieldwork in Syria. The human rights violations, which were examined in detail from a legal perspective in the second chapter, are supported in this chapter by primary data obtained during field visits. The findings and testimonies of witnesses and officials from the new administration regarding the violations of the former regime are presented directly in this chapter, thereby revealing the full extent of the violations committed by the regime.

The information obtained through testimonies and observations during the field visits has been evaluated from a legal perspective and is presented in this chapter under three subheadings. These subheadings are:

1. Widespread Human Rights Violations Against Civilians,
2. Use of Prohibited Weapons, and
3. Detention, Ill- Treatment, and Enforced Disappearance.

3.1. Widespread Human Rights Violations Against Civilians

Under this heading, the regime's aggression targeting civilians and violations related to property will be presented based on witness statements. It is a fact that this aggression has led to a high level of civilian casualties, forced displacement, and property violations. In addition, the targeting of essential services, particularly health infrastructure, and the regime's attempts to conceal or cover up evidence of its own attacks are among the other significant elements emphasized under this heading.

It has been observed that the Assad regime subjected cities to indiscriminate bombardment. On-site investigations determined that residential areas were rendered uninhabitable as a result of being bombed and destroyed. Witnesses described the targeting of civilians as follows:

"...They were firing machine guns on the main road. They were dropping things like barrel bombs. They were hitting cars. We would hide under trees or run while under fire." (H.I.A.)

"(The bombardment was) completely random. They were implementing a 'scorched earth' policy, trying to burn and destroy everything. Their goal was to take Aleppo at all costs; they did not care if people died. In the end, they forced people onto green buses and drove them north... (My) two houses were completely destroyed, reduced to rubble. My house in Aleppo was destroyed in 2013 by the first Scud missile. My village house is also in ruins; I cannot return to either. My animals and my truck are gone; I have lost all means of livelihood." (M.A.C.)

It has been reported that the regime adopted a policy aimed at depopulating areas where opposition forces were present. This practice is implemented after regions under opposition control are retaken and brought under regime control. Additionally, it is understood that entire areas, particularly those that can be defined as border zones, were deliberately destroyed, forcibly displacing residents. On one hand, this practice aimed to punish city inhabitants, while on the other, it can be said that it was intended to serve as a buffer zone. In districts between Idlib and Aleppo, such as Maaret al-Numan, Saraqib, and Khan Shaykhun; in neighborhoods surrounding Damascus, such as Asal, Kabbun, and Jobar; or in strategic neighborhoods in Homs, such as Khalidiyye and Jorat al-Shayyah, it is possible to observe the implementation of a depopulation policy. Witnesses from Idlib and Homs, in line with the statements of other victims, described the depopulation policy enforced by the Assad regime as follows:

“... (Regime forces) used every kind of weapon – aircraft, artillery fire, and missiles launched from the sea. They applied a scorched-earth policy, destroying and burning everything in their path. There were no roads left for us to stay in our villages anymore. So we left with our families, wearing only the clothes on our backs, and took refuge here, in northern Syria. Our aim was to gain at least some security, for ourselves, our families, and our honour. We left our possessions, our property, our livelihoods behind; we only wanted the safety of our children and our families. The Assad regime used every systematic method against us. Even while we were here it did not stop bombing; it attacked incessantly with planes, missiles, tanks, and artillery fire. Right now our homeland is completely destroyed. Our villages, our houses are all razed to the ground. There is not a decent house left to set foot in. They even cut down the trees. Their aim was to depopulate this area, to strip it of humanity and turn it into a kind of empty land. With their generals and soldiers they were saying, ‘We will plow that place and bury you in it, we will cultivate it and plant other things in its place.’ And indeed they drove those people out.” (A.A.A.)

“Look, this is U’s mother. U. was a journalist, my friend. He was detained in 2012. When his mother saw his body among the ‘Caesar Photos,’ her heart was shattered. Their house had been burned; she repaired it and still lives in Halidiyye. What was their crime? Being from Halidiyye! When the regime retook the neighborhood, we were supposedly declared ‘terrorists’ and expelled from Halidiyye. Just imagine, now there is no electricity, no water, not a single cell tower in Halidiyye. The regime’s justification was labeling the residents of this neighborhood as ‘terrorists.’ Only 2-3% of the residents could return; 97% are still refugees. My aunt returned here and repaired her house. Now she will personally tell you what she saw when the regime took over. We were literally torn to pieces. Halidiyye Neighborhood is practically a place struck by wrath. In Homs, there are other neighborhoods like Baba Amr, Rastan, Telbise, all areas that rose up because of peaceful protest movements. After the conflicts, the situation in these areas is the same.” (M.T.)



Homs, one of the cities most severely affected by the destruction of the war, Photo: HREIT, 2025.

As stated by the witnesses above, it has been observed that the indiscriminate bombardment carried out by the Assad regime destroyed civilians' living spaces, infrastructure, and access to basic services. Syrians whose living areas were destroyed and who were exposed to the risk of being killed were subjected to forced migration in line with the depopulation policy. As a result of this forced migration, displaced individuals moved multiple times for their safety, creating a main migration route toward northern Syria. Syrians living in camps in Azaz described their experience of displacement as follows:

"The migration began roughly 5-6 years ago. The regime was bombing with aircraft and rocket launchers, and also using chemical weapons. They forced us to leave our homes. They also destroyed our houses, bombing them with planes. (...) So we asked ourselves, where should we go? We decided to go north. First, we went to the rural areas of Aleppo, and stayed there for about ten days, but there too they began bombing with aircraft and rocket launchers. As a result, we retreated further north, toward northern Syria. We took our families, wanting to protect our children." (H.I.A.)

"Bombardment began on us with aircraft and artillery fire. We were forced, out of necessity, to leave our homes. Moreover, it was the middle of winter. We left with only the clothes on our backs, taking nothing with us. We could not bring blankets, beds, or other necessities. We

only focused on saving our lives... We were subjected to approximately 180-190 airstrikes... Some of our neighbors were killed by missiles or barrel bombs... During the migration, the helicopter sweeps were the most challenging; they fired machine guns from helicopters and blocked the main roads. In other words, they dropped barrel bombs on those who stayed home and carried out sweeps on those who tried to leave. Therefore, we tried to escape early in the morning, between the pre-dawn and sunrise hours. At that time, they paused slightly. During the day or night, you would see no one on the roads-no pedestrians, no vehicles... Everyone was hiding... When the regime took control of the eastern countryside (the place we called the famous “Sharqi Seiki” or “Shark Seki”), we first moved to the Maaret al-Numan area. When that area was taken, we headed toward Afrin, and then came here. For example, when we were around Maaret al-Numan, one night there were 400 rocket launcher strikes, 3 ground-to-ground missiles, plus helicopter and aircraft bombardments... The attack was so intense that we could not stay. Attacks in our countryside were usually light, but that night, due to the heavy assault on Maaret al-Numan, we could not remain there.” (C.A.)

“Even before us, others had left, but our area was also hosting people coming from different places. People from the city and countryside of Hama, Homs, and Damascus were staying in our village. When the army launched the last attack, it advanced toward Aleppo, up to the east of the highway. Everyone there, including our guests, migrated. Approximately 3 million people headed north. (...) (Our migration) was multi-staged. First, we fled toward the western countryside of Aleppo, thinking it would be safer there. But the attack continued along the entire front. We said, ‘We have no other choice; let’s go to the Türkiye border.’ (...) While approaching Surmene (Sarmin) or Dana, many people lost their lives on the roads. Some could not die at home; they died in traffic. There are so many stories...” (A.A.A.)

In addition to forcing migration and implementing a depopulation policy through bombardments, another violation committed by the Assad regime is condemning people to hunger through sieges to compel cities to surrender. This method was frequently employed in various regions of Syria, primarily in Eastern Ghouta, Homs, and Yarmouk Camp. Local residents described this situation in Homs and Yarmouk Camp as follows:

“We left Homs in 2014 – I was part of that first major forced evacuation in Syria. As we were leaving, we felt completely shattered. Honestly, I had dropped to 35 kilos from hunger. There was nothing left to eat or drink; in the end, we were eating tree leaves and grass. When the regime captured Khalidiyye in 2013, we became trapped in the neighboring districts of Juret al-Shiyyah, al-Arbais, and Old Homs. For two years, we couldn’t move at all. We were on the verge of starving to death – it was a total siege. By Allah’s power alone, we survived.” (M.T.)



Destruction in Yarmouk Camp. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

“Yes (I was subjected to forced displacement). Entry and exit to the camp were prohibited, there was no food or drink; people survived on garbage bins and market leftovers. The siege lasted for about a year. In the end, because there were perhaps 100 armed people left inside, they razed the entire camp. You see it with your own eyes – only ruins remained. Thousands, tens of thousands (of people) lost their lives... Children, older people, women, sick children, bent- over grandfathers... All of them died. Even the mosques were bombed, may Allah have mercy on them all. For example, a massacre occurred at the Abdulqadir Mosque; no mosque remained intact.” (E.S.)

As a result of the heavy bombardments and the depopulation policies pursued, it has been reported that Syrians’ homes and workplaces were destroyed or looted. The departure of Syrians from their homes led to the looting of buildings that had not been completely destroyed, including the removal of windows, doors, and even iron components from the buildings. It was reported that this looting was primarily carried out by paramilitary groups affiliated with the Assad regime, known as the “Shabiha.” While looting property serves as a punitive measure, it is also connected to the material value of the items collected. It has been observed that from Aleppo to the areas near Damascus, the windows, doors, plumbing pipes, and all valuable items in destroyed homes were stolen, and additionally, roadside power lines and electricity poles were dismantled and taken away. It was reported that the stolen materials were collected by individuals close to the regime, particularly in Homs, and converted into monetary value. Those interviewed described this property violation as follows:

“After these destructions, the so- called ‘National Army’ – the Shabiha – looted the houses. They even took the electrical cables and water pipes, reducing the homes to bare skeletons. Now many people – including my brother – want to return from Türkiye, but they cannot because there are no houses left. People have no place to go back to.” (N.A.)

“When the regime took control of the neighborhood, the Shabiha entered and looted the civilians’ property. They stole everything, from electrical cables and taps to water tanks, leaving nothing behind. On top of that, there was a terrifying bombardment with planes and tanks.” (M.T.)

“The regime also took the refrigerated truck (trailer) we had and disappeared. The house in the village was destroyed, and the house in Aleppo was destroyed. In the end, we were left with nothing. (...) Yes, everything is gone. Right now, we can only seek Allah’s mercy. For example, there is land in the village, but the house is destroyed; the house in Aleppo is also destroyed. So, I had two houses, both ruined, reduced to rubble. The truck, the animals... everything is gone. The regime, with the unit known as the ‘4th Division,’ took the truck. They even removed and stole the door and window ironworks of the house. In other words, they left nothing. We came to Azaz and started from scratch; thank Allah, we are still alive.” (M.A.C.)

Another dimension of property violation is the fraudulent transfer of real estate belonging to people whom the regime forced to migrate or who could not return out of fear. Through this method, successive sales are carried out, and it appears that attempts are made to prevent property owners from asserting their rights later.

The regime has sought to legitimize violations of property rights through legal regulations that facilitate the seizure of the assets of IDPs, migrants, and those killed, forcibly disappeared, or detained as a result of attacks. However, these legal regulations have been criticized because, in many respects, they are likely to cause rights violations.²⁶⁸

In 2012, Article 63 of the Anti-Terrorism Law granted the Ministry of Finance the authority to seize the assets of individuals falling under the scope of the Anti-Terrorism Law. This law provides broad discretion in interpreting terrorism.²⁶⁹ Consequently, during the regime, the property rights of civilians who participated in protests or were opposed to the regime were confiscated.

The law most criticized in terms of civilians’ property rights, issued by the regime, is the 2018 Law no.10 on Reconstruction, numbered 10. The law was enacted for the purpose of

268 <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/R221009E.pdf> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

269 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)

carrying out reconstruction. According to the law, individuals who own property within the regime's designated reconstruction zones are required to apply to the competent authorities within 30 days, providing documents that prove their ownership rights. This provision has been criticized because it is impossible for people who were forced to leave their country due to the civil war and do not even have identification documents with them, or those who fear being apprehended for being opposed to the regime, to submit an application. The law stipulates that if the 30-day period is not met, ownership will be directly taken from civilians. Furthermore, the law does not grant property owners the right to appeal the relevant decision. In addition, the law has been criticized because no compensation or guarantee was provided to property owners whose homes were destroyed under the law, despite approximately one-third of the houses in the country having been destroyed.²⁷⁰

It is assessed that the 2018 Reconstruction Law also aimed to confiscate the property of citizens. An examination of this law and other legislation enacted during the civil war concerning property rights reveals that the regime has effectively removed any legal barriers preventing the expropriation of citizens' property. Furthermore, it appears that there is a link between the regime's attacks and the confiscation of civilian property. For instance, during the early stages of the civil war, numerous attacks were carried out on the city of Homs, where protesters were concentrated. According to a report by the SNHR examining the attacks in this region in the context of property rights violations, it was determined that the operations conducted in the city exceeded the limits of military necessity. The report indicated that the purpose of these attacks, which went beyond legitimate military objectives, was to seize the real estate of the civilian population in the area.²⁷¹

Based on interviews with politicians and bureaucrats representing the new administration, it can be said that property violations through fraudulent sales occurred most frequently in Aleppo and Rif Dimashq. Indeed, Aleppo's Chief Prosecutor, Juma Hussein al-Ahmed, notes that Aleppo is the region with the highest concentration of fraudulent sales in Syria, and that the vast majority of these sales were made to Assad loyalists and Iranians. Prosecutor al-Ahmed points out that 90–95% of the displaced in Aleppo had their homes sold, and that these sales occurred through the preparation of forged documents, abuse of authority by land registry officials, or signing/stamping on behalf of the property owner. He further explains that the system envisions that the final purchaser may acquire property rights in good faith through successive sales; however, this does not apply to every sale, and the existence of good faith is evaluated based on the circumstances of the specific case. Rif Dimashq Governor Amir al-Sheikh also drew attention to fraudulent and successive sales, adding that in the Muadamiyat al-Sham area, regime soldiers confiscated private property by seizing 60% of the houses.

270 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law> (Access Date: 24/6/2025).

271 <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/R230815E-1.pdf> (Access Date: 24/6/2025)



Tunnels dug in Douma by civil defense teams to protect civilians and allow ambulances to reach them.

Photos: HREIT, 2025.

It has been reported that healthcare facilities and personnel, civil defense teams, and ambulances were targeted. An on-site inspection was conducted at the Maaret al-Numan Central Hospital, which was struck by the regime while patients were present, and it was observed that medical facilities and staff had also become targets of the bombardment. In various cities across Syria, it was reported that people lost their lives due to medical shortages. Interviews conducted in Eastern Ghouta indicated that the healthcare system was deliberately targeted, forcing armed groups to leave the cities. As a precaution against attacks on hospitals, it was noted that hospitals were deliberately moved underground by the public, with their upper parts covered with rubble and camouflaged. In Douma, resident M. and the official Â.Z. of the Syrian Civil Defense responsible for Douma described the violations related to healthcare as follows:

“In my opinion, the main purpose of the bombardment was to hit the tunnel and disable the medical point at its end. The regime was exerting maximum pressure on the armed groups and targeting every medical facility it saw. Even Civil Defense centers were among the first to be hit. They bombed every medical point in the neighborhood. After we were evacuated north to a safe area, they entered and changed the face of these places.” (M.)

“There was an extreme shortage in the medical field. From 2013 to 2018, Eastern Ghouta was under siege. During this period, we were deprived of all protective equipment and personal safety materials, and even the most basic medicines. Many of the amputation cases that occurred at that time happened due to the collapse of the healthcare infrastructure and the inability to provide necessary treatment. All of our friends in Eastern Ghouta suffered greatly during those days.” (Â.Z.)

It has been stated that the Assad regime has attempted to mislead the international community in order to cover up its own violations. In particular, it appears that the regime tried to evade responsibility by attributing bombardments in civilian areas and chemical attacks to opposition groups. Based on this, it can be said that the regime sought to conceal its violations and continue its actions by destroying evidence, producing false evidence, and forcing the public to give false testimony. Witnesses described this situation as follows.

“In 2017 two of my siblings were killed in Haydariye while they were at home. They bombed from the air. There were women and children there too. We rushed them to Razi Hospital. There they told us, ‘Tell the media, ‘the Free Army hit them.’” (H.M.)

“I know this shop – it had been closed for years. They broke the lock and went inside, brought tools and equipment and set them up; then they called the cameras and said, ‘Look, the terrorists were manufacturing chemical weapons here, they were going to poison the whole city.’ It was all fake. They came back under the pretext of an interview. I began to run away. Once they forced me to speak. After that I accepted no interviews because they were all lies. You know the truth, but if you speak you are forced to lie; if you tell the truth, there is torture, imprisonment, even death. If someone from our building were detained, they would be thrown into one of the prisons in Damascus; their fate would be no different from the approximately 340,000 Syrians who are still missing today.” (M.)



The Cobar neighborhood, completely destroyed by the Assad regime, Damascus. Photo: HREIT, 2025.



*The Cobar neighborhood, rendered unusable and whose residents were displaced by the Assad regime, Damascus.
Photo: HREIT, 2025.*

It has been determined that the regime carried out widespread human rights violations against civilians. Indiscriminate heavy bombardments caused the collapse of infrastructure and disrupted access to essential services. This situation was also observed to result in significant casualties and the depopulation of settlements. The depopulation process and policy led to cyclical or multi-stage displacement. This situation brought about property issues and violations of property rights due to the fraudulent sales organized by the regime. Additionally, it appears that civilians could be perceived as threats and targeted during the displacement process. Based on the data, it is concluded that the regime acted in violation of international law by imposing starvation through sieges and targeting healthcare facilities and medical teams.



The city of Maaret al-Numan, displaced and depopulated by the Assad regime. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

3.2. Use of Prohibited Weapons

Under this section, as detailed in Part II, field observations and interview data regarding the regime's use of barrel bombs, cluster munitions, and chemical attacks—prohibited under international law – are analyzed. Within this scope, on-site investigations were conducted in Khan Shaykhun, a district of Idlib, and in Eastern Ghouta, both of which are among the locations where chemical weapons were used. In both areas, inspections were carried out in the presence of experts who closely observed and documented the use of chemical weapons, and their expertise and testimonies were consulted during the analysis.



Interview with Abdulhamid Yusuf,²⁷² who lost 47 relatives, including his spouse and children, in the chemical attack carried out by the Assad regime on Khan Shaykhun. Photos: CBS News²⁷³ and HREIT.

M.H., a lawyer and human rights activist who is both a witness to and a victim of the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack, describes the attack and its consequences as follows:

“(…) Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Khan Shaykhun has been subjected to numerous bombardments and massacres. Many civilians lost their lives, most of them children and women. In the chemical massacre in particular, there were over 100 fatalities and more than 500 injured. This chemical bomb fell precisely on this street, at this point. (...) This munition was dropped by an aircraft belonging to the Assad regime on April 4, 2017, between 7:00 and 7:15 in the morning. This neighborhood is where residents were exposed to the toxic sarin gas. Approximately 100 people suffocated and died in this attack. Most of the residents of the houses you see here were children. Some families were completely wiped

272 The names of the victims and witnesses interviewed within the scope of the report have been coded. However, since Abdulhamid Yusuf is a publicly known victim, his name has been disclosed with his consent.

273 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/heartbreaking-photo-shows-father-saying-goodbye-to-babies-after-chemical-attack-syria/>

out; children, women, and older persons suffocated to death. I documented this massacre and collected evidence from the site. I delivered the evidence I collected to the relevant and competent authorities conducting the investigation. (...) While collecting evidence, I was also exposed to the chemical attack because my home was nearby, and I suffered from the chemical effects for three days. The chemical effects continue to impact people's lives. In particular, children suffered from respiratory problems for years. Pregnant women were also affected; babies were born with disabilities. There are many cases. Especially older people experienced long- term shortness of breath, and some later died. Moreover, those who faced the risk of suffocation at that moment also suffer psychological trauma. The people of Khan Shaykhun were forced to leave the city.”(M.H.)



The civilian residential area in Khan Shaykhun where the chemical bomb was dropped by the Assad regime.

Photo: HREIT, 2025.

A.Y., who was directly exposed to the attack and lost all members of their immediate family, describes the moment of the attack and the deaths of neighborhood residents due to the toxic gases as follows:

“At around 6:30 a.m. on the morning of 4 April 2017, warplanes belonging to regime forces carried out four airstrikes loaded with sarin gas. At first, we didn’t realize it was sarin gas because there was no sound of an explosion. The missile fell about 100 meters from here, near the intersection, across from the bakery. People were suffocating there – my brothers were among them. May Allah have mercy on them; they were martyred.

At first, we thought it wasn’t real, but soon we understood the seriousness of the situation. I took my children – my twins, A. and A. – and told my wife, ‘Let’s get out of here.’ Our car was nearby, but we couldn’t move immediately. I started heading down the road, and our neighbors were shouting, ‘Come, help us!’ When I reached them, foam was coming from their mouths, they were trembling violently, and their eyes were fixed. We carried them to the cars and helped the other neighbors. Then I went to my family’s house. My brother Y. was there, trying to save his five-year-old son, A., who couldn’t breathe and also became a martyr. I went to my other brother, A.; he, too, had died. He was lying in front of the door. Y.’s wife and my sister’s 15-year-old daughter were there as well. They all lived in that building.

I handed my children to my wife and told her, ‘Go, get away from here.’ I thought she managed to escape. I tried to save my brothers but couldn’t. Then I lost consciousness and found myself on the ground. They took me to a medical point – first to Rahma Hospital in Khan Shaykhun. But it was full of the wounded; they couldn’t admit me. I was then transferred to a medical point in Jarjanaz. The situation there was terrible – people were suffocating, fainting; it was a massacre. Many of our neighbors had died in their cars. A few days later, when I returned, I learned they had all been martyred.

After receiving treatment, I left Jarjanaz Hospital and went home. It was as if I had lost my memory; slowly, I began to remember everything. I asked about my brothers – they told me Y. and A., Y.’s wife, and the others had been martyred. Then I started searching for my children and my wife. I couldn’t find them. I asked many people, but they weren’t in any hospital. I asked our relatives, acquaintances – we searched everywhere. It turned out they had been right next to us, in the basement under the house. When the planes came again, they had taken shelter there. My wife, my children, and four of our neighbors’ children were all there... They all became martyrs. May Allah have mercy on them.”(A.Y.)



Interview conducted at the site where the bomb fell with Âmir Zerîfe, a civil defense worker who carried out the initial response to the chemical attack on Douma by the Assad regime. Photo: HREIT.

In the chemical attack carried out in Douma on April 7, 2018, Cemil, who lived in the targeted building, stated that the residents of the building – especially those on the fourth floor – were trapped in the toxic smoke and suffocated, and that hundreds of people in the neighborhood required hospitalization. Â.Z., the Syrian Civil Defense official responsible for the Douma area and actively involved in collecting and delivering evidence regarding the use of chemical weapons to the competent authorities, described the situation of the chemical attack as follows:

“The bomb was dropped from a helicopter; a rotary-wing combat helicopter targeted this area, and it landed right here. We documented the moment of impact. I filmed that moment from where I am standing now, recording the condition of the bomb and the type of gas leaking from the canister. I collected evidence and samples in this house. That day, risking both my life and my family’s, I transported the samples to northern Syria so they could be safely delivered to OPCW laboratories for analysis. Thanks to that, the type of chemical agent used – and therefore the party that used the weapon – could be identified. I gave testimony to various teams affiliated with the OPCW, including the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), and the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT). The reports concluded that the agent used was high-concentration chlorine and that the perpetrator was the Bashar Assad regime. Even the aircraft type and its identification code were passed to the competent authorities. (...) We collected the samples with a highly professional system; we securely delivered the specimens to the OPCW. Laboratory analyses confirmed the type of chemical, and our testimonies were taken as fundamental in determining who the perpetrator was. (...) As we began to climb the stairs, victims were piled from the building entrance up to the fourth floor; the floor we are standing on now is the fourth floor. This was a residential, entirely civilian building. Residents of the adjacent building were on the

basement levels. There was no military objective or armed element in the middle. All those who died in the chemical attack were civilians.(...) The area was under heavy military threat. That is why people had actually gone down into basements to seek protection from bombs and shrapnel. But when they inhaled the toxic gas, the first thought that came to them was, "Gas is heavier than air, let's go up." They immediately decided to climb toward the fourth floor. However, with each floor they climbed, the gas concentration increased; they were literally walking toward death. On the fourth floor, where we are now, this open stairwell was the very source that spread death. If you look at the videos and photos we took that day, you will see victims collapsed on the stairs from the entrance up to the fourth floor. Even in the basements some people tried to reach the medical point or the hospital about fifty meters away, but they could not make it; some died on the way, some died inside the tunnel (the underground hospital built by the opposition)." (Â.Z.)

In addition to chemical weapons, on-site inspections were carried out in many locations where barrel bombs were used extensively – notably the Aleppo suburbs of Hraytan, Kafr Hamra, and Anadan, and other central neighborhoods – as well as in the Damascus suburbs of Cobar, al-Kabun, and Harasta; in Douma in Rif Dimashq; in the Khalidiyye neighborhood of Homs; and in several places in Idlib, particularly Saraqib and Maaret al-Numan. The severe destruction caused by the barrel and cluster munitions used there was plainly observed. As noted in the previous section, the frequent use of barrel bombs appears to have been intended to create fear and depopulate the area. This sought to force the population to abandon the area and to reduce the armed groups' logistical support, or to drive armed elements out by weakening their popular support. In addition, it has been indicated that barrel bombs were also intended to destroy traces of other prohibited chemical weapons used. Whatever the motive, based on interviews with elites and victims, it is understood that chemical weapons, barrel and cluster munitions, and other prohibited weapons were used in areas controlled by the opposition.

"Now we see that the area was being brutally attacked with barrel bombs to prevent people and the wounded from reaching the field hospital, to stop Civil Defense teams from coming to help, and to erase the traces of the crime. To destroy any evidence of chemical weapon use, the entire neighborhood was set on fire and flattened. When we arrived and tried to collect the bodies, the pain we felt and the hardships we went through are still before my eyes. May Allah have mercy on the dead and grant patience to their families; I hope that one day justice will be achieved for these victims and their loved ones." (Â.Z.)

It is understood from witness testimonies that several measures were taken, especially to protect against barrel bomb attacks. Ahmet Zeydan, former Police Chief of Azaz, stated that because barrel bombs caused direct destruction where they fell, people immediately went down to shelters and basement floors of buildings to protect themselves as soon as they received news of planes taking off from the airport. In Eastern Ghouta, tunnels were dug to protect against the destructive impact of barrel bombs, wide enough for a car to pass

through and to allow treatment of those injured in the attacks at the hospitals. On- site inspections of these tunnels were conducted with officials, and detailed information about the tunnels was obtained.

“The tunnel connected to a network that, in places, descended to a depth of 25 meters and was also used by civilians as a shelter. This depth was sufficient to protect against barrel bombs and missiles dropped from aircraft. (...) The entrance was dug by the local population living here at the time. The purpose was to prevent the entrance to the medical point from being targeted by warplanes. Whenever there was an intense military raid, ambulances would gather in front of the hospital. The tunnel was used only for emergency transport. Because it was dug between two buildings, it could not be seen by surveillance drones. Ambulances would enter through it, deliver the injured to the emergency room, and exit through another passage, thus protecting them from the bombing of the hospital or medical point. (...) The tunnel was dug solely to transport the injured safely to the hospital, that is, for medical and emergency purposes. It had no military or offensive function. Why was it dug? To allow rescue personnel to reach the victims for treatment while being protected from the shrapnel of barrel bombs.” (Â.Z.)



Tunnels dug by civil defense teams in Douma to protect civilians. Photos: HREIT, 2025.

In addition, civilians relocated to areas they perceived as safer in an effort to protect themselves from intense barrel bomb attacks. As discussed in more detail in the previous section, this resulted in displacement and forced migration, leading to various forms of victimization. A victim residing in camps in Azaz described their experience of forced migration due to barrel bombs as follows:

“Before coming to Azaz, we had returned to Aleppo for a while and stayed in a relative’s

house. After staying there for some time, during the mass exodus from Aleppo – they were dropping 200 barrel bombs every day – we had to leave again. This was in 2016. The cruel regime, dropping 200 barrel bombs daily, said, ‘I will not stop until I level it completely.’ (...) The regime dropped 200 barrel bombs every day. They used every kind of weapon: Scud missiles, vacuum bombs, cluster munitions... There was no weapon they did not use in Aleppo. (...) Eventually, Aleppo was taken over, people were loaded onto green buses and sent to the northern countryside. At that time, we came to Azaz and settled there.” (M.A.C.)

Based on on-site inspections and the testimonies of victims and elites, it is understood that the Assad regime frequently resorted to barrel bombs indiscriminately in bombardments, did not hesitate to use cluster munitions, and carried out massacres against civilians using chemical weapons. The use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun and Eastern Ghouta, as well as in various other locations in Syria, the destruction of cities, and the displacement of millions of people, can be cited as the most concrete examples of human rights violations.

3.3. Arrest, Torture and Ill-Treatment, and Enforced Disappearance

Under this heading, the report addresses three main issues i) arbitrary arrests and summary executions, ii) torture and ill- treatment, and iii) enforced disappearance. First, under the subheading of arbitrary arrests and summary executions, the analysis focuses on the arbitrary detention of Syrians, the torture they were subjected to, their non- appearance or delayed appearance before judicial authorities, and the resulting instances of summary execution. Under the subheading of torture and ill- treatment, the cruel treatment Syrians experienced during interrogation and detention is examined. Under the subheading of enforced disappearance, the report analyzes cases where the families of detainees were unaware of their whereabouts and fate, as well as the occurrence of mass graves.



A visual depicting the Tadamon massacre, where civilians were thrown into pits and burned, on the wall of a ruin in Yarmouk. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

Arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial executions

The Assad regime, under the pretext of maintaining public security, has arbitrarily accused individuals of crimes, carrying out arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial executions. Arbitrary detention could occur following the discretionary behavior of a security officer at a checkpoint or as a result of a complaint or tip-off. Interviewed individuals who were subjected to detention generally reported that the reasons given for their arrest were linked to alleged membership in a terrorist organization, possession of symbols related to the opposition, communication with dissidents, participation in demonstrations, disrupting public security, or engaging in speech or activities against the regime and Hafez al-Assad or Bashar al-Assad. A notable point here is that in interrogation centers, no genuine investigation was conducted into whether the alleged crimes were actually committed; instead, the accused were often coerced into admitting the alleged offenses through ill-treatment. Victims also emphasized that family members' attempts to obtain information about detained individuals frequently resulted in their own detention. From this, it was observed that the principle of personal criminal responsibility was violated, as detentions and arrests were sometimes carried out based on the alleged guilt of a family member. Interviewed victims described the practice of arbitrary detention as follows:

"I was detained at a checkpoint while returning home from university. It was December 2012, in Idlib. Of course, I was detained at a checkpoint while traveling from my university in Aleppo to my home in Idlib. The reason for my detention was that I had a laptop with me. They may have noticed that some files on the laptop contained things related to the Syrian revolution, such as demonstrations or flags. That's why they arrested me. Later, my father went to obtain information about me. He was also detained. Initially, we were arrested by the security branch in Idlib. Then, we were transferred to the military intelligence branch. After that, we were sent to Branch 215 in Damascus. Of course, no reason or justification was given during the transfer process. Everything was entirely arbitrary. My arrest was completely arbitrary. (...) There was absolutely no official justification – no court order or any other document. Everything was arbitrary. (...) The interrogators told us, 'What you said at previous branches doesn't matter; everything starts anew here. You are guilty.' They did not explain what our crime was. Mockingly, they said to us, 'Now we are calling Azrael here because there are new people.' The person they called Azrael came and began beating us severely – on our faces, backs, and hands. We were ordinary civilians, carrying no weapons and harming no one. Yet, they forced us to confess, saying, 'Admit that you attacked this checkpoint.' They also interrogated us about our connection with other people detained from the same city. They asked for the name of a checkpoint, then accused us by saying, 'You targeted this checkpoint,' and recorded it. This is what they said after the interrogation ended." (A.S.)



An interview with a Syrian victim at the HREIT Gaziantep Office. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

“They accused me of a fabricated crime of being a member of armed groups. (...) There was no such thing there (in Syria) – it didn’t happen as the result of any legal decision. There was no legal basis anyway. Someone could simply file a tip-off, or there could be a mix-up or similarity because of a surname... For example, the person they’re looking for might even be your relative; they come and take you like that.” O.T.

“I had some business at the general company in Homs; I was dealing with paperwork. They told me, ‘You need a signature at the Political Security Office, no problem, just take the document and get it signed.’ I went there to get the document signed. I entered the office and told someone, ‘I only need to get this document signed,’ but the man said, ‘Wait a little,’ closed the door, and left. After a while, four officers came, blindfolded me, handcuffed me, and took me to the branch—the Political Security Branch. The charges were participating in demonstrations, insulting the President, and similar issues. All of them were related to the revolutionary movement in Syria. (...) They took me to Political Security, where I stayed for about an hour. They asked questions regarding this accusation; there was no court order or any other official document. It was entirely arbitrary. For about an hour, they took my personal information and statement. Then they took me down for interrogation. First, they stripped me completely naked, searched my clothes, and began hitting me directly. They cursed me, insulted me and my family, even swore at Allah, and made threats. This lasted about two hours. Then they put me in a solitary cell. (...) When we first entered, we were kept with our hands behind our backs, on our knees, heads down. This time, they didn’t

blindfold us, but there were soldiers and officers in the room. They shouted, 'Sign this!' – we didn't know what we were signing. They were just yelling, 'Sign it!' When they asked for our names and said, 'Come here!' hitting would start immediately as soon as we stood up. Our bodies were already bruised from previous torture. We stayed in this kneeling position for about three hours. Anyone who stood up, moved, or spoke to a friend was immediately struck on the head or back. (...) We stayed like this for almost five months. (...) Towards the end of the interrogation, while my eyes were blindfolded, I was being beaten in front of the interrogator. The officer asked me, 'Will you confess or not?' I had had enough, so I said, 'Okay, I will confess.' As he wrote, he recorded something. I asked, 'Are you tired?' He said, 'Yes.' I told him, 'Everything I'm saying is a lie, just so you know. I actually didn't do anything, but I am exhausted from the beatings and torture.' He replied, 'Do it or don't do it, it doesn't matter, here you will accept it. You will sign the statements. Then you will appear before the military judge.' He said exactly this: 'Whether you committed the crime or not, I don't care. My concern here is to have this confession signed.'" (Q.T.)

As can be understood from the above statements, detention and interrogation periods were prolonged. Victims who shared their experiences indicated that, although the law prescribes specific time limits for these processes, they were never adhered to, and individuals could be held in interrogation centers or security units for months or even years. During this time, individuals were not brought before a court, nor were they or their families informed about when they would appear. Families were not notified whether the person had been taken by security forces, where they were held, or whether they were considered guilty, and the individual's connections with their entire social environment were severed. H.M., who was accused and stopped at a checkpoint on the allegation that a childhood friend he had contacted by phone had joined the Free Syrian Army and passed information to him, described the length and uncertainty of his detention and the isolation from his family and society as follows:

"...(During my detention) I neither appeared in court nor met with anyone. The arrest was not official. There was no lawyer or anything. If anyone tried to find you there, asking, 'Where is this person?' they would include that person in the same accusation as you. So, there was no official detention. When the time was up, the branch would send a note to other security units. The same logic applies in all security branches in Syria: for example, a branch in Aleppo would write a petition to higher authorities, saying, 'We have this name, the situation is as follows. What should we do – send them to the military court, release them, or transfer them to another branch?' Then a sealed envelope would come from above. In that envelope, there would be orders such as 'Try this person,' 'Send to military court,' or 'Release.' It doesn't matter if you are a civilian; if you end up in a military branch, you will

definitely be referred to a military court. (...) They took us by car to the Palestine Branch. (...) In the courtyard, they said, 'Look, once you enter here, the situation changes. Once you go inside, you disappear, no one can find you. If you come out, it's like being born again.' (...) (After being tortured in a solitary cell for 15 days) At some point, they took me back for interrogation. They asked, 'Do you know so-and-so, so-and-so?' Some I knew, some I didn't. I said, 'If I don't know these names, I don't know them.' They beat me again and sent me back to the cell. (...) The first three months passed entirely under torture. According to Syrian law, a person cannot be held in security branches for more than 90 days. Within that period, they must be brought before a judge or released - no matter who you are, whether a terrorist or something else. But what they did was, every 90 days, they would restart your entry as if you had just been newly detained, giving you a new number. (...) In my first year, I spent 4-5 months in solitary cells, 2-3 months being transferred, 4-5 months under interrogation, and in the last year, they simply forgot about me." (H.M.)

For an act to constitute a crime, the principle of legality requires that it be predefined by law, constitute a violation of the law, and involve intent or negligence. Based on the testimony of victims, contrary to the principle of legality, actions that are not clearly and transparently defined as crimes have been treated as criminal offenses, and arrests have been carried out on that basis. In particular, it has been reported that young people who pray or those who grow beards at an early age were monitored by security units, and at a certain point, a connection was made between these acts and membership in a terrorist organization. Victims consulted have stated that age was not taken into account in arbitrary detentions, and minors were also arrested and subjected to torture as follows:

"If a young person gets up for morning (dawn) prayer or prays regularly, this is considered a major crime for them because the young person is seen as religiously committed and therefore dangerous. They assume the person is aware and understands what they are doing. In the 1980s, very few people, especially young people, attended morning prayer... Therefore, if a young person went to morning prayer, they were immediately arrested on the charge of 'membership in the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan).' Attending morning prayer, or performing the five daily prayers regularly in a mosque, was considered a crime, especially for young people... (...) After school, I would go to a workshop where household appliances were repaired. When it was time for the call to prayer, since there was no restroom in the workshop, I would go to the mosque's restroom to perform ablution, pray there, and then return. The shop owner allowed this. One day, the mosque's imam came to the shop and told me, 'Ö, don't go to pray in the mosque anymore; it's better for you to pray here.' I asked, 'Why?' He said, 'You are attracting attention.' That is, 'They are asking questions about you, 'Who is this boy, why does he come, what does he know?'" So don't pray in the mosque.'

From that moment, I stopped praying with the congregation. (...) Recently, police stations and security branches have been keeping complete records of those who attend morning prayer or the five daily prayers regularly. They keep them under full surveillance: where they gather, who they meet, every detail is recorded. This was the situation everywhere in Syria. Everywhere, it was the same.” (O.T.)

In line with the above account, former Azez Police Chief Ahmet Zeydan stated that he was arrested in 2004 and 2008 for growing a beard and performing prayers, and that he was subjected to torture in all security units. He explained that growing a beard and praying were equated with membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, which was considered a terrorist offense. He further noted that the regime used torture methods that push the limits of human endurance, dehumanizing individuals, and that such practices began with the 1980 uprising in Hama and increased again after 2012. The former Police Chief emphasized that, especially after the end of 2012, people across the country were subjected to arbitrary detention and extrajudicial execution, and that it became routine for detainees to endure severe torture in prisons such as Sednaya and Tadmor.



Informal camps housing thousands of people in Azez. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

Muhammed Hamdan Yusuf, Chairman of the Azez Local Council, also stated that, based on his own detentions and interrogations – first in 1972 during high school, and later in 1985 and 2011 – human rights violations in Syria under Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad showed no significant differences. He noted that in his first two detentions he was accused, without any evidence, of providing financial support to the Muslim Brotherhood, while in his 2011 detention he was accused of working against the regime. Emphasizing that these arrests were carried out on a political and arbitrary basis, Yusuf also highlighted the torture he endured during interrogations and in prison.

It has been observed that some arbitrary detentions carried out outside the legal system have resulted in extrajudicial executions. In the arbitrary detentions described by the interviewed individuals, it appears that interrogations were conducted with the aim of forcing the detainees to admit to the alleged crimes. Victims stated that interrogations conducted in military courts often ended in extrajudicial executions. O.T., who was detained in 2014, explained that his older brother, who had been arrested in 2012 for participating in protests, was executed, but they only learned this after conducting research following December 8, 2024, as they had received no news about him earlier due to the closed nature of military trials:

“The death sentence was issued by a military field court. Neither a lawyer nor a judge could access these courts. Legally, it was a completely closed system. The field court consisted of three people: the prison director, a military judge, and an intelligence officer or security branch official. The process for issuing a death sentence was very simple: they would call the prisoner, ask for their name and the charges against them, then ask, ‘Is this correct?’ and the prisoner would respond ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ That was all. Only these three questions were asked. Then the prisoner was made to sign a document containing the death sentence. That was how the field court operated. No one disappeared there because no one was secretly lost; executions were carried out directly.” (O.T.)

M.A., who was arrested at the age of 15 in 1980 and spent approximately 25 years in prison, emphasizes that arbitrary detention and extrajudicial execution are not phenomena exclusive to Bashar al-Assad’s era, but have existed since the time of Hafez al-Assad, and that release from prison was also arbitrary. Similarly, Q.T. noted that the court system functions only formally, serving primarily to validate confessions obtained through coercion during interrogations rather than to ensure justice. While R.M. points out that the judicial system is influenced by social networks, M.A. highlights that court decisions can be altered through bribery:



An interview with a Syrian victim at the Civil Law Association. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

“According to Syrian law, I had been sentenced to death. However, instead of reducing my sentence to six years due to my age, they reduced it to 12 years because I was a minor. So, what was the outcome? They were supposed to keep me in prison for 12 years, but I was held for more than 24 years. This is oppression on top of oppression! What does it mean to spend almost 25 years in prison? It means a human lifetime, a quarter of a century! (...) I imprisoned Tadmor on October 30, 1980. (...) I, along with 43 others, was transferred here from Aleppo. Among us, 8-9 people were under 18. Everyone else was transferred. Because we were under 18, we were spared execution, but 36 people were tried in a military court and executed. (...) The so-called court was not even a judicial process. The judge was a short man named Suleyman al-Hatib. Next to him sat a large man, called his ‘assistant.’ They would ask a prisoner entering only, ‘What is your name?’ If there was a charge in the file, they would issue a sentence without any interrogation. Some prisoners made false confessions under torture. For example, someone would be asked, ‘Did you kill so-and-so?’ and, unable to withstand the torture, they would admit to the crime. These courts were the most terrifying; people were executed just for dreaming. This oppression was a system unprecedented in history. (...) Transfers to Tadmor did not end and continued until the year 2000. According to statistics, 40,000 to 50,000 people were imprisoned in Tadmor Prison over 20 years, and perhaps only 2,000 to 7,000 were released; the rest were executed (or died). Possibly around 90% of those who were sent Tadmor between 1980-2000 were buried there. Executions, especially in the first period, sent to Tadmor 1980-1982, imprisoned in Tadmor four to five times a week. (...) The group I entered with had 43 people, 36 of whom were executed. (...) In July 2004, they called us, saying they would release us from prison. There were 150 of us. They sent 50 back and released another 50. Among the 150, there were about 6-7 former detainees. They separated us and prepared us for television interviews. Buseyne Shaban would come, as well as Major General Hasan... Hasan Haluf, I forgot the name... They would come and interview us. The footage was made to send to state forgot. They told us to speak, ‘With the permission of the President, by his pardon,’ and to express remorse. But after 24 years, how could one show remorse? I spoke personally, but I was not at ease. They started asking questions again; Buseyne Shaban was not satisfied and said, ‘Take him again and send him.’ They kept me from August (the eighth month) to December (the twelfth month), then took me to the President again. (...) Honestly, though reluctantly, they had to release us. Allah also helped us, praise be to Him.” (M.A.)

“Then they took us to the judge. There was a civilian judge and a military judge. The civilian judge brought various charges, such as ‘participating in demonstrations,’ and the military judge added other charges, such as I told him, ‘Sir, I do not accept these; everything I signed was under beatings, under torture,’ he said, ‘You confessed to these crimes; I will not consider anything else.’ Even when I said, ‘Sir, they forced me and beat me to death,’ he didn’t care. I thought, ‘If you stayed in my place for one hour, you’d confess twenty times over,’ but the judge did as he pleased. He found me guilty one hour, sent me to prison.” (Q.T.)

“I was released thanks to a friend of my husband. He was a lawyer. I was released before my case was officially closed. (...) My husband had a friend working in Tartus who would occasionally call, ask how we were, and provide some help. At that time, my sister was with the children. When that friend asked, ‘Where is R.?’ my sister said, ‘R. has been arrested.’ He asked, ‘Why didn’t you inform me? Why did this happen?’ Then that lawyer friend somehow got involved and followed up on the situation. He had a friend who was a judge and some connections in Damascus. Thanks to him, I was released.” (R.M.)

Torture and Ill-Treatment

Testimonies indicate that ill-treatment and torture begin during detention, intensify during interrogation, and become routine in prison. Individuals detained based on any allegation are subjected to torture during interrogation to coerce them into admitting to the alleged crime. To this end, detainees are transferred to interrogation centers in different cities, where they are subjected to various forms of torture and interrogated again at each location. During transfers between interrogation centers affiliated with different security units in different cities, individuals endure inhumane treatment, physical abuse, and psychological violence. A.S., a university student in 2012, described the harsh transfers between centers during the interrogation process and the ill-treatment and torture he experienced as follows:

““They would tell us, ‘Confess that you carried weapons and attacked checkpoints or military zones.’ But we didn’t confess because we hadn’t done any of it, so the torture continued. Eventually, they sent us to Damascus. On the way, they put us in a vehicle that resembled a truck used for transporting sheep. The floor was covered with animal waste. They made us lie down, our hands were tied behind our backs, and we could not move. We were truly packed in like sheep. The vehicle started moving, but we didn’t know where we were going. At first, they mockingly said, ‘You are going to your families,’ but we later realized that wasn’t true. The vehicle left Idlib, passing through a camp called ‘Mastume.’ They transferred us from this vehicle to a large open truck resembling a transport vehicle, and we continued like this. Then we entered areas completely under regime control. At one checkpoint, a security officer wearing military boots came toward the vehicle. (...) There were about 25 of us in this vehicle. I didn’t hear the exact number, but there were other detainees with us, some sitting near the edges. This person held onto the edge of the vehicle and started hitting people on their heads with his boots. People were struck, and many were bleeding heavily from their heads. (...) After taking us from here, they transported us from Idlib to the military police center in Hama, where we stayed for about two days. Then we were transferred to Al Balouna Military Prison in Homs for two days, and afterwards to the Kabun Military Police Center in Damascus. Finally, we were sent to Branch 215. Of course, this entire process was filled with

pain and torture. We were tortured even during the journey. I still carry the marks. Look, here are some, and here are others. (...) The method of transport was never normal. For example, upon arriving in Hama, we were kept in sheep-transport-like vehicles for about two days. When transferred from Hama to Homs, we were chained together – this ‘chain’ meant a line of people bound like a chain. They put us in a closed vehicle resembling a refrigerated or meat transport truck. The vehicle was so crowded that I couldn’t say exactly how many were inside, but it was extremely packed, and we could barely breathe. My hands were tied with plastic handcuffs, which left marks over time. Even now, 11 or 12 years later, the marks remain. Upon arriving in Homs, they made us remove all our clothes and searched us completely naked. We stayed in Homs for two days, during which torture continued. Then we were sent from Homs to the military police center in Kabun, and afterwards to Branch 215. At Branch 215, the torture resumed. They said they would not accept anything said in previous branches and that the interrogation would start anew. When we first entered Branch 215, I thought it was a slaughterhouse. It smelled like a place where animals were slaughtered – blood, disease, and decaying corpses. At first, I thought it was for sheep or cattle because we could see nothing; our eyes were blindfolded and we were taken to the basement. Descending the stairs, we entered a large hall. The hall was overflowing with people. It was very cold, and people were almost naked, wearing only underwear. The torture we had experienced in Idlib or other branches seemed very mild compared to what happened at Branch 215. Other detainees there told us, ‘This is Branch 215. Anyone who enters here disappears; those who come out are like reborn.’ This conveyed how difficult it was to get out.” (A.S.)

The interrogation process is equivalent to severe physical and psychological torture. It has been reported that there is generally a hierarchy in the severity of torture between interrogations conducted at security units in different cities. In this context, the Al Balouna Security Center in Homs – which includes a quadruple committee composed of military intelligence, air intelligence, political security, and state security – is considered one of the most feared places in terms of torture and human rights violations. In parallel with the fear created by Branch 215 mentioned above, Q.T. provides detailed insight into the differences in the level of torture among security and interrogation centers and the notorious reputation of Al Balouna for torture:

“Almost every day, a group of seven or eight Shabiha would come in; they carried thick sticks, sometimes metal rods. They would beat us and then leave as if it were a form of entertainment. This went on continuously. I stayed under these conditions for nearly three months. At the end of the three months, we were transferred to a four-person committee called ‘el-lecne er-rubaiyye,’ which was the security committee in Homs. It was composed of four branches: Military Intelligence, Air Intelligence, Political Security, and State Security. Previously, when we talked among ourselves in State Security (Aman al-Dawla), we would say, ‘We hope they send us to Damascus or Sednaya, just don’t send us to that four-person committee.’ Because its name was ‘el-lecne er-rubaiyye,’ and it was said that anyone sent there was going to hell. One day, they put us on buses. There were about 150 of us. Even as we got on the vehicle, we received beatings equivalent to all we had suffered before. We traveled for about an hour or more. We thought we were going to Damascus. Our eyes were blindfolded, our hands cuffed behind our backs. Those standing over us struck us with electric cables, thick sticks, and batons continuously. We had no idea exactly where we were. Then the bus stopped, and they made us get off. People said, ‘This must be the place of the four-person committee.’ It turned out this was the military prison called Al Balouna. In Syria, the number one military prison was Sednaya, the second was Tadmor, and the third was Al Balouna. It was also the center of the security committee in Homs. People said, ‘Al Balouna, the four-person committee... this is literally the gate of hell...’ and with that, everyone’s last hope was gone.” (Q.T.)



Corridor with cells in the notorious Al Balouna Military Police Prison in Syria. Photo: HREIT, 2025.



Entrance area of Al Balouna Military Police Prison. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

Testimonies indicate that individuals are generally held in underground solitary cells or in cramped spaces with many people at interrogation centers. Survivors consistently report that the physical conditions of the cells where they were kept during interrogation were extremely poor, a finding confirmed during on-site inspections. Solitary cells have insufficient ventilation, lack natural light, and as a result, detainees lose their sense of time. In both solitary cells and the small rooms where multiple detainees were held, there is no opportunity to lie down or rest. Ultimately, individuals are transferred to military courts – which operate formally – either by accepting the alleged crime or assuming they committed it, and from there to prisons. During the period before being accused of the alleged crime, detainees endure severe torture at various security centers while struggling to survive. O.T. described this situation as follows:

“They put me in a solitary cell. The area did not exceed 5 square meters—about 5 or 6 square meters... Its length was 2.75 metres and its width 1.75 metres... There were seven of us in that cell. It was underground. There was no light in the cell; only a little light came through a small vent from the corridor. There was an air opening to the outside, a kind of fan (turbine) that forced air in. Even on cold winter nights, they would leave the ventilation on deliberately so our bodies would get very cold. There was nothing to protect us. There was only a thin blanket, which was not enough to block the cold from the floor. There was one more blanket,

but seven people had to cram into that single blanket. We were forced to lie on top of one another. For example, one would lie on his side and pull his legs in and another would put his head near that person's feet. We were so tightly packed that even sleeping a little was difficult – there was no space to turn. Even if the body went numb, we could not move. At the same time, we suffered from skin diseases in the cell. There were lice and cockroaches. The cell was truly filthy. At night, we were so cramped we could not move. For example, even if we itched, because of lice and skin from disease there was no place to scratch. We stayed in the solitary cell for about 16 days. My whole body broke out in red rashes, like an allergy. (...) Every day or every two days they would take a few people from among us. There were 3–4 others about my age – that is, minors (16–17 years). There were also married and older people among us. They also brought a 50– year– old man who could not walk. They accused him of 'terror.' The man had a small grocery shop; he also cleaned the mosque and called the adhan. He had nothing else to do with anything. His health was so poor that he could not even hold a cane, let alone use a weapon. Yet they forced him to confess under torture. Even afterwards they showed him no mercy. Every day or every two days, they would take some detainees out of the cell and bring new ones in. For example, when the detainee transfer bus arrived after morning prayer, we would understand that those people would be taken to branches in Damascus. Afterwards, they would probably be sent to Sednaya Prison. Those sent there were left to Allah – they were almost certainly heading to their deaths. If the transfer bus came in the afternoon, they would be taken to Hama Central Prison, the Hama court, or Hama Military Prison (Al Balouna). That place was also a prison notorious for torture and violations. After 21 days in the State Security Branch, they would send the detainee either to branches in Damascus, to a military court, or to Hama Military Prison. After the 21 days were up, I woke up at morning prayer time. Normally, performing performing ablution was forbidden. We would go into the washroom and come out in seconds; if they saw wetness on our hands or faces, there was a risk of being beaten. So we would perform tayammum with a stone and pray in the solitary cell. (...) They beat me before interrogation – the torture usually began as soon as a person entered interrogation. It started when they took me for questioning. They asked my name, where I lived, what my income was. They said, 'Your name is such-and-such; are you affiliated with this armed group?' I said, 'I am just a student.' I was 17. (...) I told them, 'I am a high school student, I have no connections to any armed group, I have never carried a weapon. I am registered at school; you can ask the principal or my classmates if you want.' They replied, 'No, you're lying! You were a member of an armed group,' and they started to beat me: 'You did this, you did that.' In the end they returned to the same method (beating). They put a tire on my feet, made me lie face down, and began to beat me. Two people were doing the torture while the interrogator sat at the table and recorded my answers. When you are beaten there is no escape-you must answer. When they asked, 'Did you use a weapon?' you had to say, 'Yes, I

used a weapon.' It reaches a point where you say 'Yes' to everything and are forced to confess. You say, 'Write whatever you want. I raised a weapon-just stop hitting me.' They feel no pity and threaten you. Then they began to ask me questions. Eventually I said, 'Yes, I was a member of an armed group, but I didn't carry a weapon.' By then I was inventing answers off the top of my head. For example I said, 'I provided funding.' They told me, 'Okay, we'll record that you collected money and transferred it to armed groups.' They asked, 'Did you participate in demonstrations?' I answered, 'Yes.' Whenever I said, 'No, I did not,' they would continue to beat me until I said, 'Yes' and confessed. I was tortured for about an hour. No matter what they asked... For example they asked, 'Your brothers?' and I also (falsely) confessed about them. My brothers were in opposition- held areas and were also wanted. One brother was at that time detained in Sednaya. I confessed about them too." (O.T.)

The victims emphasized that severe torture was prevalent during this process and that many people lost their lives as a result. Q.T. testified to witnessing individuals who died due to the harsh conditions in the security centers and the torture endured during interrogations, stating:

"They took all our information, finished the procedures, and then an attack started there; every officer who came in grabbed whatever they could and started hitting us. At that moment, three people died right there, three of them were friends we knew from State Security. Two were young, and one was old; they made excuses, saying, 'His heart stopped, he was already sick.' They said, 'He was sick from the beginning, we took him in sick.' Even back in Political Security, there was a man in his sixties brought to us from the Homs region who transported fruits and vegetables. He was already exhausted and unwell... He went to interrogation, then came back; they threw him inside as if he were nothing. He couldn't speak or respond, he just moaned. One or two hours later, the moaning stopped. We saw that his heart had stopped, he wasn't breathing - he was dead... Yes, he only went through one interrogation, and it was over. We knocked on the cell door and said, 'Someone died.' The officers came, glanced at him, and started beating us. They even struck the dead man, cursing him. 'He was sick from the start, a terrorist, his heart



gave out,' they said. We had heard similar words back in Political Security, but now the focus is on the four-person committee, the Rubaiyya. As soon as we entered, even before the investigation began, three people among us died. Men with hoses, wires, and sticks attacked again; some were hit with hoses, some with electric cables, some with sticks. Our eyes were blindfolded, we were completely naked, and it was impossible to predict where the blows would land – head, arms, or back. Some were dying while we bent our heads forward to minimize hits to our skulls. Eventually, the deceased were taken away from us. Then they brought us to the upper floors. There, they recorded our identity information. Afterwards, we were brought back down to a large dormitory. The dormitory was almost 100 square meters (ten by ten meters) but housed more than 400 people. We were literally piled on top of each other, like animals in a pen. There was a single toilet in the middle, but most of the time there was no water. I stayed in that room for about five months; during this time, I barely saw any water. We had no clothes except underwear. The blankets they brought were soaked with others' urine and filth. I spent five months like this..."

"My interrogator was from Military Intelligence. Before every interrogation, we were subjected to beatings, the 'dûlâb' (torture using a car tire), 'sâtiriyye' (beating with a strap or stick), and 'shabeh' (suspension by the wrists with handcuffs). After that, I was brought to the interrogator. That officer would ask absurd questions, like, 'Which vehicles did you blow up? Which women did you assault? Which state properties did you loot?' I'm talking about late 2012, before armed clashes had even started. We kept denying everything, and then they would come back and beat us again. Later, they put me in a cell. The cell was so filthy that the stench was unbearable. The dampness made it hard to breathe. There was filth and urine on the floor... I stayed there for about 15 days. No one came to check whether you were alive or dead. We were given dry bread once a day, but you didn't even want to eat it. Even if they had brought a lamb to eat, you wouldn't have. We were living on the edge of death. People died from hunger or severe illness; their kidney failed, their teeth fell out, and some lost the ability to speak. More than fifteen people died from starvation, beatings, and some lost. People would get a heavy blow to the head, survive a day or two, and their teeth fell out." (Q.T.)

The second phase of torture is related to the prison environment. Victims have stated that the existence and severity of torture in prisons has become routine. It has been noted that individuals are subjected to or witness various forms of violence both during the interrogation process and in prison. In addition to physical violence, individuals are commonly subjected to psychological, neglectful, sexual, and economic forms of abuse, often intertwined. Among the prisons where different types of torture were applied, Sednaya, Tadmor, and Al Balouna are frequently mentioned.

It can be said that various torture methods, some of which could result in death, were frequently applied to victims. In interrogation centers and prisons, aside from ill-treatment and routine beatings, certain types of physical torture were commonly used. Victims identified the widespread torture methods as “shabeh” (suspension by the wrists), “basat al-rih” (tying hands and feet and beating while the person is laid on the ground), “dûlâb” (torture inside a car tire), “kursi” (torture chair), “hızık” (anal torture), and electric shocks. As a result of these severe tortures, as stated by the victims above, detainees lost their lives. A.A., A.S., M.A., and H.M. have detailed the physical torture methods they were subjected to or witnessed as follows:

“.. I was beaten with electric cables. I was struck with a cable around 350 times. (...) They used car tires. They would cut the edges of the tire and place it around the head, leaving the head protruding while securing it from behind, like a kind of shackle. They would torture with that tire. This happened almost daily. In common terms, whenever it was someone’s turn, whoever was next in line. Two days would pass, and then it would be your turn. The main tortures mostly took place in the security branches (interrogation centers). Since there was no oversight there, severe torture occurred in the underground torture centers. Electric shocks, the torture chair, shabeh (suspension by the wrists), waterboarding... (...) Deaths due to torture in the security branch were extremely frequent. Almost every day. For instance, in the branch where I was, seven or eight people would die each day. There was a lot of torture in the branch. I even sometimes saw the dead; some had no arms, some had no legs, things like that. In prison, death was slower. The deaths of our brothers there were tragic for us because of excessive thinking, extreme pressure – that is, psychological torture, physical torture, lack of food, and mental pressure. People could not endure it; some could not cope and mentally broke down.” (A.A.)

“Torture usually begins with the ‘shabeh’ method and continues with starvation. (...) Once, after the torture, I became unable to walk. They had beaten the soles of my feet and I could no longer move. Then they placed pieces of wood and glass on the ground and demanded that I run on them or lick and clean them. That was also one of the methods of torture. Of course there are details – this torture was repeated constantly.” (A.S.)

“They bring a car tire (dûlâb). First you put your head there, then you lift your legs and pass them through it while bent double. They come and kick you. When you get kicked you end up on your back. Your legs go up. Then they bring the falaka. One person holds from one side, another from the other side. To stop you from moving your legs, they tightly tie a rope and pass your feet through it – sometimes both feet at once – and pull that rope very tight. Being struck with that stick, the falaka, is more painful than with a whip. Imagine a rope or an electric cable being pulled like that: the blood circulation in your legs is cut off, the flesh rots, the skin tears away. The leg flesh is torn apart from such stretching. At the same time, on the other side, two or three people hit you with whips or cables as they please. These are

the whips, the 'dûlâb' (torture done by placing a car tire around the body) method, and the 'basat el- rih' (binding hands and feet and beating while the person is lying down) method. 'Basat el- rih' was applied in the branch. In the 'basat el- rih' method they lay a person on a plank in a cross position, then turn him up; your head up, your feet up, your head down. They bind your hands and feet, and then the torture begins. It can go as far as killing. (...) There is also the 'kürsi', the torture chair. A large iron chair... They put your legs back there and bind them. Then they lift that chair up and bend your back downward. They push your back until your spine cracks. They tie your chest to your back and break your bones. They turn you like a gymnast, like a toy... They force your back until it makes a cracking sound. Then they lift your feet and beat you with cables or whips. These were the torture methods used in the branches. (...) Among other torture methods there was something called the 'hızık' (stake). We could call these Nazi torture methods. Like what was done to the Jews during the Inquisition, may Allah damn them... They sit you on a stake and lift from you above and the person dies there. With us you do not die immediately. They bring a glass bottle - for example a petrol bottle or a wine bottle; they break its mouth, place it in front of you, hold you and make you sit on it. The inside of the bottle is full of glass shards; then they press you down on it and cut your skin, and blood spurts out. This bottle method also happened in the branch." (M.A.)

"The torture methods start step by step. Tire, electricity... But there are other kinds of torture as well. For example, they tie up the male genital organ and make you drink a lot of water. Then they give you diuretic pills. This way, the person has to urinate, wants to go to the toilet. But since your genitals are tied, you can't. This torture is stronger than the tire, stronger than electricity, worse than anything. And they do it in such a position that your hands and feet are stretched. Your hands and joints are cramped. The body takes in liquid, naturally the kidneys process it, and you need to urinate. They make you drink one or two liters of water - force it down your throat until you can't take more. With the diuretic, you feel it in your sides, your back, everywhere - it's unbearable pain. At that moment, you accept whatever they want, you sign, and you give your fingerprint. I went mad from the pain; if they had told me, 'You are Osama bin Laden,' I would have said, 'Yes, I am, and my wife is too.' It wouldn't matter - just to make it stop. Death is easier than torture. I experienced this once. They did it to me once. I said, 'I would sacrifice myself for it, just let it end. What do you want? I'll sign, I'll give my fingerprint. Bring me the papers, I'll press my finger. Fine, fill in whatever you want. Whoever's crime is left unclaimed, I'll take it on.' When they untied me, I urinated immediately and fell on my knees. They took me inside. They know torture very well. They are experienced, they know exactly how to do it. One of these methods is connecting electricity to the testicles. That's one of the torture methods." (H.M.)

In the category of psychological violence, individuals are threatened with harm to their relatives and loved ones, misinformed about the conditions of their detention, and subjected to intimidation. Victims have sometimes stated that they were held together with close

family members and made to witness each other's torture. A.S., who was held in the same location as his father, stated that they were tested against each other, while R.M. expressed that he was threatened with his children outside and subjected to psychological violence in the following words:

"My father also endured very severe torture during this period. He died in prison. They kept his hands tied up for two days, forcing him to stand. He had to stand for two days, unable to lie down or sit. His hands were suspended. This is how they tortured my father. By torturing my father, they wanted to put pressure on me, and by torturing me, they put pressure on my father. For example, they tortured my father by saying, 'Your son did this, this, and this.' (...) Sometimes they would bring us (my father and me) together and torture us in front of each other (...) During the first 60 days, I was not together with my father, but sometimes we could secretly see each other. Once, my father, may Allah have mercy on him, said to me: 'If it is possible for you to be released and go outside, I will stay inside.' My father was constantly worried about me, and I was worried about him. The torture was carried out in a very brutal manner. My father was 50 years old, and they hit different parts of his body with the harshest instruments." (A.S.)

"The person who called me the most was the interrogator - the responsible officer. At first, they would start psychological warfare. They would frighten me with words like, 'You will never see your children again; we will send you to Damascus, to Sednaya; they will go hungry, they will never be able to be with you again.' They knew that my weak point was my children. They had already obtained all the information. They would show how people were tortured and say, 'This is how you will be tortured too.' We saw them torturing men. They would threaten, 'Yes, you mentioned it too, right? We will do the same to you.' ... So it was mostly psychological warfare. I don't know, that was how it was for me. (...) Especially at night, we could not sleep because of the sounds of men being tortured. Screaming and shouting... They were calling on Allah and asking for our help." (R.M.)



The cell in Sednaya Prison where 19 people were held together. Photo: HREIT, 2025.

It is possible to define prisoners witnessing the torture of their peers as a dimension of psychological violence. In line with R.M.'s statement in the last sentence above, victims reported that the sounds of those being tortured prevented them from sleeping. Victims also stated that they witnessed executions in prisons or heard the victims' voices every night. In particular, at Sednaya Prison, an on-site investigation conducted with the guidance of two individuals who had been detained there for many years shows that prisoners were forced to watch each other's executions in the execution areas. Sednaya detainee A.A. describes this situation in a manner consistent with the statements of other prisoners:

"On the first two floors, three to four people were executed every day. Every night, we would hear the sounds of the 'chain' (prisoners being linked together with chains and taken away). It usually happened around 11-10 p.m. There were various methods of execution. I even heard of people being executed by being pressed. Most commonly, it was by hanging with a rope. I witnessed someone being hanged with a rope. A friend of mine witnessed an execution by intravenous injection." (A.A.)

Witnesses stated that in prison, communication and dialogue with those sharing the same room were prevented, and those who did not comply with this restriction were subjected to torture. To prevent detainees from obtaining information about each other or gathering together, they were assigned numbers in interrogation centers and referred to by these numbers instead of their names. It was emphasized that during this process, individuals were isolated from their own names and from those they were held with, in an attempt to keep them alone. Victims drew attention to the psychological violence caused by this isolation as follows:

"(...) They asked, 'What is your name?' I told them. 'No - forget that now,' they said, and gave me a number. 'From now on your name is this...' they imposed a new identity on me. Then I went into interrogation and they asked my name again. I said H. 'Are you an ass? What did we tell you! Your name is 3400. That number is your name,' they said. There you are nothing but a number - if you die, they erase the number and that's it. In the following days they would ask, 'Who are you?' '3400.' 'Okay, go back!' After a while you accept it and begin to forget your name, your past, your identity. The first three months passed entirely under torture.

(...) The 'Palestine' Branch has multiple wings. They move you from one wing to another; soldiers enter with you. Transfers happen every week. For example, I may be in this cell for four or five days and then they take me to another cell. That way you can't form friendships or learn who the people around you are. Maybe they set it up so someone might go out and pass information - that's the logic. They hold you there, observe and listen, then the next day place you somewhere else and seat you at a table. You can't learn who anyone is. They tell you, 'We put others among you.' For instance, if a friend or a teacher comes and speaks a single word to you, he will be afraid of you and you will be afraid of him. We cannot tell each other anything; we cannot share secrets. Speaking is forbidden. I intend in my heart

and stand in prayer with my eyes. I told someone, 'I pray.' They said, 'Then they will get rid of you.' So you say, 'I am Abu Jahl,' 'I don't believe,' anything to survive. All my relationships and my situation were like that during these transfers.

(...) Even the prison guards were so brutal that, imagine, for two years we did not see the face of the guard who brought our food. As soon as we heard footsteps we had to immediately turn to the wall. For two years we did not see, we did not know the face of the person who brought us food; we never knew who he was." (H.M.)

"We stayed like this for almost five months. They addressed us with two- digit numbers, and no one knew who anyone was. Yes, you were given a two- digit number, and instead of your name, they used only that number. In this way, you were also deprived of your identity." (Q.T.)

It is possible to say that the uncertainty regarding one's own situation and the feeling of being forgotten were imposed as a form of psychological violence. After being subjected to torture, detainees were left to be forgotten in interrogation centers or prisons, in terms of their access to judicial processes. Nuh describes this situation as follows:

"In my first year, I spent 4-5 months in solitary cells, 2-3 months being transferred, and 4-5 months under interrogation; and in the last year, they forgot about me. That was the hardest torture, because when you are interrogated, you think, 'Why are they questioning me?' - at least you know something is happening. But if no one is looking for you or asking about you, that is an even greater torture. You keep thinking, 'Why was I put here?' Every day, they would take people's fingerprints as if they were taking them to court or somewhere else - we didn't know whether they were being released or executed. You just sit and wait for your turn. You keep waiting, wondering if your turn will ever come. Until the very end, my turn never came. I became so depressed that I stopped speaking. When I developed a fever, I stayed like that for about a month." (H.M.)

The type of violence known as neglect refers to the disregard of individuals' basic needs, such as nutrition, health, and shelter, and the failure to address these needs. Victims stated that the living conditions in prison were far from meeting daily personal needs such as hygiene, clothing, bathing, and toilet use; that they were subjected to deliberate neglect through insufficient food and lack of medical checks; and that detainees lost their lives in prison as a result. Victims reported that due to the prison conditions, they developed chronic illnesses, suffered severe weight loss from hunger, and ultimately, this negatively affected their mental health, as they described:

"During the day, we could only eat a single slice of potato. Sometimes they would spread a little jam on bread, but the jam was deliberately very limited. At times, these foods were even harmful to health, especially causing diarrhea, which weakened our immune system. When you had diarrhea, the body lost a lot of fluids, and your immunity completely collapsed. (...) They placed us in small cells. For example, they crammed dozens of people into an area of 4 by 5 meters. The space allocated to each of us was about 25 square centimeters - just slightly larger than a tile. Regardless of height or weight, everyone had only the space of

one tile. People were so tightly packed that even sitting was difficult. I had to sit with my knees raised. Moreover, the environment was full of lice, disease, and filth. We constantly developed rashes on our skin. Going to the toilet was nearly impossible. We were allowed to use the toilet only twice a day, and even then, there was a strict time limit. They would bring a large 20- 25 liter container for urination, which was passed around among all the detainees. When the container was full, overflowing urine would spill onto other prisoners. I sat in the corner, and when the container reached me, filth accumulated on the floor. Everywhere was extremely dirty, and this filth would spill onto your body or head. Meanwhile, there were cockroaches, lice, and various pests everywhere. It was impossible to clean your body. For instance, if you had lice on you, you could do nothing but crush them. In Branch 215, no personal hygiene was permitted under any circumstances. Even when granted toilet access, the time given was only a few seconds. A guard would count you quickly: 'One, two, three...' If you didn't exit within a few seconds, he would bang on the door and force you out. There were only five toilets, and hundreds of people had to use them. (...) Diarrhea was deadly here because after torture and prolonged exhaustion, the body started losing fluids and resistance completely collapsed. (...) When I entered prison, I weighed 84 kilograms, but when I was released, I weighed 49 kilograms." (A.S.)

"The food was very bad; we went hungry. The portions were very small, served in plastic containers. For example, daily rice or bulgur was about half a cup per person. (...) Many people died from illness, and we witnessed their deaths. (...) Food itself was a method of torture. Sometimes meals were deliberately burnt before being given. If we received food one day, the next day we would be left completely hungry. Meals were usually boiled in water only, with no salt or spices. They were so tasteless that people felt disgusted eating them. If breakfast was delayed, we experienced dizziness and nausea. If we went without food all day, many people would faint. We tried to survive by drinking only water – but even the water was dirty. We could hear rats inside the water tanks. Even fulfilling our need to bathe was extremely difficult. We were allowed to bathe only once every fifteen days. Sometimes people refused to go to the bath because some prisoners who went never returned. We thought they had been killed." (A.A.)

"For example, when a person is beaten, their skin tears. Naturally, it splits open. When that happens, it gets infected and becomes infested with maggots. The maggots move around inside your body. Normally, we say worms eat the body when a person has been in the grave for a long time. But here, they start eating you while you're still alive. While you're alive. You say, 'Brother, you need to take us to the doctor.' There is a doctor, but not for us. I saw him. The doctor comes, gives a sick person a few yellow pills, and that's it. (...) There were all kinds of diseases. They keep you there so that you suffer and die. If you survive, it's only by Allah's permission – it's fate. They put you there so that you will die. The most common diseases were scabies, lice, malnutrition, asthma... Those with asthma or breathing difficulties died from the stench. For example, today, in a room, there is no water; our drinking water comes

from the bathroom or the toilet. I feel ashamed even saying this. On the first, second, and third days in the cell without water, by the fourth day, I drank my own urine. When a person is desperate, they do such things. (...) Sometimes, as food, they would give us one potato a day. For example, two people would share a single potato. At first, the hunger makes you nauseous, but later you become desperately hungry. They gave maybe two or three small pieces of bread or half a potato per day. So little that it was just enough to keep you alive. They knew exactly how much food a human needs to survive. If one milliliter was enough to live, they gave that - never two. When I was taken there, I weighed 90 kilos, I was athletic. When I was released, I weighed 50 kilos - I lost 40 kilos." (H.M.)

Based on the victims' testimonies, it is understood that detainees were subjected to or witnessed sexual violence in prisons. R.M. states that he was directly subjected to sexual violence, while M.A. describes witnessing a detainee being subjected to sexual violence as follows:

"I was a woman living with four orphans whose spouse had passed away and had no involvement in anything. The regime took me without cause. I was subjected to torture,



insults, and sexual abuse. (...) I was under torture for nine months. (...) The most severe form of torture for me - that is, rape - I endured myself, let me put it that way. As far as I remember, there were about ten to fifteen of us. It was a small room. Among us were women older than me as well as young girls attending school. For example, some of them had a mark drawn on their hands, which was why they had been captured." (R.M.)

"There was a brother I knew from Tartus; perhaps he became a martyr. I left him there when I left Hennano three months later. He was in the third room. This brother was very isolated. Every Thursday, when they were drunk, they would take him out and rape him, committing every kind of atrocity. Then they would bring him back in tears. The poor man was devastated. Even now, when I remember this, despite being outside for 20 years, I relive it with my whole life because the memory, or the brain, records everything." (M.A.)

It has been determined that detainees and their families were also subjected to economic violence. Bribery was reportedly used as a tool to secure the release of detainees, and large sums of money were extorted from them. Individuals noted that this route, which they saw as the key to freedom, often did not succeed, highlighting that both prisoners and their families were defrauded and subjected to violence in this way. A.A., who was held at Sednaya Prison between 2012 and 2019, stated that his release from prison was only possible by paying money, and described the process as follows:

"I was released from prison through a bribe of 12,000 dollars. This kind of bribery sometimes happened. My sentence was 15 years, and I had served seven. There had been an amnesty that reduced it to 12 years. This process took two years. Through my lawyer, a kind of 'agreement' was made. But this did not always work. If such a route could not be found, release was impossible. In the past, people had also used this method. We heard that some people paid large sums of money to be freed, yet still could not get out of prison. This was a method used to deceive people – one of the biggest frauds in the world. My father experienced the same thing. During the first two years, when my father learned I was in prison, he contacted someone who told him that for 2,000 dollars he could get me out and visit me. But unfortunately, that too was a scam." (A.A.)

"The suffering we have endured and the hardships we have experienced are immense. In fact, the entire Syrian people live in a large prison – like a huge prison... Yes, people eat, drink, go out, and see their relatives. But at any moment they can be stopped at a checkpoint and thrown into prison. Then someone may have to pay thousands of dollars to find out where they are. Even if they learn the location, they will have to pay an additional fee to be able to visit." (M.A.)

"The method of the security branches was this: even if they knew a person had committed no crime, they would still detain them. The purpose was to extract money from the family. They would send a man to notify the family, telling them that their son was at a certain security branch and that they had information from him. Then, by delivering this news to the family, they would demand money from them. It was a kind of extortion/bribery mechanism. (...) Of course they would not release the person immediately. First they would prolong the process in order to obtain as much money as possible from the family. After the investigation was completed and the detainee signed papers admitting all the charges, the soldier would be instructed, 'Take him out.'" (O.T.)

"(...) Then they put me into a car. I got in with my eyes open. Someone was sitting next to the driver, and I said, 'Why did you detain me like this? It's been more than a month, my family knows nothing.' He said things like, 'By Allah, you have a file, they call you a terrorist.' 'If you want, you can pay and I'll get you out,' he said. I replied, 'I'll give whatever you ask, just let me get out.' All the torture I had endured had already been more than enough. He told me, 'Actually I'm not supposed to say this. Now we're going to State Security. Compared to Political Security, State Security is like paradise. I can try to get you out if you give me money.'

I said, 'Okay, I'll give it - just let me go.' (...) I stayed in prison for about one year and three months, and in the end I was supposedly "released" by a court decision. More precisely, it was something like "trial without detention." But in reality you give money to a middleman and that's how you can get out. There is no legal way. They arranged it that way, and I was freed in June 2014. (...) It was completely a form of brokerage. You pay money and thus you get out." (Q.T.)

It is understood that the conditions and torture in prisons and interrogation centers have left deep marks on the memories of Syrians, and that the mental health of individuals who have gone through these processes has been negatively affected. Enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, extremely poor prison conditions, and the various forms of violence experienced in prison have been observed to continue impacting the lives of victims. The interviewed individuals described the lasting effect of the victimization they endured on their lives as follows:

"Imagine being away from your family for 25 years... Let's say you started your life at 20 - you've spent at most 5 years with your family. What's left after that? We were together there 24 hours a day. The brain records everything for 24 hours straight. I'm sure there's a part of the brain dedicated to memory, and that part is still storing everything. I still see the prison in my dreams, and so on." (M.A.)

"When I first came to Türkiye, I was psychologically devastated. Later, we went to an association and received psychological support. Since then, I've had memories that feel like nightmares. After being released from prison, I absolutely didn't want to open the windows, didn't want any light, and didn't want anyone to come near me - never. But now, I've overcome that period. (...) Of course, absolutely (the effects of torture continue). Even just talking about it now makes my insides burn again; I remember everything. I also started to fear men. I never trusted them, because I saw how they treated women there. I thought everyone was like that... I've been a widow since 2011, it's been 14 years, and I've never wanted or thought about getting married. Many men have approached me, but still, I didn't marry. I don't know, I'm afraid of communicating with a man again. Of course, I know all the details of those tortures; none of them ever leaves my mind." (R.M.)

"I still don't have the courage to go out and look for a job. I'm afraid to go outside, thinking, 'What if I can't come back?' Psychological pain is worse than physical pain. For example, if your hand is cut or your leg is broken, you somehow get used to it - but psychological pain isn't like that. I try to cope with it through faith, with my children, with the Qur'an. (...) I'm still receiving treatment because my voice keeps fading; I can't speak, so I communicate by writing. I'm afraid of everything. Even now, if we were sitting somewhere and a group from the government came, I would relive that horror all over again. Only someone who has lived it can understand. If a police officer walks past me or if I see someone holding a gun, I start trembling with fear because they could shoot for the smallest reason. They used to beat us until we were almost dead, but Allah didn't take my life - apparently, I still had time left. Many people died after two or three days. The beatings were so severe that a person could die from them." (H.M.)

Enforced Disappearance

One of the human rights violations most closely associated with the Assad regime is enforced disappearance. Interviewees emphasized that when individuals perceived by the regime as threats are detained, their families and the public encounter serious obstacles in accessing information about their fate. It is exceedingly difficult to determine where the person has been taken, where they are interrogated, or whether they will stand trial. Enforced disappearances – typically carried out by security personnel affiliated with various Syrian intelligence agencies – are widespread and have instilled deep fear among the population. As noted in the previous subsection, obtaining information about the detention center or prison where detainees are held is often possible only through bribery. Victims describe the uncertainty surrounding the fate of a detained or disappeared person as follows:

“For 45 days, I neither appeared before a court nor saw anyone. The arrest was entirely unofficial. There was no lawyer, no legal process whatsoever. Anyone who dared to ask ‘Where is this man?’ would immediately be accused of committing the same crime. In short, it was an unrecorded detention, not an official arrest. When the period ended, the branch reportedly sent a letter to other security units.” (H.M.)

The interviewees stated, consistent with H.M.’s testimony, that even attempting to locate individuals detained by security forces could constitute a crime for their relatives. A.S. recounted that his father, who came searching for him, was also arbitrarily arrested. He explained that after spending some time in the same prison as his father, he never heard from him again. Later, leaked documents revealed that his father had died in prison:

“The conditions we were kept in were a form of torture in themselves. We were not held in a specific cell, which made the situation even more difficult. It was not an official detention site – no one recognized it, and no one knew its location. It was an anonymous place. (...) During this period, my family had no information about me; in fact, they sometimes received false news that I had died. Later, I was referred to the Terrorism Court and transferred to Adra Prison. (...) My father, however, remained at another branch. I was released, but I later learned that my father had died there. This became known only after my release. Someone who had been imprisoned in the same facility told me, ‘Your father died after you left.’ Later, I saw my father’s photographs in the Caesar files. I could not learn the details of my father’s death at that time.” (A.S.)

As discussed in the previous two subsections, as a result of arbitrary detention and extrajudicial executions, individuals are subjected to torture and may die during the process. Consequently, the causes of death are often falsified, and information regarding the deaths is concealed. H.M. describes an instance of enforced disappearance, in which information about a detainee’s status was not shared with their family, legal access through official channels was denied, and the person reportedly died as a result of the treatment they endured

in prison. The body was not returned to the family, constituting an example of enforced disappearance, as follows:

“They kept saying, ‘We will make you disappear,’ at every opportunity. I saw how they eliminate people. Not by shooting or openly executing them, but in other, subtler ways. They provoke you and say, ‘Go to the bathroom!’ The floor is wet with water and other substances, so it becomes slippery. While you are walking, they strike your head with a metal pipe. In the forensic report it will be recorded that the death was caused by an impact – ‘He hit his head in the bathroom and died,’ they say. Do you see the logic? They don’t shoot you because that would be noticeable. Sometimes a person dies from repeated blows. Afterwards they put the body in a room at the Palestine Branch they call the ‘salt room.’ The corpse decomposes there and gives off a very strong stench. I stayed there for a very long time and learned how things work.” (H.M.)

During an investigation conducted at Sednaya Prison, officials stated that the families of detainees were not informed of their imprisonment, that even the bodies of those who died from illness were not returned to their families, and that the corpses of the deceased were burned to destroy evidence. Amir al-Sheikh, the Governor of Rif Damascus, who was imprisoned in Sednaya between 2011 and 2014, also reported that the proportion of those who entered certain prisons in Syria and managed to emerge alive did not exceed 2% of the total. Witnesses stated that they had relatives and acquaintances who had been forcibly disappeared and that they were unable to obtain any information about their fate, noting:

“There is a missing person from my family – my brother-in-law, M.Z.A. He disappeared in 2012 or 2013, and we have not heard from him since. He was detained by the Military Intelligence Branch in Hasakah. (...) He was working at the post office there. One day, he was suddenly taken into custody, and we never received any further information about him. (...) In fact, he had no direct involvement in any crime. However, his brother was connected to opposition groups, and because of that, he was detained as well. We received some information about him two months after his disappearance, but nothing afterward. We even went to Sednaya later and checked the records, but we could not find any trace of him.” (A.A.)

“My elder brother was arrested on December 13, 2012. We waited for his release, along with the other prisoners in Sednaya, but we could not find any trace of him. Later, when we investigated the cases of those who had died in the civil prison in Damascus, we learned that my brother had been executed two and a half years after his arrest. The charges against him included carrying a weapon and participating in protests. He was executed on August 22, 2014, but we only learned this information on December 8, 2024.” (O.T.)

“For example, my nephew, who was a university student, was arrested. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison, 12 years! (...) And we still haven’t heard any news about him since.” (H.I.A.)

“In Syria, there are hundreds of thousands of martyrs and hundreds of thousands of detainees. In Khan Shaykhun, there are approximately 500 detainees; most of them never left Sednaya Prison and were killed under torture. We kept records of 250 detainees in Sednaya. We had hoped they would be freed with the liberation of Syria, but we later learned that none of them had survived.” (M.H.)

The burial locations of individuals who disappeared after their detention are often unknown. Consistent with the testimonies of the witnesses mentioned above, interviews conducted with politicians and bureaucrats representing the new administration revealed that mass graves have been discovered in Syria, where those killed under torture or by gunfire in political units were buried. Aleppo Chief Prosecutor Juma Hussein al-Ahmed stated that although there are mass graves in Aleppo, most are concentrated in Damascus and its surroundings. Similarly, Raid al-Salih, former Head of the Syrian Civil Defense and Minister of Emergency and Disaster Management, explained that mass graves can be classified into two groups, large-scale and small-scale. Al-Salih noted that there are 53 large-scale mass graves across Syria and 11 in Damascus. He also pointed out the existence of smaller mass graves, typically containing around 20 bodies, located in various provinces, districts, neighborhoods, and around residential areas. Due to technical limitations, comprehensive investigations into these mass graves could not be initiated, and their existence has been kept confidential to prevent the destruction of evidence. Under the supervision of the Aleppo Chief Prosecutor, a large-scale mass grave in Khan Asel was examined. The Prosecutor stated that the bodies had been transported by trucks and buried in pits dug with excavators, estimating that approximately 16,000 individuals were interred in that mass grave.



Examinations conducted by the HREIT Delegation at the Khan Asel mass grave near Aleppo.

Photo: HREIT, 2025.

Another dimension of enforced disappearance emerges in the Assad regime's destruction of cemeteries and the relocation of bodies after gaining control over areas previously held by opposition forces. This phenomenon is particularly observed in locations that changed hands between the opposition and the regime. In Homs, Khan Shaykhun, Aleppo, and Eastern Ghouta, it was stated that the graves of opposition members were destroyed by regime forces and that the bodies were made to disappear. Witnesses indicated that these actions by Assad-affiliated forces were carried out either as acts of revenge and humiliation or, in the case of graves containing those who had died from chemical weapons, to conceal evidence.

"The city's old 'Martyrs' Cemetery' came under regime fire, so we needed a new cemetery, and we opened this area. (...) Then we accepted this site as our official cemetery, and on April 8, one day after the chemical attack, we buried the gas victims next to the other martyrs here. After we left the city, the Syrian regime came. The graves were dug up, and all the bodies of the chemical victims and the other martyrs were removed and taken to an unknown location. Now it does not look like a cemetery. To this day we do not know where those bodies are or what happened to them. The purpose was clear, to erase every trace that would lead investigative teams to conclude, 'These people died from poisonous gas,' and to destroy the evidence completely." (Â.Z.)

"You can see an open grave here, a martyr who was buried here has been moved elsewhere. These are the remains of the martyrs, and these stones belong to them and are still here. As you can see, it has been attacked repeatedly. The tyrannical regime did not even leave the dead in peace; even the martyrs could not escape its oppression." (M.H.)



Graves of victims whose bodies were exhumed and destroyed by regime soldiers. Maaret al-Numan.

Photo: HREIT, 2025.

The Assad regime's human rights violations concerning arrest, ill-treatment, and enforced disappearance have been continuous. It has been documented that the regime has been involved in numerous violations in the areas of arbitrary detention and extrajudicial execution. In cases of arbitrary detention, the principle of legality is disregarded, individuals are transferred from a security branch in one city to another branch in a different city regardless of whether they admit to the alleged crime, subjected to torture in various locations during the process, and kept in inadequate conditions. During interrogation, the person's communication with their social environment is completely cut off, they face the risk of death, and neither they nor their families are provided with any information. Furthermore, those attempting to obtain information about the individual also face the risk of detention.

It is evident that ill-treatment and torture are routine practices during interrogation and detention. Findings indicate the existence of numerous forms of violence and torture that have become systematic. Individuals are not only widely subjected to physical violence and torture but also to psychological, neglect, sexual, and economic forms of abuse. This constitutes a clear violation of human dignity, which the UN Convention Against Torture and the European Convention on Human Rights explicitly seek to protect, and it represents a breach of the prohibition of torture. The lack of a transparent judicial process for detainees, the inability to obtain information about their whereabouts, the execution of prisoners, and the presence of mass graves are identified as examples of enforced disappearance. On-site investigations and witness testimonies point to the regime's culpability. Based on this, the next section will address the Assad regime's responsibility at both the international and national levels.

Hundreds of thousands in the regime's torture centers in Syria

The Assad regime is detaining around 500,000 people in 6 major prisons and 18 interrogation centers in the areas it controls, subjecting them to systematic torture

Nur Hatib, Detainee
File Officer at the
Syrian Network for
Human Rights (SNHR):

// As SNHR, we have confirmed that **128,000 people** are currently detained. The real number is certainly higher"

// Among them, **82,000 people** have been **forcibly** disappeared – meaning there is no information about their fate after detention"

// We have confirmed **7,721 women** in custody. Some are held in security branches, others in prisons"

BRANCH 235 (PALESTINE BRANCH) AND 17 OTHER INTERROGATION CENTERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY







IV.


THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ASSAD REGIME AT THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS

International Criminal Responsibility 

Responsibility Under The International
Criminal Court 

Establishment of Hybrid Courts 

National Criminal Responsibility 

Responsibility within the Scope of
Universal Jurisdiction at the National Level 

Transitional Justice Practices 

Criminal Prosecution Before the Courts of
Foreign Jurisdictions 

4. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ASSAD REGIME AT THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS

Since 2011, during the intensifying civil war in Syria, government forces and armed groups affiliated with the government have committed numerous and extremely serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how individuals within the Assad regime – not only those who carried out the acts but also those who issued the orders, and those bearing executive or negligent responsibility, including high-ranking officials – can be held legally accountable.

By violating the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the Assad regime has committed serious breaches of international humanitarian law through mass killings, sieges, and systematic attacks against the civilian population, as well as bombings of protected sites such as hospitals and schools. Crimes committed by the regime and its members – including gross violations of fundamental rights such as the right to life, the prohibition of torture, and the right to a fair trial – fall within both the scope of international humanitarian law violations and international criminal law. Thus, the crimes perpetrated by individuals affiliated with the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war constitute some of the gravest categories of offenses under international humanitarian, international criminal, and human rights law. In addition to the direct perpetrators within the regime, all commanders and officials within the chain of command and supervision can be held accountable for their responsibilities. Ensuring effective legal accountability for members



of the Assad regime depends on international cooperation, political will, and a strong evidentiary foundation. Promoting the application of universal jurisdiction and establishing a Syria-specific hybrid court at the international level constitute the most appropriate long-term models for achieving truth and justice.

The use of chemical weapons, severe and systematic torture, extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, systematic attacks on civilians including barrel bombings, attacks on healthcare facilities, systematic sexual violence, and ethnic cleansing are among the crimes committed in Syria by the Ba'ath regime under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad. These crimes are classified as war crimes and crimes against humanity under the Geneva Conventions and international human rights law. The mechanisms for prosecuting these crimes are defined within international criminal law mechanisms as well as the mechanisms within national criminal justice systems.

4.1. International Criminal Responsibility

As is well known, states are the primary subjects of international law.²⁷⁴ For a long time, states were regarded as the sole subjects of this legal order. The exclusive recognition of states as subjects of international law led to the perception of international law as a field applicable solely to inter-state relations.²⁷⁵ Consequently, individuals were not recognized as subjects of international law but were instead defined as objects of the state.

An important milestone in recognizing that natural persons can possess rights and obligations under international law was the establishment of the Tokyo and Nuremberg tribunals after World War II.²⁷⁶ Through these international criminal courts, individuals acting on behalf of states could be held criminally accountable, which significantly strengthened the relationship between individuals and international law. Subsequently, the issue of individual criminal responsibility under international law became a subject of greater debate and focused attention.

The impunity of crimes committed on the international stage that shock all of humanity is, of course, inconceivable. International law has made, and continues to make, significant progress in addressing this need through international criminal law. It is an undisputed fact that, as a consequence of the principle of the sovereign equality of states in international law, states themselves cannot be held criminally responsible. However, ensuring that human rights violations do not go unpunished and that victims' need for justice is met remains an unavoidable necessity. For this reason, individual responsibility has been established under international criminal law.

274 Yusuf Aksar, *International Law I*, Seçkin Publishing, 2019, p. 202.

275 Ezeli Azarkan, "Individual Criminal Responsibility and the Milošević Case", *Selçuk University Law Faculty Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3-4, Konya, 2003, pp. 265-287.

276 Aksar, *International Law I*, p. 235.

The most important mechanism of international criminal law for punishing these serious human rights violations is the ICC. With the adoption of the Rome Statute, a permanent international criminal court was established to ensure that the international community would not remain passive in the face of such grave violations. This section will examine the establishment and functions of the ICC, and analyze its jurisdiction in terms of persons (*ratione personae*), territory (*ratione loci*), subject matter (*ratione materiae*), and time (*ratione temporis*). Within this framework, the ways in which individuals can be held accountable for serious human rights violations will be presented, and the possibility of establishing responsibility under the ICC for the events that have occurred in the Syrian state will be discussed.

4.1.1. Responsibility under the International Criminal Court

One of the most effective ways for the international community to heal the wounds caused by the use of force and armed conflicts and to satisfy victims' need for justice is through the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators who unlawfully use force or engage in armed conflict.²⁷⁷ Undoubtedly, international criminal courts of a supranational character play a critical role in fulfilling this function. The reluctance of states to prosecute their own citizens for international crimes before national courts has rendered the establishment of international criminal tribunals indispensable.²⁷⁸ In this context, the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal, the Tokyo International Military Tribunal, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda emerged as temporary international criminal courts established to meet this need.²⁷⁹ International criminal law marked a historic development by establishing a permanent international criminal court, thereby addressing a major deficiency – the nature and scope of this permanent court will be explained below.

Until the establishment of the ICC, a permanent international criminal court could not be created for a long time; instead, international crimes were prosecuted through ad hoc international criminal tribunals established in relation to specific incidents, such as those mentioned above. The main reason for the prolonged absence of a permanent international criminal court was the unwillingness of states to relinquish their sovereignty in this field.²⁸⁰

277 Hakkı Hakan Erkiner, "The Concept of the International Community," *Marmara University Faculty of Law Legal Research Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1-2, Istanbul, 2010, pp. 39-75.

278 Yusuf Aksar, *International Law II*, Seçkin Publishing, Ankara, 2019, p. 160.

279 Fatih Halil Kaplan, "The Crime of Genocide in the Decisions of the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia," *Journal of the Court of Jurisdictional Disputes*, Vol. 3, Ankara, 2013, pp. 106-129.

280 Arzu Alibaba, "The Establishment of the International Criminal Court," *Ankara University Faculty of Law Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Ankara, 2000, pp. 181-207.

States were reluctant to support such a court, fearing that its establishment would limit one of the fundamental manifestations of state sovereignty – the authority to prosecute and punish.²⁸¹ Finally, as a result of the United Nations Diplomatic Conference on the Establishment of an International Criminal Court held in Rome from 15 to 17 June 1998, the Statute of the International Criminal Court was adopted, commonly known as the Rome Statute²⁸² Pursuant to Article 126 of the Statute, the ICC was to commence its functions once 60 states had ratified the Statute. Upon reaching this number, the Court began its operations on 1 July 2002. Türkiye is not a party to the Statute. It should also be noted that Syria, which is the focus of this report, is likewise not among the States Parties to the Statute. Since the institutional structure of the Court falls outside the scope of this report, the following discussion will instead address which crimes and which individuals may be subject to investigation and prosecution under the Court’s jurisdiction, as well as the potential procedural framework governing such processes.

The crimes falling within the material jurisdiction of the ICC are the crime of aggression, crimes against humanity, genocide, and war crimes.²⁸³ By their nature, these crimes are of a universal character and, when committed, have consequences for the entire international community; their prosecution and punishment are matters of concern to the international community as a whole.²⁸⁴

The crime of aggression is specified among the crimes within the Court’s jurisdiction in Article 5 of the Statute. However, the Court can exercise jurisdiction over this crime only if it is defined in accordance with Articles 121 and 123 of the Statute, and if the Statute also sets out the conditions under which the Court may exercise this jurisdiction.²⁸⁵ This requirement was fulfilled through the addition of Article 8 bis to the Statute. Accordingly, the planning, preparation, initiation, or execution of an act of aggression that, by its character, gravity, and scale, clearly violates the UN Charter, committed by a person in a position to effectively control or direct the political or military actions of a state, may constitute the crime of aggression. As of 17 July 2018, the Court has been able to exercise its jurisdiction over the crime of aggression.²⁸⁶ The crime of genocide, on the other hand, is defined with unequivocal clarity in Article 6 of the Statute, and the acts that may constitute genocide are listed in sub-paragraphs²⁸⁷ The commission of any of these acts is sufficient to constitute the crime of genocide.²⁸⁸

281 James Crawford, “Prospects for an International Criminal Court,” *Current Legal Problems*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 1995, pp. 303-326.

282 Statute of the International Criminal Court, dated 17 July 1998.

283 Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 5.

284 Müge Çetin, “The International Criminal Court and Türkiye’s Position,” *Ankara Bar Association Journal*, Vol. 3, Ankara, 2010, pp. 335-360.

285 Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 5(2).

286 Aksar, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

287 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 6.

288 Hacı Sangüzel, “International Criminal Court”, *Journal of the Court of Jurisdictional Disputes*, Vol: 3, Ankara, 2013, pp. 230-273.

For the purposes of this report, the relevant types of crimes are certain acts listed as war crimes under Article 8(2)(b) of the Statute, committed in non-international armed conflicts, and, in particular, crimes against humanity. Article 8(2)(b) of the Statute establishes the Court's jurisdiction over acts constituting serious violations of Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Accordingly, the Court has jurisdiction when the following acts are committed against persons not actively participating in hostilities – including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those rendered hors de combat due to sickness, injury, detention, or any other reason: i) Violence against life and person, particularly murder, mutilation, cruel treatment, and torture; ii) Acts outraging personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment; iii) Taking of hostages; iv) The passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without a prior judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees generally recognized as indispensable.²⁸⁹ It is a widely recognized fact that these acts were repeatedly committed by the Assad government and its forces during the Syrian Civil War. Therefore, it must be stated that the Court has jurisdiction over these acts.

Finally, it is beyond doubt that crimes against humanity are of great importance in terms of the subject matter of this report. The very reason for the existence of this type of crime lies in the fact that certain crimes committed in peacetime or acts carried out by a state against its own citizens cannot be considered as war crimes or crimes of aggression.²⁹⁰ For example, the massacres committed by the Nazis against Jews, older people, and the Roma cannot, in terms of the material element of the crime, be classified as crimes of aggression or war crimes.²⁹¹ Although crimes against humanity were defined in the Statutes of the Nuremberg, Tokyo, Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda International Criminal Tribunals, progress was made with the Statute of the International Criminal Court, which included in the broadest form the acts constituting this crime. Accordingly, murder; extermination; enslavement; deportation or forcible transfer of population; imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law; torture; rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization or other forms of sexual violence of similar gravity; persecution against any identifiable group or community on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, sex or other grounds universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court; enforced disappearance; the crime of apartheid; and other inhumane acts of a similar nature intentionally causing great suffering or serious injury to physical, mental, or bodily health, when committed as

289 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 8/2 (b).

290 Lyal S. Sunga, *Individual Responsibility in International Law for Serious Human Rights Violations*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1992, p. 432.

291 Aksar, *ibid.*, p. 171.

part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, constitute crimes against humanity and fall within the material jurisdiction of the Court. It is an established fact that in Syria, through police, soldiers, and civilian militias under the Assad Government, more than one of the acts mentioned in this article has been committed in a widespread and systematic manner against the civilian population.

The Court becomes competent to exercise its jurisdiction when the aforementioned crimes are committed. Its personal jurisdiction (*ratione personae*) extends to natural persons, encompassing both civilians and members of the military.²⁹² The Court has jurisdiction not only over those who commit the crimes but also over those who participate in, assist in, order, incite, encourage, or attempt to commit them.²⁹³ The sole exception to this rule concerns persons who had not attained the age of 18 at the time the crime was committed.²⁹⁴ It should be noted that this exception merely prevents the Court from exercising its jurisdiction; however, if such persons possess criminal capacity under the laws of their respective countries, they may still be tried before national courts. One of the most important aspects of the Court's personal jurisdiction is that it applies equally to all persons, regardless of their official capacity. Accordingly, the fact that a person is a Head of State or Government, a member of a government or parliament, an elected representative, or a government official does not preclude the exercise of the Court's jurisdiction, as provided in the Statute.²⁹⁵ Conversely, where military commanders or persons effectively acting as such fail to exercise proper control over the armed forces under their authority and control, and those forces commit any of the aforementioned crimes, such commanders or persons shall be criminally responsible if: (i) they knew or, under the circumstances, should have known that the forces were committing or about to commit such crimes; and (ii) they failed to take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent or repress their commission, or to refer the matter to the competent authorities for investigation and prosecution.²⁹⁶ In doctrine, this form of responsibility under the Statute is classified as command responsibility (or objective responsibility).²⁹⁷ Finally, the Statute provides that the fact that a person committed a crime pursuant to an order of a government or superior shall not relieve that person of criminal responsibility, except where the person was under a legal obligation to obey such order, did not know that the order was unlawful, and the order was not manifestly unlawful.²⁹⁸

292 Sarigüzel, *ibid.*, p. 241.

293 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 25/2-3.

294 Art. 26.

295 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 27.

296 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 28.

297 Aksar, *ibid.*, p. 167.

298 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 33.

An important issue for this research is the scope of the ICC's jurisdiction in terms of which states' nationals it covers, which persons (nationals or foreigners) are present in its territory, the territorial scope itself (land, air, and sea), and the relevant time period. It should first be noted that the Court began its operations on 1 July 2002 and, under Article 11 of the Statute, has jurisdiction over events that occurred from that date onward.²⁹⁹ For states that became parties to the Statute after its adoption, the general rule is that the Court has jurisdiction only over crimes committed after accession; however, by way of exception, a state may make a declaration accepting the Court's jurisdiction over crimes committed prior to ratification.³⁰⁰

In this context, although Syria is not a party to the Statute, if a newly established Syrian government were to express its intention to accede to the Statute and submit a declaration recognizing the Court's jurisdiction retroactively over events that occurred during the Syrian Civil War, the ICC's jurisdiction over those responsible for such events could be invoked.

Another important issue concerns the states over which the Court can exercise its jurisdiction. As noted above, for states that are parties to the Statute, jurisdiction automatically arises from the date they become members.³⁰¹ Accordingly, the Court has jurisdiction over crimes committed within the territory of a state party. Furthermore, even if the state where the crime occurred is not a party to the Statute, the Court may still exercise jurisdiction if the perpetrator is a national of a state party.³⁰² In doctrine, the fact that the Court's jurisdiction generally extends only to crimes committed within the territory of a state party or by nationals of a state party is interpreted as evidence that the ICC's jurisdiction is not truly universal, but rather territorial or personal in nature.³⁰³

It should be noted that a state that is not a party to the Statute may, by submitting a declaration to the Court, accept its jurisdiction over a specific crime and the related events, thereby authorizing the Court to exercise jurisdiction over that situation without formally acceding to the Statute.³⁰⁴ This provision serves as an incentive for states that are reluctant to become parties to the Statute but where international crimes have occurred, aiming to ensure that crimes committed within the territories of non-member states do not go unpunished.

An exception to the conditions outlined above regarding the Court's jurisdiction arises when the UN Security Council, acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, refers a situation to the ICC Prosecutor involving one or more crimes determined to have been committed.³⁰⁵ Chapter VII of the UN Charter provides that the Security Council has the authority to determine

299 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Art. 11.

300 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Art. 11/2.

301 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 12.

302 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Art. 12/2 (b).

303 Malcolm N. Shaw, *International Law*, Türkiye Academy of Science, Ankara, 2018, p. 288.

304 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Art. 12/3.

305 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Art. 13 (b).

the existence of any threat to peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression and to take measures to restore international peace and security. Article 13(b) of the Rome Statute likewise stipulates that, acting in accordance with Chapter VII, the Security Council may refer to the ICC any situation in which it determines that one or more crimes have been committed. Through this procedure, crimes committed by nationals of a non-State Party on the territory of a non-State Party can also fall under the ICC's jurisdiction. Naturally, such crimes must fall within the subject-matter jurisdiction of the Court. In this case, even if the state concerned is not a party to the Statute, the ICC becomes competent to investigate and prosecute the situation in question.³⁰⁶

Finally, it should be noted that the ICC's jurisdiction does not arise if the state having territorial or personal jurisdiction over a crime under the Statute is already conducting an investigation or prosecution, except in situations where that state is unwilling or unable genuinely to carry out the proceedings³⁰⁷ In doctrine, this is known as the principle of complementarity.³⁰⁸

Syria is not a State Party to the ICC Statute; therefore, as a general rule, the Court does not have jurisdiction over crimes committed by the Assad government within Syrian territory. However, the Court could acquire jurisdiction if the situation were referred to it by the UN Security Council under the conditions described above. This, however, appears unlikely given Russia's veto power in the Council, as Russia is a supporter of the Assad regime. Alternatively, if a newly established Syrian government were to accede to the Statute and submit the aforementioned declaration, the Court could be granted jurisdiction over events predating Syria's formal ratification. In such a case, the ICC would be authorized to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity and war crimes committed by the Assad government since 2011. This could, in turn, lead to the issuance of an arrest warrant for Bashar al-Assad, raising the inevitable question of whether Russia, as a non-State Party, would cooperate in surrendering him to the Court.

306 Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 288.

307 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Art. 17.

308 Aksar, *ibid.*, p. 179; Sarıgüzel, *ibid.*, p. 250.

4.1.2. Establishment of Hybrid Courts

National judicial authorities can investigate and prosecute crimes that fall within the scope of contemporary international criminal law, holding perpetrators accountable. However, in some cases, there may be insufficient state authority to conduct such trials, or the authorities may be unwilling to do so. Moreover, the outrage caused by these crimes may extend far beyond national boundaries. For these and other reasons, the prosecution of such crimes often necessitates the establishment of hybrid or internationalized criminal courts.

Courts conducting internationalized criminal proceedings are categorized in doctrine under two main types: permanent and ad hoc tribunals.³⁰⁹ A permanent court is an international criminal court of a continuous and institutional nature, not established for a specific event; the ICC, as described above, is an example of this type. Ad hoc tribunals, on the other hand, are established to adjudicate specific incidents that occurred within a defined timeframe, and their mandate terminates once they have fulfilled their judicial function. Prior to the establishment of the ICC, ad hoc tribunals were the primary mechanism employed in international criminal law.

The perspective underlying this distinction further divides *ad hoc* international criminal tribunals into two subcategories: *temporary international criminal tribunals* and *hybrid international criminal tribunals*.³¹⁰ Examples of temporary international criminal tribunals include the Nuremberg, Rwanda, the Former Yugoslavia Tribunals. Hybrid tribunals, on the other hand, are a type of international criminal court that combines both national and international elements. According to one view, in some hybrid tribunals, national characteristics prevail over international ones. For such courts, scholars argue that the term “*internationalized tribunals*” would be more accurate.³¹¹

Hybrid tribunals, as a specialized form of temporary courts, are established to operate in specific locations and for defined time periods in response to conflicts or similar events. Given the serious political and financial risks associated with conducting post-conflict judicial processes solely through national courts, hybrid tribunals aim to balance both international and domestic components, thereby ensuring the legitimacy of judicial proceedings in both spheres.³¹² A review of hybrid tribunal examples shows that they are generally established and operate in the very locations where the crimes were committed. After conflicts end, national courts often face several shortcomings in handling prosecutions, including inadequate legal frameworks, corruption, a lack of qualified personnel, and barriers to accessing justice.³¹³ Since such events typically involve crimes of exceptional

309 Köprülü, *ibid.*, pp. 617-618.

310 Köprülü, *ibid.*, pp. 617-618.

311 Cesare P. R. Romano *vd.*, *Internationalized Criminal Courts*, Oxford University Press, 2004; Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 293.

312 Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 293.

313 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner For Human Rights “Rule-of-Law Tools for Post-Conflict States Maximizing the Legacy of Hybrid Courts”, New York and Geneva, 2008, p. 1.

gravity that shock the conscience of humanity, difficulties also arise regarding jurisprudence and institutional experience. These challenges are addressed by appointing international judges and filling gaps in domestic law through the application of international legal norms and treaties.³¹⁴

During the transition from conflict to peace, relying solely on national courts for prosecutions may raise legitimacy concerns, as individuals who served under previous regimes might participate in the process and manipulate it. Conversely, as exemplified by the trial of Saddam Hussein, a newly established government may use judicial proceedings as an instrument to eliminate political opponents rather than to deliver justice, which poses a significant risk.³¹⁵ To mitigate such dangers, hybrid tribunals are established to maintain a balance between national and international elements, thereby ensuring that prosecutions are carried out effectively and with enhanced legitimacy.

A potential drawback of hybrid tribunals arises when disproportionate emphasis is placed on international elements. If these tribunals rely too heavily on international law or procedures, it may be difficult for local populations to place full trust in them. For instance, in Kosovo, one of the reasons why local communities viewed the hybrid tribunal with skepticism was precisely this overreliance on international components.³¹⁶ Therefore, the establishment of a hybrid tribunal – along with the legal rules and procedures it follows, the ratio of international judges and officials, and its independence and impartiality must all be determined with great care and sensitivity.

To illustrate the structure of hybrid tribunals, it is useful to examine a specific example: the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone, a violent civil war broke out in 1991 when a group supported by Liberia launched an insurgency to overthrow the existing government and seize power. The conflict lasted until 2002, resulting in the deaths of between 50,000 and 70,000 people, while approximately 2.5 million were displaced from their homes.

Following the end of the civil war, President Tejan Kabbah, citing the weakness of Sierra Leone's judicial system, appealed to the United Nations and requested the establishment of a court with both national and international characteristics. Subsequently, on 14 August 2000, through Resolution 1315, the United Nations Security Council authorized the Secretary-General to begin negotiations with the Government of Sierra Leone to establish such a court.³¹⁷ As a result, an agreement was concluded between the United Nations and Sierra Leone to create the Special Court for Sierra Leone, tasked with investigating and prosecuting serious crimes committed during the civil war.

314 "Rule-of-Law Tools for Post-Conflict States Maximizing the Legacy of Hybrid Courts", p. 4.

315 Medwis al-Rashidi, "The Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon: Lessons to be Learned from the Establishment, Composition and Jurisdiction of an International Tribunal", *Ankara Law Review*, Vol: 9, No: 1, Ankara, 2012, pp. 1-25.

316 Laura A Dickinson, "The Promise of Hybrid Courts", *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol: 97, No:2 (n.d.), pp. 295-310.

317 The pertinent resolution of the United Nations Security Council See. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/420605?v=pdf> (Access Date: 23/4/2025).

The structure of the Court provides an excellent example for understanding the composition of a hybrid tribunal.³¹⁸ The Court consists of Chambers, the Office of the Prosecutor, and the Registry. Each chamber is composed of three judges – two appointed by the UN Secretary-General and one by the Government of Sierra Leone. The Appeals Chamber comprises five judges, three appointed by the UN Secretary-General and two by the Government of Sierra Leone. In its deliberations, the Appeals Chamber draws upon the jurisprudence of the Appeals Chambers of the International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

The Prosecutor of the Court was appointed by the UN Secretary-General for a three-year term and is responsible for investigating serious violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law committed since 30 November 1996.³¹⁹ Assisting the Prosecutor is a Deputy Prosecutor from Sierra Leone and a team composed of Sierra Leonean staff members.³²⁰

Articles 2–4 of the Statute define the Court’s material jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, violations of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II, and other serious breaches of international humanitarian law. Article 5, in continuation, lists certain crimes under Sierra Leonean law, confirming that the Court also possesses material jurisdiction over these offenses.

As observed, the Special Court for Sierra Leone embodies both national and international elements in its establishment, the composition of its judicial personnel, and the legal framework it applies. In this respect, it serves as a quintessential example of a hybrid tribunal. Even a close examination of this Court alone provides substantial insight into the structure and nature of hybrid tribunals. Whether a hybrid international criminal court can be established in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war remains a matter for discussion. In light of recent developments, Syria appears, for the first time in years, to be in the process of building a fully sovereign government. It may be argued that, given Syria’s long-established statehood and relatively structured legal system, war crimes committed during the civil war could be prosecuted within the framework of national judicial authority. However, considering the transboundary nature of these crimes and their profound impact on humanity as a whole, the involvement of an international judicial mechanism is undeniably necessary. As noted above, conducting proceedings under the ICC appears difficult under the current circumstances. Nevertheless, the establishment of a hybrid court could ensure that prosecutions are carried out effectively. Moreover, creating a hybrid court would prevent the

318 Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 294.

319 Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Art. 15.

320 Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Art. 15/4.

perception that the Syrian state has no role in the judicial process – an impression that might otherwise arise if proceedings were conducted entirely before a permanent international court. In this respect, maintaining a delicate balance between national and international elements is essential. It should also be noted that opting for a hybrid court would entail a demanding and potentially lengthy process.

4.2. National Criminal Responsibility

In the *Bozkurt-Lotus* case adjudicated by the Permanent Court of International Justice, it was emphasized that state jurisdiction comprises two elements: legislative authority and enforcement authority. In terms of legislative authority, a state faces no inherent limitation and is free to regulate any matter as it deems appropriate.³²¹ The limit to this legislative authority, however, lies in the enforcement power.³²² Accordingly, although a state possesses general authority to legislate, the implementation of such laws is, as a rule, confined to its own territory. The power to punish represents one of the most characteristic manifestations of state sovereignty. Within this framework, the state exercises judicial and punitive authority over individuals who violate its criminal laws, without exceeding the limits of its enforcement jurisdiction. The exercise of judicial and punitive authority over individuals in this manner constitutes the subject matter of national jurisdiction, while, from the perspective of individuals, it is referred to as national criminal liability. In this section, the concept of transitional justice will be presented, followed by an explanation of the generally accepted principles governing state jurisdiction. Particular emphasis will be placed on the principle of universality, outlining how different states regulate and approach universal jurisdiction.

4.2.1. Responsibility within the Scope of Universal Jurisdiction at the National Level

Universal jurisdiction, in light of contemporary developments in international law and international criminal law, has been adopted by many states worldwide, particularly with respect to crimes that shock all humanity and involve grave human rights violations. Accordingly, numerous states have enacted legal provisions enabling them to exercise jurisdiction to investigate, prosecute, and punish perpetrators of such crimes, regardless

321 Aksar, *ibid.*, p. 274.

322 Aksar, *ibid.*, pp. 274-275.

of where or against whom they are committed. The exercise of this universal jurisdiction by states – which arises only in exceptional circumstances, as explained below – constitutes the application of judicial authority at the national level. Before elaborating on the concept and scope of universal jurisdiction, the notion of transitional justice will first be examined. Subsequently, Section 4.2.3 will discuss the substance of universal jurisdiction and the regulatory frameworks adopted by various states and organizations concerning its implementation.

4.2.2. Transitional Justice Practices

The transition from conflict situations, such as civil wars or dictatorial regimes, to a state of peace is inherently complex for states. This complexity stems primarily from the challenges of confronting human rights violations committed during the conflict, conducting investigations and prosecutions against those responsible, and remedying the harms and damages caused throughout the period of conflict. *Transitional justice* emerged as a framework designed to address these challenges, aiming to redress grave human rights violations, uncover the truth, and restore social peace.³²³ It comprises a set of mechanisms – outlined in detail below – through which these objectives are pursued.³²⁴ Initially, transitional justice focused on judicial processes addressing human rights violations committed by repressive or dictatorial regimes; over time, however, its scope has expanded to encompass war crimes and serious human rights violations committed during violent armed conflicts.³²⁵

Before presenting the mechanisms of transitional justice, it is first necessary to clarify its definition. One definition, provided by the International Center for Transitional Justice, describes transitional justice as “a response to systematic or widespread human rights violations.”³²⁶ The UN Secretary-General offers a more comprehensive definition, stating that the institution of transitional justice encompasses all processes and mechanisms aimed at addressing the legacy of large-scale past violations, with the objectives of ensuring accountability, achieving reconciliation, and serving justice.³²⁷ Another definition characterizes transitional justice as a conception of justice shaped by legal remedies for the wrongs of former repressive regimes and associated with periods of political transition.³²⁸

323 İlyas Özcan, *Transitional Justice and Truth Commissions in the Peacebuilding Phase: The Cases of Argentina and Chile*, *Journal of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution*, Vol: 10, No: 2, Yalova, 2022, pp. 221-252.

324 Merve Yüce Usta, “A Brief Analysis of the DAESH Terrorist Organization within the Framework of Transitional Justice,” *Journal of Political Science, Istanbul Medeniyet University*, Vol: 9, No: 2, Istanbul, 2024, pp. 105-124.

325 Martina Fischer, “Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: Theory and Practice”, *Advancing Conflict Transformation: The Berghof Handbook II*, (ed.) B. Austin, M. Fischer, H. J. Giessmann, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Frankfurt, pp. 406-430.

326 “What is Transitional Justice”, International Center for Transitional Justice, <https://www.ictj.org/what-transitional-justice> (Access Date: 20/03/2025)

327 United Nations Secretariat, *The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies: Report of the Secretary-General*, S/2004/616, 2016 <https://www.unhcr.org/media/rule-law-and-transitional-justice-conflict-and-post-conflict-societies-report-secretary> (Access Date: 20/03/2025).

328 Ruti G. Teitel, “Transitional Justice Genealogy”, *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, No: 16, 2003, p. 69.

The manner in which transitional justice is implemented constitutes its essential foundation. The transitional process must be conducted with great care, as countries in transition bear a heavy burden: the wrongs of the past.³²⁹ This process, as noted above, is carried out through the mechanisms of transitional justice.³³⁰ Transitional justice is generally understood to comprise four fundamental components: justice, truth, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.³³¹ The justice component involves prosecuting the perpetrators of human rights violations and punishing the guilty; the truth component entails uncovering the violations committed during the period in question; the reparation component concerns compensating for the harm caused by these violations; and the guarantees of non-recurrence aim to ensure that such violations do not occur again.³³²

Transitional justice, which emerged to address widespread and systematic human rights violations in conflict settings and to pave the way toward lasting peace, employs various methods and approaches to build societal reconciliation and truth. Before detailing the mechanisms of transitional justice, it is important to clarify the conception of justice guiding these methods. Two main approaches stand out: retributive justice and restorative justice. Retributive justice, as the name suggests, primarily aims to punish offenders and encompasses the classical judicial mechanisms designed to achieve this purpose.³³³ Restorative justice, on the other hand, reflects a moderated form of retributive justice, emphasizing practices such as truth commissions that operate along the path toward societal reconciliation.³³⁴ The choice of justice approach in a transitional period must be assessed according to the unique characteristics of each conflict and geographic context. Relying solely on retributive justice may discourage offenders from cooperating in efforts to uncover the truth, whereas prioritizing restorative justice alone may leave victims' families feeling that their sense of justice has not been fully fulfilled. Therefore, adopting a balanced approach that harmonizes both retributive and restorative elements in line with the specific circumstances of each case would be the most appropriate course.

The mechanisms of transitional justice are generally classified under four main categories: trials, truth commissions, reparations, and amnesty.³³⁵ In addition to these core mechanisms, structural reform³³⁶ and public apologies³³⁷ are also cited as complementary measures.

The trial mechanism is the most historically established component of transitional justice and refers to the prosecution of perpetrators responsible for violations committed during

329 Zeynep Ardiç, "Searching for Transitional Justice Mechanisms in the Kurdish Question in Türkiye: addressing violations of social, economic and cultural rights", Doctoral Dissertation, Sussex University, 2018, p. 17.

330 Usta, *ibid.*, p. 105.

331 Yunus Emre Erdölen, "Lustration in Transitional Justice According to the Case Law of the European Court of Human Rights," Master's Thesis, Galatasaray University, 2024, p. 14.

332 Erdölen, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

333 Özcan, *ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

334 Özcan, *ibid.*, p. 225.

335 Serdar Güleler, "The Pursuit of Justice in the Transition from a Conflictual Past to a Reconciliatory Future: An Overview of Transitional Justice and Its Mechanisms," *International Law and Politics Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 32, 2012, pp. 43-76.

336 Ardiç, *ibid.*, p. 50.

337 Gizem Koç, "Special Jurisdiction for Peace in Colombia: An Analysis within the Framework of Transitional Justice," Master's Thesis, Istanbul Bilgi University, 2023, p. 57.

conflicts or under repressive regimes, thereby establishing criminal accountability.³³⁸ This mechanism explicitly demonstrates the rejection of former policies through radical means such as punishment, while ensuring deterrence against similar acts in the future.³³⁹ Regarding the implementation of the trial mechanism, the UN report “Rule of Law Tools for Post-Conflict States: Prosecution Initiatives” provides a significant roadmap³⁴⁰. To date, four distinct approaches have been employed within the framework of the trial mechanism: the Nuremberg Trials, ad hoc tribunals, the ICC model, and the hybrid court model.³⁴¹

Truth commissions are bodies established by governments overseeing transitional processes to investigate, uncover, and document human rights violations committed during periods of conflict or repressive rule.³⁴² Serving the innate human drive to seek truth, these commissions aim to heal victims’ wounds through the revelation of factual realities.³⁴³ In this respect, they operate within a restorative justice framework.³⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, truth commissions also play a vital role in ensuring accountability for perpetrators and redress for victims, as punishment and reparations cannot meaningfully occur without first establishing the truth.³⁴⁵ In recent decades, truth commissions have been implemented in countries such as South Africa, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, Liberia, Morocco, Panama, Peru, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, South Korea, and East Timor.³⁴⁶ The successful practices of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in particular, have significantly contributed to the growing prominence of truth commissions within transitional justice mechanisms.

Reparation, as the term suggests, is a transitional justice mechanism aimed at redressing the harm suffered by victims of human rights violations. Its significance extends far beyond mere financial payments; it embodies a society’s recognition of the harm done, its expression of remorse, and its determination to provide redress.³⁴⁷ In this sense, reparation also encompasses forms of compensation beyond monetary measures.

Amnesty holds an important place as the most frequently used mechanism of transitional justice.³⁴⁸ It is defined as “a legal measure adopted in exceptional circumstances, whose primary function is to eliminate, conditionally or unconditionally, the possibility and consequences of prosecution for certain types of crimes committed by specific individuals

338 Güllener, *ibid.*, p. 53.

339 Koç, *ibid.*, p. 50.

340 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Rule-of-Law Tools for Post-Conflict States: Prosecution Initiatives*, New York and Geneva, 2006. For access to the full text of the report, see <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/580041?v=pdf> (Access Date: 21/3/2025)

341 Güllener, *ibid.*, p. 55.

342 Teitel, p. 78.

343 Ardiç, *ibid.*, p. 42.

344 Güllener, *ibid.*, p. 57.

345 Özcan, *ibid.*, p. 227.

346 Christina Binder, “Introduction to the Concept of Transitional Justice”, *Transitional Justice - Experiences from Africa and the Western Balkans*, 2013, pp. 9-29.

347 Dilek Kurban and Mesut Yeğen, *On the Edge of Justice: The State and the Kurds After “Forced” Migration: An Evaluation of the Compensation Law No. 5233 - The Case of Van*, TESEV Publications, Istanbul, 2012, p. 30.

348 Güllener, *ibid.*, p. 52.

or groups.”³⁴⁹ Although the United Nations and other international organizations and actors have taken an opposing stance toward amnesty, it has nonetheless been used during transitional periods as a means of achieving peace in the dilemma between peace and justice.³⁵⁰ The amnesty mechanism has also been criticized on the grounds that granting amnesty to those who committed human rights violations may fail to ensure genuine peace and reconciliation.³⁵¹ Finally, as the most commonly applied mechanism, amnesty has a wide range of implementation across the world.³⁵²

Since 1971, the Syrian people have been subjected to oppression under the dictatorship of the Assad family. The regime, particularly for sectarian and political reasons, exerted intense pressure on individuals who did not conform to its ideology or sect. In 2011, influenced by the Arab Spring protests, a process began in Syria that evolved into a civil war lasting more than thirteen years, during which the Assad regime and its forces committed grave crimes that shocked the conscience of humanity. Eventually, opposition forces overthrew the regime, and a new Syrian government was established. Having experienced a prolonged period of dictatorship and conflict, Syria is now in a transitional phase toward peace, providing favorable conditions for the implementation of transitional justice and its mechanisms. The fall of the regime has brought to light numerous truths that must be uncovered, documented, and prosecuted – such as the torture and abuses perpetrated in Sednaya Prison. Therefore, on the path toward establishing peace in Syria, implementing transitional justice to reveal the truth and hold perpetrators accountable is both possible and necessary. Addressing the crimes of the Assad regime requires transitional justice approaches encompassing both international and national dimensions, including judicial proceedings and processes of social reconciliation. The simultaneous and complementary operation of these mechanisms will help victims regain their rights, rebuild public trust, and prevent the recurrence of similar violations.

4.2.3. Criminal Prosecution Before the Courts of Foreign Jurisdictions

Jurisdiction refers to a state’s authority to regulate or influence individuals, property, and events within the framework of international law. This concept is directly linked to the fundamental principles of international law, including state sovereignty, the equality of states, and the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states. Jurisdiction is defined as the exercise of power to alter or terminate existing legal relationships and, in this respect, constitutes one of the essential elements of state sovereignty.³⁵³ The exercise of jurisdiction by a state is manifested through the activities of its legislative, executive,

349 Mark Freeman, “Amnesties and DDR Programs” (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2010).

350 Ardiç, *ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

351 Koç, *ibid.*, p. 47.

352 Güllener, *ibid.*, p. 66.

353 Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 461.

and judicial bodies. In all cases, competent state organs, as recognized and defined by the relevant legal order, perform the duties and functions entrusted to them, thereby influencing social life in various ways.³⁵⁴ In this study, the concept of jurisdiction and the principles governing state judicial authority will first be introduced, with particular emphasis on the principle of universality. The principle of universality will also be examined in relation to the countries that are of particular significance to the subject of this study.

As a requirement of state sovereignty, a state holds the exclusive authority to establish and enforce criminal and civil regulations concerning individuals and property within its territory in order to maintain public order.³⁵⁵ In this context, the state is free to determine how its legal regulations are to be applied. This forms the basis of the state's national jurisdiction.

Within this framework, while a state's jurisdiction is primarily limited to its own territory, it retains the discretion to extend its criminal jurisdiction beyond its borders under certain conditions, so long as there is no binding norm of international law to the contrary. The authority to determine which individuals, places, or events fall within the scope of criminal norms constitutes an expression of the state's sovereign power.

However, in accordance with the principle of public interest underlying the application of criminal law, it is often neither practical nor economically rational for states to apply their criminal laws to acts committed outside their sovereign territory. Although such applications may yield limited benefits, they involve significant prosecutorial challenges, financial burdens, and the potential to create tensions in international relations.³⁵⁶ For this reason, states have chosen to limit the scope of their criminal norms based on specific principles.

These limitations on the scope of the application of criminal laws are assessed in legal doctrine within the framework of five main principles: the principle of territoriality, the principle of nationality, the principle of passive nationality, the protective principle, and the principle of universality.

Territoriality Principle: The exercise of jurisdiction based on territoriality represents a state's exercise of sovereignty within its own borders and constitutes the indispensable foundation for the application of its legal authority.³⁵⁷ One of the most fundamental manifestations of state sovereignty is the power to conduct criminal prosecutions. In international criminal law, a state's criminal jurisdiction generally derives from the principle of sovereignty, with the state in which the crime was committed exercising this authority. Accordingly, a state's jurisdiction over acts occurring within its territory is grounded in the territoriality principle. However, in certain exceptional circumstances, states other than the one where the crime

354 Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 461.

355 Aksar, Yusuf, *International Law*, 1st Vol. Ankara: Seçkin Publishing House, 5th Issue, 2019, p. 275.

356 Bassiouni, M. Cherif 2008, *International Criminal Law*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008, pp. 121-123.

357 Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 466.

occurred may also exercise jurisdiction – particularly in cases involving serious crimes such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, or acts of terrorism, where the interests of other states are affected. In such situations, the cross – border effects of the crime or the presence of offenders within another state may serve as grounds for asserting jurisdiction. In practice, conflicts of jurisdiction between states are guided by international legal norms and judicial precedents. Therefore, when exercising their criminal jurisdiction, states must take into account both their sovereign prerogatives and relevant international regulations.³⁵⁸

Nationality Principle: Under the nationality principle, the application of criminal norms is grounded in the citizenship of either the perpetrator or the victim. This principle allows a state to exercise its criminal jurisdiction over its nationals regardless of their location.³⁵⁹ A state may prosecute and punish its citizens for criminal acts without requiring their physical presence within the state at the time of the offense. In practice, this principle is most commonly applied to serious offenses such as treason or crimes against humanity. While the nationality principle is applied more restrictively in Anglo-Saxon legal systems, it is more broadly recognized in Continental European legal traditions. From the standpoint of international criminal law, the nationality principle is significant in that it enables states to extend the exercise of their criminal sovereignty beyond their territorial boundaries.³⁶⁰

Passive Nationality Principle: The passive nationality principle, reflected in domestic criminal law as the principle of personality in relation to the victim, bases jurisdiction on the state of which the victim is a national. This principle enables a state to exercise its jurisdiction over an offense on the basis of the victim’s nationality, regardless of where or by whom the crime was committed. In international law, this approach is linked to the right of diplomatic protection and has gained particular significance in combating terrorism and addressing crimes committed against citizens abroad. Since the 1980s, states have increasingly exercised extraterritorial jurisdiction in response to terrorist acts targeting their nationals and have enacted corresponding legal frameworks. The legal proceedings initiated by Türkiye following Israel’s Mavi Marmara intervention constitute a concrete example of the application of this principle.³⁶¹

Protective Principle: The protective principle permits a state to exercise criminal jurisdiction extraterritorially in response to acts that threaten its fundamental interests. Because the state’s interests may be interpreted broadly under this principle, there is an inherent risk of misuse. In practice, offenses against the state – such as treason, counterfeiting, and espionage – generally fall within this scope. The most prominent international example – though its conformity with international law remains disputed – is Israel’s abduction and prosecution of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann from Argentina. Over time, the protective principle

358 Aksar, *ibid.*, pp. 277-278.

359 Shaw, *ibid.*, p. 471.

360 Aksar, pp. 278-279.

361 Aksar, pp. 283-284.

has been expanded to include the safeguarding of economic interests and has become particularly prevalent in Anglo-Saxon legal systems. However, this broad interpretation has occasionally resulted in conflicts of jurisdiction among states at the international level.³⁶²

Universality Principle: The universality principle, which holds particular importance for this study, is a legal doctrine that enables states to exercise jurisdiction over crimes committed beyond their sovereign borders that concern the international community as a whole. Under this principle, any state may assert jurisdiction over crimes that violate the shared interests of the international community, such as genocide, torture, and human trafficking.³⁶³ This principle was concretized – particularly in the prosecution of grave violations – through the 1949 Geneva Conventions. The establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) represents a direct outcome of this development. The Nuremberg and Tokyo Tribunals played a pioneering role in prosecuting serious international crimes, such as crimes against humanity, on the basis of individual responsibility. Cases such as Israel’s Eichmann trial and Belgium’s Congo case paved the way for the exercise of universal jurisdiction by national courts. In particular, in the Eichmann case, the Jerusalem District Court recognized Israel’s jurisdiction on the grounds that crimes against humanity constitute violations of universal legal norms. These developments collectively accelerated states’ efforts to harmonize their domestic laws with international criminal law. With the establishment of the ICC, it has become evident that the immunity of heads of state and government officials from prosecution has been significantly weakened. Being a head of state, minister, or senior official no longer provides protection from accountability for international crimes. This transformation is regarded as clear evidence of international law’s evolution toward an individual-centered structure.³⁶⁴

These principles give criminal law an international dimension, strengthening cooperation among states and providing an effective means to hold perpetrators accountable.

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to examine the principle of universality in relation to certain states and communities for which it holds particular significance. The following section analyzes the application of this principle in the contexts of the United States, China, Russia, the Council of Europe, and Türkiye.

United States: Following the end of the Cold War, within the unipolar power structure that emerged in the international system, the United States has largely maintained its global leadership role, despite the European Union’s efforts to strengthen its political, economic, and military capacities. This position of the U.S. is also reflected in its approach to international law. Notably, the United States has historically adopted a cautious and at times even opposing stance toward the principle of universal jurisdiction.³⁶⁵

362 Aksar, pp. 279-280.

363 Shaw, p. 477.

364 Aksar, *ibid.*, pp. 282-283; Burak Kaya, “The Principle of Universality in International Criminal Law,” *Journal of International Law and Social Science Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2020, pp. 46-60.

365 S. Sinan Kocaoğlu, “Universal Jurisdiction,” *Journal of the Union of Türkiye Bar Associations*, No. 60, 2005, p. 12.

During the drafting of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the United States firmly opposed proposals to incorporate the principle of universal jurisdiction into the treaty. The U.S. delegation characterized this principle as “one of the most dangerous and unacceptable doctrines of international law.”³⁶⁶

This approach persisted throughout the drafting of the Rome Statute in 1998. Although the Statute establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC) was adopted with the participation of 120 states, the United States was among the seven countries that voted against it and actively opposed its adoption during the negotiations. The U.S. position stemmed from concerns that international criminal proceedings could be directed against its military and civilian officials. In particular, the perceived risk that personnel involved in peacekeeping missions and international interventions might be subject to prosecution made the United States highly cautious toward such mechanisms.³⁶⁷

However, in recent years, a certain degree of flexibility has been observed in the United States’ traditional position. Since the early 2000s, there have been instances in which the U.S. has invoked universal jurisdiction – albeit to a limited extent – in cases involving international crimes such as human trafficking, terrorism, and torture. For example, through statutes such as the Torture Victim Protection Act (1991) and the Alien Tort Claims Act (ATCA), foreign nationals have been granted the right to bring lawsuits before U.S. courts for certain serious violations.³⁶⁸

These developments indicate that the United States has partially revised its previous stance of absolute rejection toward universal jurisdiction and has begun to engage selectively with the framework of international criminal justice.

China: In the People’s Republic of China, regulations regarding universal jurisdiction are directly incorporated into the Chinese Criminal Law (《中华人民共和国刑法》, 1997)³⁶⁹ and are recognized only under certain limited circumstances. These provisions are found in Articles 6, 7, 8, and 9 of the Law. According to Article 6, the People’s Republic of China has jurisdiction over crimes committed within its territory. Article 7 extends this jurisdiction to Chinese citizens who commit an offense prescribed by the Law outside China’s territory or territorial waters. Article 8 provides that crimes committed outside China by a foreign national against a Chinese citizen or in a manner that harms China’s interests – if they constitute a serious offense under Chinese law and the perpetrator has not been prosecuted elsewhere – may be tried by Chinese courts. Although this article does not explicitly refer to universal jurisdiction, it may, in practice, be interpreted within the scope of the protective principle and, to a limited extent, universal jurisdiction. Article 9 applies to crimes for which China exercises

366 William A. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes*, 2. Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

367 Jack L. Goldsmith, “The Self-Defeating International Criminal Court”, *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol: 70, No: 1, 2003, pp. 89-104.

368 Benjamin Stephens, “The Amoral of Profit: Transnational Corporations and Human Rights.” *Berkeley Journal of International Law*, Vol: 20, No:1, 2002, pp. 45-90.

369 Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China (adopted 14 March 1997). (《中华人民共和国刑法》).

criminal jurisdiction under international treaties it has concluded or acceded to. This article implicitly incorporates the concept of universal jurisdiction by providing that China may exercise jurisdiction over offenses enumerated in treaties to which it is a party, regardless of where the crime was committed. Notably, rather than specifying particular offenses, Article 9 ties the exercise of jurisdiction to crimes defined in international treaties binding upon China. Certain treaties, such as the *1984 UN Convention Against Torture*,³⁷⁰ include obligations grounded in the principle of universal jurisdiction, thereby providing a theoretical basis for its implementation within China's domestic legal system.

It should be noted that China is not a party to the Rome Statute and does not cooperate with the ICC, which reflects its cautious stance toward the notion of universal criminal justice. Scholarly literature highlights that China remains firmly committed to the principle of sovereignty and tends to invoke universal jurisdiction only when it coincides with its national security or political interests. Ultimately, while universal jurisdiction is formally acknowledged within China's legal framework, its application remains highly restricted and pragmatic, constrained by both legal infrastructure and political will.³⁷¹

Russia: In the Russian Federation, universal jurisdiction has a theoretical foundation derived from constitutional provisions and ratified international treaties; however, in practice, its application remains highly limited. Article 15 (4) of the Constitution of the Russian Federation³⁷² affirms the supremacy of generally recognized principles and norms of international law, as well as international treaties, over domestic legislation. This provision allows for the direct incorporation of obligations arising from international criminal law into Russia's domestic legal framework.

In Russia, the regulation of criminal jurisdiction in national courts is primarily framed by the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (*Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации, 1996*)³⁷³ and the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation (*Уголовно-процессуальный кодекс Российской Федерации, 2001*)³⁷⁴. Both instruments establish criminal jurisdiction mainly on the basis of territoriality and personality principles, yet they provide a limited avenue for the exercise of universal jurisdiction through obligations derived from international treaties.

Article 11 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation stipulates that any person committing a crime on the territory of the Russian Federation shall be subject to criminal liability under this Code, whereas Article 12 requires that, for crimes committed abroad by foreign nationals to be prosecuted, the act must be provided for under international treaties (УК РФ, Articles 11-12). This provision provides a theoretical basis for universal crimes recognized under international law, such as torture, genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, but

370 UN, Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

371 Donald C. Clarke, "The Chinese Legal System and the Globalization of Law", In *Globalization and the Future of the Law*, (ed.) David B. Wilkins, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018, pp. 263-289.

372 Constitution of the Russian Federation, Art. 15(4) <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm> dated 12/12/1993 (Access Date: 23/4/2025).

373 Criminal Code of the Russian Federation/Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации, dated 13/6/1996, No. 63-ФЗ.

374 Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation/Уголовно-процессуальный кодекс Российской Федерации, dated 18/12/2001, No. 174-ФЗ.

the exercise of this jurisdiction requires the existence of an international treaty. However, in Chapter 34 of the Code, Articles 353–360 include certain universally recognized crimes, such as “Genocide” (Art. 357) and “Use of Prohibited Means and Methods of Warfare” (Art. 356). In these articles, it is observed that jurisdiction is extended universally, without limitation based on the location where the crime was committed.

Indeed, certain treaties to which the Russian Federation is a party, such as the UN Convention Against Torture (1984), provide for universal jurisdiction and require the contracting states to fulfill their obligation to prosecute. However, as emphasized in the literature, Russia demonstrates a highly cautious approach to actually exercising this jurisdiction. Scholars argue that Russia accepts the expansion of its jurisdiction under international norms only to the extent that it aligns with its political interests.³⁷⁵ Furthermore, Russia’s signing of the Rome Statute in 2000 and its subsequent withdrawal in 2016 reinforce its reserved stance toward universal criminal justice. Within this framework, universal jurisdiction in Russia remains highly limited both normatively and practically, with existing regulations being largely symbolic and confined to obligations stemming from international commitments.

Council of Europe: In the context of crimes against humanity, the Council of Europe stands out not only as a human rights protection organization but also as a significant actor that promotes universal jurisdiction and develops its normative framework.³⁷⁶

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), within this framework, places particular emphasis on the necessity of implementing effective domestic remedies for systematic violations of norms such as the right to life (Article 2) and the prohibition of torture (Article 3).³⁷⁷ Under the principle of universal jurisdiction, crimes against humanity may be prosecuted before the courts of any state. This reflects the understanding that such crimes are so grave and of such global concern that they cannot be confined within the borders of a single state. On April 30, 2002, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation to member states on the prevention of violence against women. The recommendation included specific measures to address violence against women during and after armed conflicts. Paragraph 69 of the recommendation states that member states should define acts such as rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, and other comparably severe forms of sexual violence as serious human rights violations, and classify these acts as war crimes when committed during armed conflicts, or as crimes against humanity when committed as part of a broader attack.³⁷⁸

In this context, the practice of universal jurisdiction has been adopted by many European countries. Several European states – most notably Germany and France – are able to prosecute

375 Marko Milanovic, “From Compromise to Principle: Clarifying the Concept of State Jurisdiction in Human Rights Treaties,” *Human Rights Law Review*, Vol: 8, No: 3, 2008, pp. 411-448.

376 Cassese, p. 287.

378 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), *Kaya/ Türkiye*, B. No. 22729/93, 19/2/1998. 377

378 Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Recommendation Rec(2002)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Protection of Women against Violence, 30 April 2002, para. 69.

crimes against humanity even when neither the perpetrator nor the victim is a national of their country. This approach is consistent with the general legal orientation of the Council of Europe and aligns with the European Court of Human Rights' doctrine of positive obligations.

Although the Council of Europe does not possess direct judicial authority, its discourse and norms promoting universal jurisdiction serve as a guiding influence on the domestic laws of member states. While the Council's human rights protection function does not directly intersect with criminal justice mechanisms, its sensitivity to crimes against humanity and its policies supporting the enforcement of criminal sanctions contribute to the broader dissemination and acceptance of universal jurisdiction.

Türkiye: The principle of universality was first regulated in Türkiye criminal law under Article 4 of the former Türkiye Penal Code No. 765 and is currently safeguarded by Article 13 of the Türkiye Penal Code No. 5237. Under this provision, certain serious crimes can be prosecuted in Türkiye regardless of who committed them or where they were committed.³⁷⁹ Türkiye may exercise universal jurisdiction without requiring any citizenship connection between the perpetrator and the victim. Crimes covered by this article include torture, genocide, and crimes against humanity, as well as acts targeting the sovereignty and dignity of the state. In legal doctrine, it is argued that subparagraph (b) of paragraph 1 of Article 13 is not regulated under the universality principle but rather under the protective principle aimed at safeguarding the state.³⁸⁰

Paragraph 2 of Article 13 ties the ability to prosecute certain crimes in Türkiye to a request by the Minister of Justice. This provision functions as a political balancing mechanism in the exercise of jurisdiction consistent with international law. At the same time, it serves as a controlled intervention in the judicial process to prevent potential diplomatic issues that the state might encounter in foreign relations. Paragraph 3 of the article stipulates that Türkiye may conduct a new trial for the same act even if the perpetrator has already been acquitted or convicted in another state. This provision is crucial for the effective exercise of universal jurisdiction, as proceedings in some countries may be merely formalistic, and a second trial may be necessary to ensure justice.³⁸¹ Under international law, the principle of “ne bis in idem” – not being tried twice for the same offense – is a general rule. However, this principle can be relaxed under Türkiye law in cases involving serious human rights violations. Türkiye's regulation in this regard aligns with developments in international law. The effective application of the universality principle constitutes an important safeguard for human rights and international criminal law. Its inclusion in Türkiye legislation represents a positive step toward combating crime and protecting human rights on a global scale. It should be noted that internationally recognized crimes in the Türkiye Penal Code are largely compatible with the Rome Statute. Although Türkiye is not a party to the Rome Statute, it has

379 M. Emin Artuk and Ahmet Gökçen, *Criminal Law: General Provisions.*, 13th Edition, Adalet Publishing House, Ankara, 2019, pp. 1110-1111.

380 Artuk ve Gökçen, *ibid.*, p. 1107.

381 Artuk ve Gökçen, *ibid.*, p. 1112.

kept pace with developments in international criminal law and implemented corresponding regulations in its domestic legislation.

Universal jurisdiction is a power generally recognized by states, allowing them to establish legal frameworks under which international crimes can be prosecuted even if they were not committed within the state's territory. During the Syrian civil war, the Assad regime committed numerous atrocities—including massacres, use of prohibited weapons, and acts of torture – that shocked all of humanity. As a result, it is theoretically possible for the perpetrators of these crimes to be prosecuted, detained, and punished in states that recognize universal jurisdiction over such offenses. It is immaterial whether these individuals committed the crimes on the prosecuting state's territory or against its nationals. For example, Bashar al-Assad could, in principle, be tried, arrested, and punished in Russia for crimes falling under the universal jurisdiction provisions of the Russian Criminal Code. However, given Russia's long-standing support for the Assad government, it appears unlikely that Russia would take any concrete action in this regard.



In Syria, where one of the most ruthless regimes in the Middle East – known for its severe human rights violations – was established, the events between 2011 and 2024 clearly demonstrate the methods of repression and massacres employed by the Assad administration to maintain power. Strengthened by Hafiz al-Assad’s Baathist ideology and a security approach rooted in the Nusayri sect, the regime carried out every form of human rights and humanitarian law violation over the years to suppress and eliminate opposition. This approach, which prioritizes the security and interests of the regime embodied in the figure of a dictator and his close circle above all else, resulted in the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent people and forced millions to flee. Inspired and emboldened by popular uprisings in the Arab world, Syrians’ aspirations to live more freely in their country – with demands for democracy, transparency, and respect for the rule of law – were met with disproportionate responses by regime forces, opening the door to civil war and causing irreparable suffering and profound hardship across the country.

Since 2011, Bashar al-Assad, relying on external support to remain in power, has inflicted the gravest abuses on his own citizens in line with practices inherited from the traditional codes of the regime. During this period, when civilian infrastructure was almost entirely destroyed, the regime used numerous prohibited weapons to annihilate areas inhabited by opposition groups. Despite being declared a “red line” by the international community, the Assad military resorted to chemical weapons to punish Syrian opponents and repeatedly deployed barrel and cluster bombs. Forced disappearances became one of the most frequently employed methods, alongside arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings, leading to the suffering and even death to countless innocent people. As millions were forced to flee, the country’s demographic structure was manipulated. Citizenship was granted to Shia families brought from countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan in an unlawful attempt to alter the population balance in Syria. Through confiscations or fraudulent sales, the property of displaced Syrians was seized, effectively violating their property rights. The 2018 Law No. 10 on Reconstruction, issued by the regime, aimed to facilitate the expropriation of citizens’ property. The practical difficulties faced by property owners in complying with the application process outlined in the law resulted in further violations of civilians’ property rights.

In addition to targeting civilians and infrastructure throughout the civil war, the regime also committed violations against media personnel who sought to report on the massacres and human rights abuses. Attempting to manipulate information, the regime tried multiple methods to prevent the reality in Syria from reaching

the international community, directly targeting journalists and frequently resorting to disinformation to shape perceptions of the crisis. Furthermore, to inflict greater harm on opposition groups and break resistance, the regime's security forces did not refrain to target healthcare institutions and personnel. In this context, the testimonies of victims and primary witnesses of the events constitute crucial evidence for understanding the actions of the regime's army and intelligence services.

According to reports based on field data from the UN and civil society organizations, the Assad regime has committed systematic and widespread violations against civilians. These include arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and deliberate starvation policies. The absence of a transparent judicial process for detainees, evidence of torture, and findings related to mass graves indicate the commission of crimes prohibited under international law. Moreover, documented evidence shows that torture was carried out systematically against women, children, and men, without distinction of age or sex, and inflicted not only physical but also psychological and economic harm. Similarly, protected civilian sites such as healthcare, infrastructure, and educational facilities were deliberately targeted by the Assad regime. The UN has identified substantial evidence that the regime used prohibited weapons, including chemical agents and barrel bombs. In this regard, the regime's practices constitute clear violations of international human rights law, humanitarian law, and jus cogens norms, such as the prohibition of torture. The targeting of journalists, healthcare workers, and opposition members further demonstrates the regime's attempts to conceal these violations. With the eventual overthrow of the regime and the end of these abuses, accountability mechanisms must now be implemented. Therefore, independent archival systems should first be established to preserve and document evidence of violations in Syria. Regional centers should be set up for the physical and psychological rehabilitation of victims. While prioritizing humanitarian aid and development, mechanisms must also be created to ensure that the Assad regime is held accountable for its actions.

Processes to hold the Assad regime accountable can be pursued at both the national and international levels. According to the findings, the Assad regime systematically violated the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. The regime's massacres of civilians, attacks on healthcare facilities, collective punishments, and enforced disappearances constitute some of the gravest offenses under international criminal law. In this context, all individuals who held positions across the various levels of the regime bear responsibility under international law. This accountability can be pursued through the acceptance of the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction or by establishing a Syria-specific hybrid court. Judicial proceedings against members of the Assad regime can also be initiated in countries that recognize universal

jurisdiction, and international cooperation mechanisms can be activated. Particularly in terms of evidence access, a hybrid approach within the framework of transitional justice practices could be considered as a third pathway. Accordingly, a series of reforms is necessary, including rebuilding the legal system and constitutional order, establishing mechanisms to protect and monitor human rights, prosecuting regime perpetrators in courts with international jurisdiction, or developing a justice policy consistent with victims' claims for truth, reparations, and rehabilitation.

Observations and interviews conducted during field visits by members of the Türkiye Human Rights and Equality Board, institutional experts, and academics on the writing team support the magnitude of the violations committed by the Assad regime. First-hand testimonies reveal, in stark detail, the experiences of the Syrian people since 2011. Field observations and witness accounts demonstrate that acts intended to degrade human dignity have become routine under the regime. Interviews indicate that the regime's security forces have subjected innocent Syrians to all forms of physical and psychological violence, normalizing sexual abuse and rape. Substantial evidence on the regime's violations were collected during two field visits to Syria, particularly in Aleppo and Damascus.

This report, which documents the human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria between 2011 and 2024 and provides legal evidence of these abuses, also draws on field observations and witness testimonies to portray the scale of the atrocities in Syria. The report lays bare the arbitrariness and brutality of the regime and includes a discussion on the national and international prosecution of Bashar al-Assad and other senior officials responsible for the massacres. The disclosure of numerous incidents that had previously been concealed, suppressed, or manipulated, particularly following the developments of December 8, is of critical importance for the future of Syria.

It is prepared to contribute to Syria's stability and to alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people, serves as highly significant evidence for understanding the violations that occurred in Syria at both regional and global levels. At the same time, in the new period, a series of measures must be taken by UN member states and the Damascus administration during the transitional phase to address past traumas, ease the inflicted suffering, and prevent the emergence of conditions that could allow similar violations to occur.

Finally, based on the findings drawn from the violations and massacres committed by the regime, the following recommendations are presented to the UN member states and the Damascus administration within the framework of this report:

Recommendations for United Nations Member States

- | Supporting the extradition and prosecution of perpetrators of crimes committed by the regime before national courts in the intervening states.
- | Initiating judicial proceedings, under the principle of universal jurisdiction, against perpetrators of crimes committed by the regime, and investigating and prosecuting regime officials responsible for chemical attacks verified by the United Nations and the OPCW.
- | Lifting international embargoes and sanctions and ensuring the provision of sufficient financial resources in order to accelerate the reconstruction process in Syria.
- | Conducting investigations into cases of migrant smuggling and human trafficking in an independent, impartial, and prompt manner to ensure effective redress for victims.

Recommendations for the Syrian Administration

- | Cooperating with relevant UN bodies - particularly the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) - as well as NGOs and international forensic teams, in collecting and preserving evidence related to serious human rights violations in Syria,
- | Providing all relevant information and documentation to UN and OPCW investigators to support inquiries into chemical attacks in Syria,
- | Preventing the concealment or destruction of evidence by ensuring that evidence collection procedures are conducted swiftly and by establishing independent archiving systems,
- | Conducting thorough investigations and prosecutions of individuals responsible for enforced disappearances,
- | Establishing an official institution dedicated to the issue of missing persons - an area connected to forensic techniques, evidence collection, witness testimonies, and archival research (examples: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, South Africa, and Iraq), including:
 - › Maintaining cooperation with the IIMP (Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic) and relevant NGOs in the execution of this institution's activities,

- › Carrying out investigations into the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, including work on the identification of individuals in mass graves, and informing the public,
- › Creating and regularly updating a comprehensive database on missing persons,
- | Establishing appropriate compensation mechanisms to remedy the grievances of individuals whose property was confiscated or fraudulently sold to third parties,
- | Creating regional centers for the physical and psychological rehabilitation of victims of human rights violations – especially torture survivors, former detainees, and families of the forcibly disappeared,
- | Drafting an inclusive and comprehensive constitution to lay the foundation for a pluralistic political system,
- | Ensuring that no form of discrimination is permitted against religious or ethnic groups,
- | Establishing an official institutional structure with the authority to protect and monitor human rights, as well as to receive and review complaints regarding discrimination, in order to prevent further violations during the transitional period,
- | Taking necessary measures related to border control and other areas to prevent cases of human trafficking and migrant smuggling,
- | Removing all obstacles to the return of displaced persons and implementing projects aimed at revitalizing the economy through industrial development.

ANNEX-1: THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND KEY UNITED NATIONS RESOLUTIONS ON THE MATTER

With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, the UN General Assembly and the Security Council adopted numerous resolutions concerning the actions carried out by the former regime in Syria. The first of these was Security Council Resolution 2042 (2012), which called for an end to the ongoing conflict and the implementation of Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan. The Security Council demanded that regime forces withdraw their heavy weapons and military units from city centers and decided to establish a UN Supervision Mission in the region.³⁸² Later that same year, through Resolution 2043, the Security Council established the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) for a 90-day period to monitor the ceasefire in the country.³⁸³

Following the chemical weapons attack carried out by the regime on August 21, 2013, in the Eastern Ghouta region of Damascus – which resulted in the deaths of numerous civilians – the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2118 (2013). The resolution emphasized that those responsible for the use of chemical weapons must be held accountable. It also noted that Syria, having acceded the Chemical Weapons Convention on September 14, 2013, is bound by its provisions, and it condemned the attack in Eastern Ghouta. Furthermore, the resolution stated that, in the event of Syria's non-compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention, sanctions could be imposed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.³⁸⁴

In its Resolution 2139 (2014), the UN Security Council drew attention to the scale of violence in Syria, reporting that more than one hundred thousand civilians had been killed. The resolution strongly condemned the widespread human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law committed by both the Syrian authorities and armed groups. It particularly highlighted the use of barrel bombs, attacks on hospitals and schools, sexual violence, and the recruitment of children as soldiers. All parties, especially the Syrian authorities, were called upon to remove obstacles to the delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians. It demanded that access to humanitarian assistance be ensured in besieged areas such as Homs, Yarmouk, and Eastern Ghouta, that sieges be lifted, and that civilians be safely evacuated. The resolution also emphasized that the Syrian people must determine their own future in an independent and democratic manner.³⁸⁵

382 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2042 (2012), 14/04/2012.

383 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2043 (2012), 21/04/2012.

384 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2118 (2013), 27/09/2013.

385 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2139 (2014), 22/02/2014.

Although Resolution 2139 (2014) called for the removal of obstacles to the delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians, the continuing insufficiency of aid in the region led the Security Council to adopt Resolution 2165 (2014). This resolution authorized humanitarian agencies to deliver aid through the Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al-Yarubiyah, and Al-Ramtha border crossings. It stipulated that notification of such deliveries would be sufficient, removing the requirement for prior approval. This marked the first instance in which cross-border humanitarian aid was permitted without the consent of the Syrian regime.³⁸⁶

In 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254 (2015), aimed at ending the civil war and establishing an internationally agreed political transition process under UN supervision. The resolution called upon the UN Secretary-General to facilitate formal negotiations between representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition, beginning in January 2016. It set forth a plan to form an inclusive and legitimate transitional governing body within six months and to hold elections under a new constitution, supervised by the UN, within 18 months. The resolution also urged all parties to remove obstacles preventing humanitarian aid from reaching those in need, demanded the release of arbitrarily detained persons, and condemned attacks against civilians, medical facilities, and humanitarian workers.³⁸⁷

Through Resolution 2235 (2015), the UN Security Council established the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) to identify those responsible for chemical weapons attacks. Following the Fact-Finding Mission conducted by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in 2016, which investigated allegations of renewed chemical weapons use – including chlorine gas – particularly in the areas of Aleppo and Idlib, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2314 (2016), extending the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism. The resolution once again condemned the use of chemical weapons and emphasized that any state or entity using such weapons bears international accountability.³⁸⁸

In 2018, during a period marked by heavy civilian casualties and restrictions on humanitarian aid access – particularly in Eastern Ghouta – the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2401 (2018), calling for a nationwide humanitarian ceasefire lasting at least 30 days. The resolution demanded an immediate cessation to attacks against civilians, the delivery of humanitarian assistance to besieged areas, and the facilitation of medical evacuations.³⁸⁹ Subsequently, in 2020, through Resolution 2533, the Security Council reaffirmed the necessity of implementing its previous resolutions concerning the situation in Syria, emphasizing maintaining humanitarian access and ensuring the protection of civilians.³⁹⁰

386 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2165 (2014), 14/07/2014.

387 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2254 (2015), 18/12/2015.

388 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2314 (2016), 31/10/2016.

389 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2401 (2018), 24/02/2018.

390 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2533 (2020), 13/07/2020.

In its Resolution A/RES/66/176 (2011), the United Nations General Assembly drew attention to the escalating violence and widespread human rights violations in Syria throughout 2011. The resolution condemned attacks on civilians, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment. It called on the Syrian authorities to respect fundamental rights and freedoms, particularly freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and the right to protest. The General Assembly urged the immediate and full implementation of the six-point action plan proposed by the League of Arab States and requested the UN Secretary-General to provide support to the Arab Observer Mission. The resolution further emphasized the need for the release of detainees, unhindered access to healthcare services, and the prioritization of civilian protection. Moreover, it stated that the legitimate demands of the Syrian people should be addressed through peaceful means and that the crisis must be resolved via a political solution.³⁹¹

In response to the human rights violations, civilian casualties, forced displacements, and regional instability caused by the civil war, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/67/262 (2013) to demonstrate the international community's unified stance and to call for action on political transition, humanitarian access, ending impunity, and support for the refugees. The resolution condemned the regime's use of heavy weapons, including barrel bombs, Scud missiles, and cluster munitions. It also expressed concern over arbitrary arrests, torture, violence, attacks on journalists, and the recruitment of children into armed conflict.³⁹²

In its Resolution A/RES/71/130 (2016), the United Nations General Assembly demanded the immediate and complete cessation of all attacks against civilians and critical civilian infrastructure in Syria. The resolution specifically called for the lifting of all sieges, particularly in Aleppo, and for rapid, safe, and unhindered access for the United Nations and humanitarian actors. It emphasized that all parties must fully comply with international humanitarian and international human rights law and recalled that the Syrian government holds primary responsibility for the protection of civilians and other persons not taking part in hostilities.

The resolution also called for the full and immediate implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions and stated that a sustainable solution to the crisis could only be achieved through an inclusive, Syrian-led political process. Forced displacements were condemned, and it was affirmed that those responsible for violations of international law must be held accountable. Additionally, the resolution requested the UN Secretary-General to monitor its implementation and provide recommendations to ensure the protection of civilians.³⁹³

391 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 176 (2022), A/RES/66/176, 23 February 2012.

392 UN General Assembly, Resolution A/RES/67/262, 4 June 2013.

393 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 130 (2016), A/RES/71/130, 19 December 2016.

United Nations Security Council Resolutions Adopted During the Syrian Civil War (2012–2020)

Resolution Number	Date	Subject/Content
S/RES/2042 (2012)	14 April 2012	Measures to achieve a ceasefire in Syria, end military operations, and halt human rights violations. A 30-member unarmed advance team of UN observers was deployed.
S/RES/2043 (2012)	21 April 2012	The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) was established to monitor the cessation of violence and support to restore peace and security in Syria.
S/RES/2118 (2013)	27 September 2013	The chemical weapons attack carried out in Eastern Ghouta was condemned. It was decided that Syria's chemical weapons would be eliminated under international supervision by 2014.
S/RES/2139 (2014)	22 February 2014	A call was made for the immediate cessation of attacks against the civilian population and for the free and rapid delivery of humanitarian assistance.
S/RES/2165 (2014)	14 July 2014	It was decided to authorize the UN and its partners to deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance into Syria without the consent of the state, and a monitoring mechanism was established for this purpose.
S/RES/2209 (2015)	6 March 2015	The use of chlorine gas, a chemical weapon, was condemned.
S/RES/2235 (2015)	7 August 2015	The Joint Investigative Mechanism was established to identify those responsible for chemical weapons attacks.
S/RES/2254 (2015)	18 December 2015	A call was made for the immediate cessation of attacks against civilians, the release of those arbitrarily detained, and establishment of a ceasefire.
S/RES/2268 (2016)	26 February 2016	A call was made for the establishment of a ceasefire and for ensuring humanitarian access.
S/RES/2328 (2016)	19 December 2016	Adopted in response to the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Aleppo. The human rights violations committed by the regime were condemned, and the safe evacuation of civilians in accordance with humanitarian law was emphasized.
S/RES/2336 (2016)	31 December 2016	The call was reiterated for humanitarian organization to be granted "rapid, safe, and unhindered" access throughout Syria in order to implement the Council's previous resolutions and ensure the protection of the civilian population.
S/RES/2401 (2018)	24 February 2018	In response to the rising casualties in Eastern Ghouta, the call for a ceasefire and for ensuring humanitarian access was reiterated.
S/RES/2533 (2020)	13 July 2020	A call was made for the implementation of the Council's previous resolutions and for ensuring access to cross-border humanitarian assistance.

United Nations General Assembly Resolutions Adopted During the Syrian Civil War (2011-2023)

Resolution Number	Date	Subject/Content
A/RES/66/176	19 December 2011	The regime's grave violations against the population including arbitrary executions, excessive use of force, the killing of protesters, human rights defenders, and journalists, as well as arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and persecution of children were described as "deeply concerning" and were strongly condemned.
A/RES/66/253	16 February 2012	The human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the regime were condemned, and the necessity of prosecuting those responsible was emphasized. The resolution also called for the withdrawal of military forces from cities, the allowance of peaceful public protests, and unhindered conduct of humanitarian activities.
A/RES/67/183	20 December 2012	The human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the regime were condemned.
A/RES/67/262	15 May 2013	The regime's indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population and its use of heavy weapons such as barrel bombs, Scud missiles, and cluster munitions were condemned.
A/RES/68/182	18 December 2013	The human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the regime were condemned. It was emphasized that the international community must respond to these violations, and the UNSC was called upon to take effective measure to put an end to the abuses in Syria.
A/RES/69/189	18 December 2014	The regime's violations against children, the bombing of civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals, mass executions, siege tactics, and other human rights and humanitarian law violations were condemned.
A/RES/70/234	23 December 2015	The serious, widespread, and systematic human rights violations committed in the fifth year of the civil war were condemned, and a call was made for compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law.
A/RES/71/130	9 December 2016	The intense bombardments, sieges, use of chemical weapons, and the use of sieges as a tactic against civilians, particularly in Aleppo, were condemned, and deep concern was expressed over violations of international humanitarian law.
A/RES/71/203	19 December 2016	The regime's systemic human rights violations against civilians were strongly condemned, and a call was made for accountability. The resolution expressed grave concern over the large scale attacks and civilian casualties that occurred in Aleppo during 2016.

Resolution Number	Date	Subject/Content
A/RES/71/248	21 December 2016	It was decided to establish an international, impartial, and independent mechanism to investigate and prosecute the most serious crimes committed since March 2011 under international law.
A/RES/73/182	17 December 2018	Human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and ill treatment of civilians, attacks on hospitals, schools, and other civilian infrastructure, and the use of chlorine gas, a chemical weapon were condemned.
A/RES/74/169	18 December 2019	The regime's widespread and systematic human rights violations were explicitly condemned by the international community, and a call was made to end impunity.
A/RES/75/193	16 December 2020	The human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the regime were condemned.
A/RES/76/228	24 December 2021	The human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the regime were condemned. It was noted that these violations could amount to war crimes, and the gravity of the use of chemical weapons was emphasized. It was further stated that the regime holds the responsibility to protect the population and must fulfil this duty.
A/RES/77/230	15 December 2020	The human rights and humanitarian law violations were condemned, and it was stressed that the regime must fulfil its responsibility to protect the population. The international community was called upon to uphold humanitarian and human rights norms.
A/RES/77/301	29 June 2023	An independent institution under UN auspices to address missing persons in Syria is established.
A/RES/78/222	19 December 2023	The human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by the regimes were condemned, and it was emphasized that these violations could be considered as war crimes and crimes against humanity. It was also stated that there was deep concern over the regime's continued use of force against civilians.

ANNEX-2: INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH VICTIMS

INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH SYRIAN VICTIMS WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ON HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY THE BASHAR AL-ASSAD REGIME IN SYRIA

Record No: 1

Date: 20 Ocak 2025

Location: HREIT Gaziantep Office

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: A.S., 32 years old, electrical engineer, Syrian citizen from Idlib.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Were you ever detained while in Syria? If so, when and where were you taken into custody?*

A.S.: I was detained at a checkpoint while returning home from university. This happened in December 2012 in Idlib. I was on my way from my university in Aleppo to my home in Idlib when I was stopped and detained at a checkpoint. The reason for my detention was that I had a laptop with me. They may have noticed some files on the laptop contained materials related to the Syrian revolution, such as demonstrations or flags. That's why they arrested me. Later, my father went to inquire about me, and he was also detained. Initially, we were arrested by the Security Branch in Idlib, and then we were transferred to the military intelligence branch. Afterwards, we were sent to Branch 215 in Damascus. During the transfer, no reason or justification was provided. Everything happened arbitrarily. In other words, my arrest was completely arbitrary and my father was detained because he inquired about me.

Interviewer: *Was your detention carried out officially and transparently?*

A.S.: No, there was absolutely no official justification. There was neither a court order nor any other document. Everything was completely arbitrary. I was detained at a checkpoint.

Interviewer: *Do you know who these individuals were? Were they police officers, military personnel, or other officials?*

A.S.: We know that they were security personnel. These individuals are recognized as security officers affiliated with various intelligence agencies operating in Syria.

Interviewer: *Was the detention carried out individually or as part of a mass detention?*

A.S.: It was individual.

Interviewer: *Where were you taken?*

A.S.: To the security branch in Idlib. Later, after a short period of about a week, we were transferred to the military intelligence branch in Idlib. We stayed there for approximately 50 days. Afterwards, we were sent to Branch 215 in Damascus, also known as the Syrian Intervention Branch.

Interviewer: *Were you subjected to torture or ill-treatment after being detained?*

A.S.: Yes, we were subjected to very severe torture. There are different methods of torture used in Syria. For example, there is a method called “shabeh.” Have you heard of it or do you know what it is? Shabeh involves having your hands tied behind your back and being hung up. For example, you are hung from a door and left that way for hours. Sometimes one hour, sometimes two hours, sometimes half an hour. It depends on the torturer’s whim.

Initially, I was tortured at the judicial branch in Idlib and later at the military intelligence branch in Idlib. There, they used a method called “basat al-rih.” They said it has a Türkiye equivalent, but I don’t know exactly what it is. The victim’s legs are tied to immobilize the body and then they are beaten – for example, with cables, pipes, or other tools. Even plumbing pipes and similar objects were used for torture. Torture usually began with the “shabeh” method and continues with starvation. My father was also subjected to severe torture during this period. He died in prison. They tied his hands up for two days, forcing him to stand the entire time, he couldn’t sit or lie down. His hands were kept suspended in the air. This is how they tortured my father. They tortured him to put pressure on me, and they tortured me to put pressure on my father. For instance, they would tell my father, “Your son did this, and that.” And then torture him.

Interviewer: *Was your father with you during the torture?*

A.S.: Yes, sometimes they would bring us together and torture us in front of each other.

Interviewer: *Do you think that was part of the torture itself?*

A.S.: Yes, absolutely. For the first 60 days, my father and I were not kept together, but sometimes we managed to see each other secretly. Once, my father – may Allah have mercy on him – told me, “If there’s a chance for you to be released and get out, I’ll stay here.” He was always worried about me, and I was always worried about him. The torture was extremely brutal. My father was 50 years old, and they struck different parts of his body with the harshest instruments. Once, after being tortured, I couldn’t walk anymore. They had beaten the soles of my feet so badly that I couldn’t move. Then they scattered wooden and glass pieces on the ground and forced me to walk or crawl over them – even to lick and clean them. That was another form of torture. Of course, there are many details – the torture was continuous. As I mentioned before, they tortured me in front of my father and my father in front of me. The environment itself was a kind of torture. We weren’t kept in a proper cell; that made it even harder. It wasn’t an official place – no one knew it existed, and it had no name.

Interviewer: *The first places where you were held in Idlib were official and affiliated with the security forces, correct?*

A.S.: Yes, the facilities in Idlib were official. For example, we knew they were military or judicial branches. But when we were taken to Damascus, they brought us in blindfolded, and we had no idea where we were. Later, other prisoners told us that this place was called the 215th Branch. For example, I stayed there in a “single cell” for 40 days. The so-called solitary cell was actually a very small area – approximately 1.5 square meters, 1.5 meters long and 1 meter wide. This is shorter and narrower than a human’s height. Sometimes they would put four people in there. I stayed there for about 45 days. It was impossible to move. For example, if you wanted to go to the toilet, the space was so tight that there wasn’t even a 30-centimeter gap to move. Sometimes there were two, three, or four people staying in this tiny space. Most of the time I was with four others. We called those places “solitary cells,” but in reality, they were far too small. We had to sit with our knees bent upward. Toilet access was allowed only twice a day. If you needed to go in between, you either had to relieve yourself where you were or use a plastic bottle. The place was extremely filthy. After being kept like this at the Idlib military intelligence branch, they sent us somewhere else, but we didn’t know where. They said, “Congratulations, you are going to meet your families.” But that wasn’t true.

During that time, my father was subjected to severe torture. They kept telling us, “Confess that you carried weapons and attacked checkpoints or military areas.” But we hadn’t done any of that, so we refused to confess and the torture continued. Eventually, they sent us to Damascus. On the way to Damascus, they put us into a vehicle that looked like a sheep

transport truck. The floor of the vehicle was covered with animal waste. They forced us to lie down on the floor, our hands were tied behind our backs, unable to move. We were packed together like sheep. The vehicle started moving, but we had no idea where we were going. At first, they mockingly told us, “You are going to see your families.” But later we realized that was not true. The vehicle departed from Idlib. We passed through a camp called “Mastume.” They took us out of that vehicle and put us into a large open vehicle resembling a transport truck, and we continued in that way. Then we reached areas under regime control, completely under their authority. At one checkpoint, we were stopped, and a man wearing military boots – one of the security officers – approached the truck.

Interviewer: *How many people were in the vehicle?*

A.S.: There were about 25 of us in this vehicle. I couldn’t hear the exact number, but there were other detainees with us, some sitting near the edges of the vehicle. One of the guards, standing by the side of the vehicle, started hitting people on their heads with his military boot. He kept striking them, and many were bleeding heavily from their heads. Their heads were hitting the metal parts of the truck as he kicked them. After taking us from here, they transported us from Idlib to the Military Police Center in Hama. We stayed there for about two days. Then, we were transferred to the Al Balouna Military Prison in Homs, where we stayed another two days. After that, we were taken to the Qaboun Military Police Center in Damascus, and later transferred to Branch 215. Of course, the entire process was filled with pain and torture. We were subjected to abuse even during the travel. I still carry the marks to this day – look, here are the scars, and here’s another one.

Interviewer: *Do you still have marks or scars from the torture on your body?*

A.S.: Yes, I still have them. I also have photos. For example, when I was detained, I weighed 84 kilograms, but when I was released, I only weighed 49 kilograms – almost half. I have photos of my condition, and I can show them if you’d like. As I mentioned earlier, we had already been subjected to very severe torture since Idlib. The torture included physical, psychological, medical, and nutritional abuse. During the day, we were given only a slice of potato to eat. Sometimes they would spread a bit of ham on a piece of bread, but the amount was intentionally very little. Sometimes the food was even harmful to health, especially causing diarrhea, which weakened our immune systems. When you have diarrhea, the body loses so much fluid that your immunity can completely collapse. After all this torture and the terrible conditions, they took us from Idlib to Hama, then to Homs, and later to Qaboun. The transfers were never done in a normal way. For example when we arrived in Hama, we were kept for about two days in trucks that looked like livestock transport vehicles. When we were transferred from Hama to Homs, they used a method that they called the “chain”

method. The “chain” meant lining people up and binding them together like links of a chain. They put us in a truck that was like a refrigerated or meat transport vehicle. It was so crowded that I couldn’t tell how many people there were – it was suffocating, and we could barely breathe. My hands were tied and secured with plastic cuffs that left deep marks on my wrists. Even now, after about 11 or 12 years, those marks are still there. When we arrived in Homs, they forced us to completely undress. We were searched completely naked. We stayed in Homs for two days, and the torture continued there as well. Then we were sent from Homs to the Qaboun Military Police Center, and later transferred to Branch 215. When we arrived at Branch 215, the torture started all over again. They said they didn’t accept anything that had been said at the previous branches and that the interrogations would start from the beginning. When we first entered Branch 215, I thought it was a slaughterhouse. It smelled like one – like a place where animals were killed. There was the smell of blood, disease, and decaying corpses. At first, I thought it was an actually slaughterhouse was for sheep and cattle because we couldn’t see anything; our eyes were blindfolded, and were taken down to the basement. As we went down the stairs, we entered a large hall. It was packed with people. It was very cold at that time, yet many detainees were almost naked, wearing underwear. The torture we had seen in Idlib or other branches was nothing compared to what we experienced at Branch 215. Other prisoners told us, “This is Branch 215. Whoever enters here disappears; whoever leaves, is reborn.” This indicated how difficult it was to get out of there. They placed us in small cells. For example, dozens of people were crammed into an area of about 4 by 5 meters. Each of us had only about 25 square centimeters of space – slightly larger than a tile. No matter your height or weight, everyone had just that much room. People were so tightly packed that it was almost impossible to sit. I had to sit with my knees pulled up to my chest. There were lice, diseases, and filth everywhere. Our skin constantly developed rashes and sores. Going to the toilet was nearly impossible. We were allowed to use the toilet only twice a day and even then, the time was limited. When going to the toilet, they would bring a large container of 20 or 25 liters. They would bring a large 20 – or 25 – liter container to use for urination, which everyone shared. When the container filled up, it would overflow onto other detainees. I was sitting in the corner, and when the container reached me, the filth accumulated on the floor. Everything was filthy, and this filth would spill onto your head or body. At the same time, there were cockroaches, lice, and various insects everywhere. It was impossible to clean your body. For example, if you had lice, the only thing you could do was crush them. In Branch 215, no personal hygiene was allowed at all. Even when you were permitted to use the toilet, the time given was only a few seconds. A guard would count and rush you: “One, two, three...” If you didn’t get out within a few seconds, they would hit the door and push you out. There were only 5 toilets here, and hundreds of people had to use them.

Once, when there was a power outage, the ventilation system in the basement stopped working. The place was so overcrowded that within an hour, 25 people died from suffocation. It was completely dark down there. We didn't even know what time of day it was. There was no sunlight and no sound coming from outside. The only thing we could hear was the ventilation fan – but even that made a terrifying noise when it ran. The time allowed for using the toilet was less than 10 seconds, and it depended entirely on the guards' mood. There were five toilets lined up side by side, and five people were taken in and out simultaneously. As I mentioned before, we never saw the sun or any light here. Going to the toilet was the only chance to leave the cell. But on the way to the toilet, I would see many dead bodies. This wasn't only along the path – the same was true inside the toilets. I also saw people who had lost all strength and could no longer endure. Most of them had diarrhea. Diarrhea was a deadly condition there because after torture and prolonged exhaustion, the body began to lose fluids and resistance would completely collapse.

Interviewer: *How long did you remain in those conditions?*

A.S.: The first two months were like this. Almost exactly two months. In total, I was in these conditions for less than six months. I was detained in December 2012 and released at the end of April 2013. As I mentioned before, when we were brought to this branch, our eyes were blindfolded and we couldn't see anything. The interrogators told us, "What you said in the previous branches doesn't matter, everything starts over here. You are guilty."

They did not explain what our crime was. Mockingly, they said, "Now we are calling Azrael here because there are new people here." The person they called Azrael came in and began to beat us severely – on our faces, backs, and hands. We were just ordinary civilians; we had never carried weapons or harmed anyone. But they forced us to confess, saying, "Admit that you attacked that checkpoint." They also questioned us about our connections with other people detained from the same city. They mentioned the name of a checkpoint and then accused us directly, saying, "You targeted that checkpoint," and recorded it as a confession. That's what they told us after the interrogation ended.

After the torture, they put a document in front of me and told me to sign it. After I signed, they said, "Did you sign it?" I couldn't see anything, but they told me, "Swear it." So I placed my fingerprint on it. Then they said, "You have just signed your death sentence." I was in shock; I didn't have the strength to do anything. They asked, "Do you want to know what you signed for?" and said, "You signed the execution order for yourself and your mother." I couldn't say a word at that moment because I had no strength left to resist. Even if I showed disbelief, they would have tortured me again. After that, before taking us back to the cell, they lined us up and started beating everyone at random. After a while, they announced

some names, and mine was among them. They said I would be sent somewhere else, but I didn't know where. I had to say goodbye to my father. He was in terrible condition – both physically and psychologically devastated. They sent him to the State Security Court, but I only learned that after I was released. I was told by others that he had been sent to the State Security Court located on Revolution Street in Damascus. During this period, my family had no information about me. In some cases, they even received news that I had died. Later, I was transferred to the Counter-Terrorism Court and then to Adra Prison – a central prison in Damascus. The living conditions there were much better compared to the previous branches. Being transferred to Adra was, in a sense, considered survival. There was no torture in Adra since it was not an interrogation branch. However, my father was still being held in another branch. I was released, but he died there. I learned about his death only after I got out of prison. One of the people I had been detained with told me, “Your father died after you were transferred.” Later, I saw my father's photographs in the Caesar files. I couldn't learn the details of his death at that time. After my release, I began to experience various health problems. I was taken to the police hospital, where I underwent two surgeries. I had an appendectomy, and part of my intestine was cut. As a result, I began excreting waste not through the normal way but through a bag attached to my abdomen.

When I entered the prison, I weighed 84 kilograms, but by the time I was released, I was down to 49 kilograms. During this period, no one from my family was with me. After the surgeries, a release decision was made. However, this decision was never given to me in writing. They only told me verbally that I was released and sent me from Damascus to my hometown. When I returned to my hometown, I was taken directly to a hospital. There, doctors and nurses took care of my treatment. The medical staff who took care of me at that time are still alive and can testify to my condition. Some of the people who were imprisoned with me can also witness to what I experienced.

We want to support what we went through and the testimonies with documents in the pursuit of justice. We are doing everything we can to ensure that these violations are brought to account before international courts. Thank you for your efforts and assistance. May Allah give you strength.

Record No: 2

Date: 20 January 2025

Location: HREIT Gaziantep Office

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI - Assistant Expert

Interviewee: R.M., former first-year law student (discontinued due to the war), currently employed at a charitable organization.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Have you ever been arrested or detained in Syria before?*

R.M.: Yes, I was detained in Idlib in May 2012.

Interviewer: Was it a mass arrest or an individual one?

R.M.: It was individual. It was persecution... I had nothing to do with anything.

Interviewer: *What was the accusation against you?*

R.M.: They said I was affiliated with “terrorist groups” fighting against the regime.

Interviewer: *So, where did they take you, to a prison or a security branch?*

R.M.: They took me to a prison inside a security branch. There was an underground prison within the security branch in the city.

Interviewer: *Were you subjected to torture?*

R.M.: Of course. First of all, I was a woman living with four orphans whose spouse had passed away and had no involvement in anything. The regime detained me without cause. I was subjected to torture, insults, and (sexual) abuse.

Interviewer: *After you were detained, was your family informed?*

R.M.: No, no one informed them. I told them, “My children are home alone. I have no one.” I was living in the city center of Idlib, while my family was in the village. The road between Idlib and the village was blocked. The regime controlled that area, while my family was in the “opposition” regions, so there was no way through. I told them that my young children

were alone at home, but they didn't care at all. When they took me in, they immediately confiscated my phone, and that was it. Later, the neighbors saw the children, and when the children went outside and said, "They took our mother, we don't know where she is," the neighbors began to ask questions. Then they found out that I had been detained.

I was subjected to torture for nine months.

Interviewer: *Was there torture every day?*

R.M.: No, not every day. Sometimes it was daily, sometimes every two or three days. For me the worst torture – that is, the sexual assault – is what I experienced, let me put it that way. As far as I remember, there were about ten to fifteen of us in a small room. Among them were some older than me and some schoolgirls. For example, some had marked them on their hands and had been detained that way. There were about fifteen of us. Sometimes a few were taken out and the number could rise to twenty.

The main interrogator – the officer in charge – called me most often. At first they started a psychological war: "You will never see your children again; we will send you to Damascus, to Sednaya; they will starve, you will never be reunited." They knew my weak point was my children. They already had all the information. They would show how people are tortured and say, "This is how you'll be tortured." We saw them torture men and they would threaten, "Yes, you said it too, didn't you? We'll do the same to you." ... So it was mostly psychological warfare. That was my experience. I don't know what they did to the girls next to me because they didn't talk about it in front of me. They would tell me, "Confess, confess something." They would insist, "Yes, confess." I would say, "I did nothing." I'd reply, "If you want me to confess to something I didn't do, fine – say I took part in all the demonstrations, say I went everywhere secretly. But I actually did nothing." I would say, "I don't know what to confess."

Interviewer: *So how did you get out?*

R.M.: I was released thanks to a friend of my husband – he was a lawyer. I was released before my case was even closed. My husband had a friend working in Tartus who used to call us from time to time, ask how we were, and offer some help. At that time, my sister was staying with the children. When people asked her, "Where is R.?" she said, "R. has been detained." He got upset and said, "Why didn't you inform me? How could this happen?" Then that lawyer friend somehow intervened and began following up on the case. He had a judge friend and some connections in Damascus. It was through his help that I was released.

Interviewer: *Do you remember the names of the officers who tortured you?*

R.M.: One of them was named Yusuf, another was Iyad, and there was someone else from Jisr al-Shughur... I don't know exactly what happened to them or where they went.

Interviewer: *What were the conditions like where you were held? Were food, water, and basic necessities provided?*

R.M.: The conditions were bad. You know, as women, we have certain days of the month, and for that we would ask for hygiene products, but they were not given to us – sometimes only after three or four days. We were shown no respect at all. The place where we were kept was underground. No light entered inside. There was no ventilation, no fan; it was like a place for the dead. You could hardly breathe.

Especially at night, we couldn't sleep because of the sounds of men being tortured. The shouting and screaming... They were crying out to Allah and to us for help.

Interviewer: *We don't want to tire you by making you revisit painful memories.*

R.M.: I've gotten through that period. When I first came to Türkiye, I was psychologically very worn out. Later, we went to an association and received psychological support. Still, I was left with memories that felt like nightmares. After being released from prison, I never wanted to open the windows, never wanted light, and didn't want anyone near me – not at all. But now, I've overcome that period.

For the first time, I talked about what happened to me in prison at the association. Because I used to feel responsible. When someone approached me aggressively, I felt as if it were my fault. I was tormenting myself, but people kept telling me, "This is not your fault."

Interviewer: *So, do the effects of the torture still continue today?*

R.M.: Of course – definitely. Even just talking about it now stirs everything up inside me, I remember it all. I also began to fear men. I could never trust them again, because I saw how they treated women there. I thought all men were like that...

I've been a widow since 2011-fourteen years now – and I've never thought about remarrying. Many men have approached me, but I've never wanted to marry again. I don't know, I'm afraid of reconnecting with a man. Of course, I still remember all the details of the torture; none of it ever leaves my mind. Praise be to Allah, our Lord granted us victory and freedom – that brought some relief to our souls. We just say, Allah willing, we'll smile again. This is a new life, truly. Speaking about this feels like unburdening my heart. Whether it's me, any mother, or any detainee – we are all before Allah; He is above all and the Most High.

Record No: 3

Date: 20 January 2025

Location: HREIT Gaziantep Office

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI - Assistant Expert

Interviewee: L.A., 59 years old, lawyer, human rights expert.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Were you arrested or detained in Syria?*

L.A.: Yes, I was arrested when I was 15. I remained in detention for 11 years.

Interviewer: *When you were 15?*

L.A.: Yes.

Interviewer: *When and how were you arrested?*

L.A.: I was arrested in 1981 and released in 1992.

Interviewer: *How did this detention or arrest process take place?*

L.A.: They took me from school; I was just a child, in the first year of high school. They gave me no reason, only said, "He likes religious books". At that time, there were some groups active under names like "Al-Mursalin" or similar, but I was only 15 - still a minor.

Interviewer: *Was this arrest carried out by a court order, or under the directive of the Syrian authorities?*

L.A.: No, quite the opposite. They took me directly from school. They took me along with my notebooks and books still in my hands. I'm not sure if they were planning to close the higher classes at the school or something like that but they took me without any official order. They took me and my friend together.

Interviewer: *Was your family informed?*

L.A.: The school administration notified my family that security forces had come and taken me, but after that, my family received no news. From 1981 to 1986, they had no idea where I was or any information about my situation.

Interviewer: *Who took you? Were they officers, police, or intelligence agents? Which unit?*

L.A.: It was the intelligence service. I was subjected to torture both in Aleppo and in Damascus. In Damascus, it was not physical but psychological torture.

They kept transferring me from one place to another. It was a very long period – I remember everything, but it’s hard to talk about. About 17 of us women were kept for four and a half years in a space so small that each person had barely one and a half floor tiles – around 30 centimeters long and 20 centimeters wide per person. You can imagine what that means. Hygiene products for women were never provided. The floor was always muddy. I may have forgotten many details – perhaps my mind is trying to erase those years. One of the places we were held was the Kafr Sousa district, where there was an intelligence branch. We constantly heard the sounds of torture – they never stopped, day or night. For four and a half years, those sounds echoed in our ears almost every day. Even when someone went to the toilet, the sounds of whipping and torture could still be heard. That, too, was a form of psychological torture.

Interviewer: *How long did you stay at that branch?*

L.A.: Four and a half years. Then we went on a hunger strike. As a result of the strike, they told us we would be transferred to a civilian police prison in Damascus called Katana Prison. It was a civilian facility where both political and criminal detainees were held in different wards. During this period, I was brought before the Field Court and sentenced to four years in prison.

Interviewer: *Were you able to meet with a lawyer there?*

L.A.: No. Only at that point was my family informed by phone for the first time. They were told that I was being held at Katana Prison. Later, only my mother and father were allowed to visit me. We could talk through a barred window. We were able to speak for about 30–40 minutes while the police listened to our conversation.

Interviewer: *What kind of torture were you subjected to? Would you like to describe it?*

L.A.: Okay, let me tell you everything. I was 15 years old when they took me to Aleppo. They tortured me with electricity; they had a device with electrodes that they attached to various parts of my body. They removed my headscarf and the cover over me. They electrocuted me. Then they used a form of torture they called “besat er-rîh” (a torture that stresses the joints). This strains the joints. They tie your hands and feet behind your back and beat you. I was also subjected to “dûlâb” (torture involving being placed in a car tire). Still, the worst torture

I experiences was psychological. For example, I was always blindfolded. And of course, they threatened me with situations that brought me very close to being molested, even raped. But what affected me the most there was the rape and murder of my close friend. I was still very young at the time, and I saw blood coming from her. That image is still etched in my memory, I can't even tell my children about it.

There were also attempts at sexual assault. I didn't actually see it, but there were references to some very disgusting things that could be described as sexual assault. If you ask for details, the effects are still very severe.

Interviewer: *How was your nutrition in prison?*

L.A.: Honestly, the conditions at the security branch were extreme. While the young guys kept getting dragged in and out, we could barely speak in whispers. The food was unbelievably bad. Even at my age now, I still remember – once they brought white beans, and there were bugs on top, like cockroaches. The smell, the sight... Awful. We had to pick the bugs out and force ourselves to eat it. And the bread they brought with it was rock-hard, almost impossible to bite into. That was the situation with food at the security branches. But later, when we were moved to civilian prisons like Katana and Duma, the food was better compared to before. We could even cook ourselves – they gave us supplies.

Interviewer: *So, that was a more “normal” prison?*

L.A.: Yes, it was a normal, civilian prison. We could talk to the guards there, and we had the opportunity to cook food. So, at least it was somewhat more humane.

Interviewer: *So, how did you get out of prison?*

L.A.: We were released under an amnesty. I believe it was Hafez al-Assad's amnesty, and I was included. It was a release order covering some of the female detainees. But even though it was called an “amnesty,” it was far from simple. The person in charge of the branch was told, “Release them,” and only after that were we let go. They kept us in detention, underground, for such a long time that we suffered greatly until we were finally released.

Interviewer: *So, from the very beginning, there was no official decision or any legal document, is that correct?*

L.A.: Yes, I was held without any court order and I endured both physical and psychological torture. I wasn't even of legal age – I was a child. This is very important; in the '80s I was the youngest detainee. I remember that in the interrogations in Damascus they always called me

as “little.” We didn’t know who the officers there were; they didn’t give their names during interrogation, but I partially know the name of one of those who tortured me – particularly the branch chief in Aleppo, a man named Ömer Hamed. We did not know the names of most of the guards; some were called “Awani,” or by other nicknames, but we didn’t really know who they were. At every interrogation they piled more and more accusations on us.

Now I speak as a lawyer and legal professional: Detaining a child under 18 is in itself a crime against humanity. Seizing a minor and subjecting them to torture and imprisoning them is a grave human rights violation. Even for those over 18 these practices are unacceptable, but what is done to those under 18 is formally a violation of children’s rights. This directly violates the child’s freedom and bodily integrity.

Interviewer: *Regarding this issue, have you heard of reports about other minors?*

L.A.: My younger brother was also a child, 16 years old. They took him as well. There were thousands of youths like him. In the ’80s, there was almost no media, and no one was documenting these stories. Nobody knew what was really happening.

Interviewer: *But this was also prohibited under Syrian law, wasn’t it?*

L.A.: Of course, it was prohibited under Syrian legislation. Moreover, Syria is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Anyone under 18 is considered a “child,” and the law is supposed to protect them. Even if there had been an accusation, minors should have been placed in rehabilitation centers, not held under harsh prison conditions. But they threw us into dark basements and cells. This is a crime that denies a child’s freedom and fundamental rights. I spent the best years of my life in prison. Thousands of other children suffered the same persecution. We can never forget this. For this regime, it should stand as a mark of shame.

Interviewer: *Have these tortures had lasting effects on you, physically or psychologically?*

L.A.: The time spent in that prison, of course, leaves a deep impact on a person. Thirty years have passed, but sometimes I still cry as if it were yesterday...

One cannot easily forget. I am now a lawyer now, practicing my profession. On the day of the revolution, when I saw women detainees being released, I suddenly felt overwhelmed and started crying. What they were experiencing reminded me of what we went through—it was the same. I hope this information will serve as strong evidence in court.

Thank you, truly, thank you very much.

Record No: 4

Date: January 20, 2025

Location: HREIT Gaziantep Office

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI - Assistant Expert

Interviewee: A.A., formerly a teacher in Syria, was forcibly conscripted into the regime's army.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Have you ever been detained in Syria before?*

A.A.: Yes. I was detained in Latife neighborhood, Damascus, on December 22, 2012.

Interviewer: *What was the reason for this detention?*

A.A.: Due to leaving the army.

Interviewer: *Was it by a court order?*

A.A.: Yes, it was an official decision.

Interviewer: *After the detention, in which prison did you stay?*

A.A.: At Sednaya Prison. I stayed 10 days in the security branch, then was transferred to Sednaya Prison.

Interviewer: *How long did you stay in Sednaya?*

A.A.: From December 30, 2012, to August 1, 2019, that is, seven years.

Interviewer: *Were you subjected to torture or ill-treatment when you were taken to this prison?*

A.A.: Of course, there is a lot to mention. For example: Torture in terms of food, psychological torture, severe beatings, strict surveillance via cameras... All our movements were monitored. Also, for instance, you couldn't talk to your friend. There were twenty-five people in the room, but we were forbidden to speak to one another.

Interviewer: *Did the place you were held receive any sunlight?*

A.A.: There was an iron door in the ward that opened to the outside, and it has a small vent on it, but it was closed. We couldn't tell whether there was sunlight or not.

Interviewer: *What was the area like?*

A.A.: It was 7 meters by 7 meters, with an additional 2 square meters for the toilet.

Interviewer: *How was the food?*

A.A.: The food was terrible; we were starving. There was very little to eat. They brought the meals in plastic containers, and the portions were extremely small – for example, each person received about half a cup of rice or bulgur per day.

Interviewer: *Were there illnesses?*

A.A.: Of course, illnesses existed even before. But recently they started to pay more attention to it. Yet, many people died from illnesses, and we witnessed the deaths.

Interviewer: *Were there deaths due to torture?*

A.A.: Yes, deaths from torture in the security branch were extremely frequent. Almost every day. For example, in the branch I was in, seven or eight people would die daily. There was a lot of torture in the branch. I even saw dead bodies sometimes; some without arms, some without legs. Death in prison was slower. The death of our brothers there was very painful for us – they died because of excessive stress, constant pressure, psychological and physical torture, lack of food, and mental strain. People couldn't endure it; some simply broke down psychologically.

Interviewer: *What was the torture like in Sednaya Prison? Or was it more like a reformatory?*

A.A.: There was very severe torture. But let me say this: We were military detainees. As soldiers, we were on the third floor of Sednaya, up above. That area was a military ward. The torture we experienced was lighter compared to the civilians held in the political section below. Each floor was different. Compared to the first and second floors, the torture for us was milder. For example, we had three meals a day. On the first and second floors they would put the three meals into the same container. They mixed all the meals and put them

in at once. Moreover, they did not bring the container carefully; they would throw it down and spill the food on the floor.

Interviewer: *Physical torture?*

A.A.: Of course, there was beating. They used car tires for torture. They would cut the edges of the tire, bring it, put it over the person, position the head through it, and pull it back, like a kind of shackle. They tortured people with that tire. This happened almost daily, in plain terms, whoever's turn it was. Two days might pass, then it would be your turn.

Interviewer: *Did these tortures leave marks on your body?*

A.A.: There are minor marks, but the biggest damage is to my teeth. I lost six teeth in prison. And of course, there are psychological scars as well. I have a photo, the first one I had taken right after leaving prison.

Interviewer: *How much did you weigh before entering prison?*

A.A.: Before entering prison, I weighed 78 kilograms. When I was released, I weighed 48 kilograms.

Interviewer: *So, how did you get out of prison?*

A.A.: Through bribery, for 12,000 dollars. This kind of bribery happened sometimes. My sentence was 15 years; I had served seven. An amnesty reduced it to 12 years. This process took two years. Through my lawyer, a sort of “arrangement” was made. But this didn’t always work. If you couldn’t find such a way, it was impossible to be released. People had used this method before as well.

We heard that some people paid large amounts of money to be released but still couldn’t get out. This was a method used to deceive people. One of the biggest scams in the world. My father experienced the same thing. During the first two years, when my father learned I was in prison, he contacted someone who claimed that for 2,000 dollars, he could get me out and even allow him to visit me. Unfortunately, that too was a scam. There’s a lot to talk about the torture. I was kept in underground cells for 14 days. There are some videos of the underground cells in Sednaya Prison, and that’s exactly where I stayed.

Interviewer: *How many days did you stay there?*

A.A.: I was in a single-person underground cell for exactly 14 days. I never saw daylight; I didn't know whether it was day or night. My sleep cycle was completely disrupted. When I woke up, I would pinch myself to check if I was still alive.

Later, I was transferred to another cell for the "crime" of learning the Qur'an in prison. I was held there for 100 days. The cell was 7 meters by 7 meters, but during the winter it was unbearably cold. They gave us only four military blankets. The food was extremely insufficient.

Interviewer: *Were you subjected to torture?*

A.A.: Yes, I was beaten with electrical cables. I was struck with a cable about 350 times.

Food was also used as a method of torture. Sometimes meals were deliberately burned before being given. If food was given one day, we would be left completely hungry the next. Meals were usually boiled in water only, with no salt or spices. It was so tasteless that people became disgusted with eating. If breakfast was delayed, we would experience dizziness and nausea. If we could not eat all day, many people would faint. We tried to stay standing by drinking only water. But the water we drank was also dirty. We could hear the sounds of rats inside the water tanks. Even meeting the need to bathe was a great difficulty. We were allowed to bathe once every 15 days. But sometimes people refused to go to the bath because some prisoners who went to bathe never returned. We thought they had been killed. In Sednaya it was not even possible to see soldiers. We could only see the soldiers waiting at the door. We always had to walk hunched over; we could never look soldiers in the face. While walking behind a soldier, we had to bow our heads. Looking at them was forbidden. All the prisoners there were being destroyed physically and psychologically. I too was subjected to severe torture for seven years.

Interviewer: *Is there anyone from your family who is still detained?*

A.A.: Yes, there is one missing person, my brother-in-law, M.Z.A. He disappeared in 2012 or 2013, and we haven't heard from him since. He was detained at the military intelligence branch in Hasakah. After that, he vanished, and we never received any news about him again.

Interviewer: *When did he disappear?*

A.A.: He was detained in Hasakeh in 2013. My brother-in-law, born in 1982, was working at the post office there. One day he was suddenly taken into custody, and we never heard from him again.

Interviewer: *So, why was he arrested?*

A.A.: Actually, he didn't have any direct crime. However, his brother was connected to opposition groups, and that's why he was also taken. We received news about him two months after he disappeared, and then we never heard anything. Later, we even went to Sednaya and checked the records, but we couldn't find him.

Interviewer: *Apart from your detention, were you also subjected to forced displacement?*

A.A.: After I was released from prison, I came directly to Türkiye, but our village is located in the rural area of Aleppo and is known as an opposition-held area. The villagers were forcibly displaced.

Interviewer: *During your imprisonment, were any liquids or chemical substances injected into you during torture?*

A.A.: In the section where we were held, nothing like that happened. However, from what I heard from some younger detainees, executions by injection were carried out in the Field Courts. Similar incidents also happened at Tishreen Military Hospital. When we went to the hospital, they were putting bodies into vehicles. I had wounds on my skin and went there for treatment. Since we had a military background, we were treated with a bit more care. We were not tried in the terror court, but those on the first two floors were tried for terrorism, so their conditions were extremely harsh; they could not even use their names, only numbers.

Interviewer: *Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the torture?*

A.A.: On the first two floors, three to four people were executed every day. Every night, we could hear the sounds of the "chain" (prisoners being chained together and moved). This usually happened around 10-11 p.m. There were various methods of execution. I even heard that some were executed by being crushed. Most executions were by hanging. I witnessed a hanging myself. A friend of mine witnessed another prisoner being executed by injection. The main tortures mostly occurred in the security branches (interrogation centers). Since there was no oversight, severe torture was carried out in the underground facilities - electric

shocks, the “chair,” shabeh (suspension by the wrists), drowning in water... We were 15 people in a cell measuring 180 centimeters long and 100 centimeters wide. Only two people could go to the toilet at a time. While two prisoners attended to their needs, the others had to take a shower immediately behind them. All of this happened in a very confined space. Those using the toilet had to finish quickly so that the people showering could also exit. The time restrictions were extremely strict; only one minute was given for toilet or bathing needs. Everything had to be completed within that single minute. It was almost impossible to clean oneself or relieve oneself in such a short time.



Record No: 5

Date: 21 January 2025

Place: Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP)

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarik ÜNALDI - Assistant Expert

Interviewee: O.T., 27 years old, Syrian citizen.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Have you ever been arrested or detained in Syria before?*

O.T.: Yes, on October 19, 2014. In the city of Homs, by the Political Branch and the State Security Branch (security units).

Interviewer: *What was the reason?*

O.T.: They accused me of a fabricated crime related to being a member of armed groups.

Interviewer: *Were you arrested as a result of a legal decision?*

O.T.: There was nothing like that there. In fact, there was no legal basis at all. Someone could simply file a report against you, or there could be confusion or similarity because of your surname... For example, the person they were looking for could even be your relative, and they would still come and take you away.

Interviewer: *What happened after you were arrested? Where were you taken?*

O.T.: On the first day, they took me to the Political Security Branch in Homs. I spent one night there. Then, on the second day, they transferred me to the State Security Branch, also in Homs.

Interviewer: *Were these officers military or from national security?*

O.T.: They were security officers, from intelligence. After being transferred there, we entered the building and were taken by bus from the Political Security Branch to the State Security Branch. They brought us down to the basement of the building (underground). First, they conducted a strip search. Then they returned our clothes and made us wait in the corridor; we had nothing on our feet, our eyes were blindfolded, and our hands were handcuffed.

Interviewer: *Were you subjected to torture?*

O.T.: Yes. At first, there were a few others with me. Everyone's name was called, and they were taken for interrogation. Some of them were tortured, while others were only questioned and then returned to the cell. I was among those who were tortured. There were five officers in the interrogation team. The first one came and punched me in the face. He said, "Lie down," and I did. Then he said, "Lift your legs," and I lifted them.

By that time, I had been standing for five or six hours, maybe more. We had arrived in the morning, but the torture happened in the late afternoon, around night prayer according to the call to prayer. Five officers attacked me. One pressed on my shoulder while I lay face down on the floor, and the others began hitting my legs with plastic rods (green, hard plastic sticks).

They started hitting without asking any questions, which was extremely painful because I had been standing for so long and my feet were cold. The pain felt even worse. I received about fifty to sixty blows. Every time I asked, "What did I do? Why are you hitting me?" they shouted, "Shut up!"

It got to a point where my legs couldn't bear anything. Then they brought a car tire and put my head and legs inside it. During this, I could hear women in a nearby ward; from their cries, I realized there were maybe 30-40 women there. I was shouting and pleading, "For Allah's sake, what's happening? Why are you hitting me?" but they kept shouting, "Shut up!"

Interviewer: *So, during all this time, you still didn't know the reason for your detention?*

O.T.: Yes, I didn't know anything. On the first day, at the political security branch, they told us that if nothing was found against us, we would be released. During that long beating, they eventually said to me, "We'll hit you five more times now - you'd better stay quiet. Every time you make a sound, we'll multiply the number of blows by five." I wanted to scream, but I couldn't - I was too afraid they'd hit me more. At the same time, the pain and the effort to hold back the scream made my chest feel like it was about to burst. After the beating ended, they lifted me up and said, "Go back to your place." They forced us to walk slowly while standing upright, so that if we were brought before a judge soon, the torture marks on our bodies wouldn't be visible. What they wanted was for people to "confess." Then, when you appeared before the judge, there would be no visible signs of beating - so the judge would accept the confession as voluntary. So, I stood there, barely able to remain upright. My head was spinning, and I told one of them, "I'm going to faint." They took me to the bathroom, let me wash my face, and said, "Go back." I stayed like that for about two hours. Then they took us in for interrogation. Of course, that beating before the questioning was meant as intimidation. They beat me before questioning - for most people, the torture started once the interrogation began. When they questioned me, it began again. They asked my name,

where I lived, what my income was. Then they said, “So your name is this – are you affiliated with that armed group?” I said, “I’m just a student.” I was 17 years old.

Interviewer: *At the time you’re describing, you were only 17 years old, so you were a minor, right?*

O.T.: Yes, I was still in high school. I said, “I’m a high school student; I have no links to any armed group, I’ve never carried a weapon. I’m enrolled at school – you can ask the principal or my classmates.” They replied, “No, you’re lying! You were a member of an armed group,” and began beating me: “You did this, you did that.” They returned to the same method of beating. They put a tire around my legs, forced me face down, and started beating me. Two people carried out the torture while the interrogator sat at the table recording my answers. When you’re being beaten there’s no escape – you have to answer. If they ask, “Did you use a weapon?” you’re forced to say, “Yes, I used a weapon.” It reaches a point where you say “Yes” to everything and are compelled to confess. You think, “Fine, write down whatever you want – I raised a weapon, just stop hitting me.” They feel no pity; they threaten you. Then they began asking me questions. In the end I said, “Yes, I was a member of an armed group, but I didn’t carry a weapon.” By then I was inventing answers out of my head. For example, I said, “I provided financing.” They answered, “Okay, we’ll record that you collected money and transferred it to armed groups.” They asked, “Did you take part in demonstrations?” and I answered, “Yes.” Whenever I said, “No, I didn’t,” they kept beating me until I said “Yes” and confessed. I was tortured for about an hour. Whatever they asked – for example, “What about your siblings?” – I ended up confessing about them too, lying. My siblings were in areas where the opposition lived and were also being sought. One brother of mine was detained in Sednaya at that time. I confessed about them as well. They even tried to make me name my father and mother. They asked specifically, “Does your mother pray at dawn for her armed brothers?” If I had said “Yes,” that could have been used as evidence to summon my mother to intelligence. I kept saying, “I don’t know, I don’t get up for dawn prayer.” They asked, “Does your father send them money, does your father finance them, is your father sympathetic to them?” and I said, “No, they’re estranged; my father is angry with them.”

Interviewer: *They considered those who performed the dawn prayer as a separate threat – what was the reason for that?*

O.T.: Let me explain why they placed so much importance on this prayer: If a young person gets up for the morning prayer or prays it regularly, it was considered a serious offense because this person was seen as someone devoted to their religion, which made them dangerous in the regime’s eyes. Such a person is conscious and aware of what is happening around them. In the 1980s, few people, especially young people, attended the dawn prayer. Therefore, if a young person went to the mosque for dawn prayer, he was immediately

accused of “membership in the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan).” Performing the dawn prayer, or praying all five daily prayers regularly at the mosque, was treated as a crime – especially for young people. For the youth, morning prayer was practically seen as a “crime.”

I’m originally from Tadmur. After school, I used to go to an appliance repair shop to help out. When it was time for the call to prayer, since there was no restroom in the shop, I would go to the mosque’s restroom to perform ablution, pray there, and return. The shop owner allowed this. One day, the mosque imam came to the shop and said to me, “Hey O., stop going to the mosque to pray – it’s better for you to pray here.” I asked, “Why?” He said, “You’re attracting attention. They’re coming and asking questions about you – ‘Who is this boy? Why does he come here? What does he know?’ So don’t pray in the mosque anymore.” From that moment on, I stopped praying in congregation.

Interviewer: *Of course these are not legal crimes, but political ones.*

O.T.: In recent years, police stations and security branches have been keeping detailed records of those who regularly attend the dawn prayer or the five daily prayers. They keep such people under full surveillance – where they gather, whom they meet, every detail. This was the case all across Syria. It was the same everywhere.

Interviewer: *Let’s continue with the interrogation.*

O.T.: Then the interrogation was almost over, but he kept pressuring me, asking, “Did you carry a weapon? Did you kill anyone?” I said, “No.” In the end, I told him, “If I could endure the beatings, I wouldn’t confess to any of this. But I can’t take it anymore. If you want, write that I carried a weapon – I didn’t, but I can’t stand the beatings.” After being beaten again, I said, “Yes, I carried one,” though I never did. At that point, the interrogator didn’t record it as “carried a weapon.” They called one of the guards, who took me to the lavatories. He told me to take off my shirt and said, “Sit down. Don’t move.” He was holding something in his hand – I thought it was an electric baton or something similar. But it turned out to be a razor; he shaved my head.

He took me to a solitary cell. The area was no more than 5 square meters – maybe 5 or 6 at most. It was about 2.75 meters long and 1.75 meters wide. There were seven of us in there. It was underground. There was no light inside the cell, only a faint beam of light coming through a small vent from the corridor. There was also an air duct opening to the outside, like a small fan or turbine, blowing air into the cell. Even on cold winter nights, they deliberately kept the ventilation running to make sure our bodies froze. We had nothing to protect ourselves. There was only a thin blanket, which wasn’t enough to block the chill from the ground. There was another blanket, but all seven of us had to share it. We had to lie

down almost on top of each other. For instance, one person would lie on their side and pull their legs in, while another would rest their head near that person's feet. We were packed so tightly that even getting a little sleep was difficult – there was no room to turn. Even if your body went numb, you couldn't move.

At the same time, we were also suffering from skin diseases in the cell. There were lice and cockroaches. The cell was a truly filthy place. At night, we were so tightly packed that we could barely move. For example, even if we felt itchy because of the lice and skin infections, there was no space to scratch ourselves.

We stayed in the solitary cell for approximately 16 days. My entire body was covered with red rashes, like an allergic reaction. Eventually, one of the prison staff came by. I told him, "Alright, I'm ready to risk being beaten again, but we need to wash. Our bodies are in this condition, and the diseases are coming back." That day, they showed a bit of mercy and prepared the shower for us. They allowed us to take a shower for ten minutes and then return. The hot water wasn't enough – for example, I could only wash my head; the rest of my body was left with cold water. Still, at least we were somewhat cleaned.

They sent us back to the cell again. Every day or every other day, they would take a few of us out. There were three or four others around my age – minors, 16 or 17 years old. Among us were also married and older individuals. They even brought in a 50-year-old man with a walking disability. They accused him of "terrorism." The man owned a small grocery shop and also cleaned the mosque and called the adhan – that was all. His health was so poor that he couldn't even lift a cane, let alone use a weapon. Despite this, they forced a confession out of him through torture. Even after that, they showed him no mercy. Every day or every other day, some detainees were taken from the cell and replaced with new ones. For example, when the transfer bus arrived after the dawn prayer, we knew those people would be sent to the branches in Damascus – and from there, most likely to Sednaya Prison. Anyone sent there was practically facing certain death. If the transfer bus arrived in the afternoon, it meant they were being taken to the Central Prison in Homs, to the court in Homs, or to the Military Prison of Homs (Al-Balouna). That prison was also notorious for torture and violations. After 21 days in the State Security Branch, detainees were either transferred to branches in Damascus, to a military court, or to the Military Prison in Homs. When my 21 days were up, I woke up at dawn for the morning prayer. Normally, performing ablution was forbidden. We were forced to enter and exit the restroom within seconds – if they saw our hands or faces wet, we risked being beaten. So we used a stone to perform tayammum (dry ablution) and prayed inside the solitary cell.

We performed the dawn (fajr) prayer and sat waiting. The security personnel would insult the Prophet and the Qur'an and blaspheme against Allah - this was very common among the security units. If someone said, "For the sake of Allah...", they would reply, "Allah? Here there is only Bashar!" If someone said, "For Muhammad's sake...", they would mock, "Muhammad? Bashar allowed him." Most of the insults targeted religion, honor, and sacred values. You were constantly stunned - they would curse at the slightest thing, and they also forced us to curse. Of course, if even the faintest sound came from a solitary cell, or if they caught someone praying, they showed no mercy. One of us would be praying while another looked outside through a small vent. If anyone whispered, "It's prayer time...", they would immediately stop it. Exactly twenty-one days passed. After performing the dawn prayer, I sat and prayed, "I hope I'll be released." There were people with me who had previously been detained and then brought back - they were taken away. I rested for about two hours and slept another two. When I woke up, it was noon and the call to the midday prayer had been made. We prayed and kept waiting. Then they began calling out names. I pressed my ear to the small vent and, from the far end of the corridor, heard them call mine. They took me to where those from the third cell were. They brought us out and cuffed our hands behind our backs with plastic ties. They also took the disabled man from the same cell to transfer him with us; because he could not walk, we carried him on the stairs. Then they put us on buses. On the bus, raising your head was forbidden - you had to keep your eyes on the ground, on your feet. I didn't even dare look at the window beside me, so I couldn't see where we were going. Some soldiers assigned to us struck us with sticks or cables. After about half an hour on the road, we arrived at the military prison in Homs: They transferred us to Homs al-Balouna Military Prison. There, we were interrogated again. There was a body they called the "four-member committee" - Air Intelligence, Military State Security, the Political Branch - and this committee, we were told, approved the statements.

When we first entered the prison, they searched us again. They stripped us all naked and ordered us to lie face down on the ground and raise our feet. The military police officers there each held a thick cable and began to beat us. When I saw how they were beating the ones in front of me, I tried to stay at the back, stepping away - but eventually, they started hitting me too; I received 12-15 blows to my feet. The officers were practically boasting, saying, "Let me try your cable, let's see if it hurts as much as mine." When the beating ended, they told us, "You'll go up to the third floor." They made us run up the stairs in a single line, even though our hands were cuffed. At the top, we reached a corner of the corridor where two military police soldiers stood holding electric clippers. They forcibly shaved everyone's heads - even those who already had short hair - in a deliberately humiliating way. The pain was so intense that I bit down on my trousers to stop myself from crying out. While this was happening, I looked toward the end of the corridor and saw a woman with her eyes

blindfolded. She had just come out of torture, standing in the corner with her hands tied behind her back. They asked me, “What’s your crime?” I was too afraid to say “membership in an armed group” or “terrorism,” so I said, “It’s a case of mistaken identity.” If I had said “I’m accused of terrorism,” they would have tortured me again. They placed us in the first ward, at the end of the corridor. The ward was extremely overcrowded – there was almost no space to lie down. We could only sleep on our sides, pressed tightly against one another. When I arrived that night, I couldn’t find any empty spot at all; I finally made a little space for myself right in front of the toilet door.

The next morning when I woke up, I saw a friend who had been arrested on the same day as me. He had stayed in the same branch. He smiled and waved at me. His head had been shaved, and his health was poor, but we still recognized each other. He asked me, “Why are you lying down by the toilet? Why are you sleeping at the door?” I said, “I couldn’t find any other empty space last night.” He and his friends said, “Alright, we’ll make some room for you – you can join us.” I asked him, “How are things here? Is there torture?” He replied, “There’s an interrogation committee here. You have to repeat your previous statements – the ones you made in the branch – exactly the same. If you say even one word more or less, they’ll torture you again.” He added that you’re only called for interrogation after 40 days. I had been there for about 22 or 23 days. Two days later, a soldier shouted, “A.T.!” – my father’s name. I got up, thinking, “Maybe they brought my father...” and turned toward the door to see. But the ward officer said, “Forbidden!” Then someone from the interrogation team called out, “O.A.T.!” I hadn’t expected to be summoned so soon. They told me, “Don’t be afraid – just repeat exactly what you confessed in the branch. If you do, they won’t torture you.” They blindfolded me. The soldier told the ward officer, “Blindfold him so he doesn’t even see the soldiers.” The ward officer said to me, “Recite the Qur’an and ask Allah for patience. Endure here just as you endured the torture in the branch.” They took me to the interrogation room, which was right next to the wards. After the first... the second... the third ward, you reached the interrogation room. Inside, there were four interrogators – each from a different branch. They started questioning me. One of them said, “I know everything. If you don’t confess, you’ll leave here only as a corpse. Good thing you confessed earlier...” I repeated all the accusations, exactly as before. But there was another interrogator, and the detainee under his charge hadn’t confessed – neither in the branch nor here. That detainee said to me, “I didn’t do anything.” I told him, “I didn’t do anything either, but I was forced to confess because they beat me at the branch...”

Another interrogator stepped in and said to the other, “Tell him he’s a terrorist. Let’s see if he confesses. His brother is a terrorist; his family are terrorists – his brother is already detained. Why haven’t you made him confess yet?” The other replied, “Make him confess

by reasonable force.” The detainee they were torturing was around 17 to 20 years old. The second interrogator lost control. He left that detainee and started kicking me in the head instead. Eventually, another interrogator arrived and said to me, “I’ll take you somewhere else.” Then he came back and continued interrogating me. For about three hours, they forced me to stay seated while pressing down on my leg, and beneath me was an ice-cold floor. I said, “I want to change my sitting position – my foot is numb; I can’t feel it anymore.” One of them said, “Okay, that’s fine,” but another came and shouted, “Stop! Don’t move! Don’t change your position!” Then yet another person came and hit me, saying, “Don’t you see that the detainee under his interrogation still hasn’t confessed?” They saw this as an insult – as if an interrogator “lost his honor” when the detainee in his hands refused to confess. The other detainee whispered to me, “Don’t stop, keep going...” Meaning, whether you confessed or not, the torture didn’t change.

Interviewer: *Up until this point, you still hadn’t had access to any lawyer or legal procedure, right?*

O.T.: No, everything was handled only through connections and intermediaries. My family knew I was detained, but they had no information about my whereabouts.

Interviewer: *How does the favoritism/bribery mechanism work? Is it carried out by people paying money (i.e. bribes), or do officers within the security branches intervene?*

O.T.: The method employed by the security branches was as follows: If they knew that a person had not committed a crime, they would still detain them. The aim was to extort money from their family. They would send a man to the family to inform them that their son was being held at a certain security branch and that they had received news from him. By delivering this message, they would then demand money from the family. It was a form of bribery mechanism.

If there was conclusive evidence against a detainee – such as carrying a weapon or having committed a killing – the head of the security branch had no authority to release them. However, if it was known that the person was innocent, they would exploit them for financial gain. Naturally, they would not release the person immediately; instead, they prolonged the process as much as possible to extract the maximum amount of money from the family. After the investigation was completed and the detainee had signed all the documents confirming that they admitted to every accusation, the officer would order the soldier: “Take him outside.”

Returning to the torture: After they brought me out of interrogation, they asked, “Shall we take him to the ward?” The officer there said, “Go and hang him.” This was a torture method called “shabeh.” The method involved tying a person’s hands and suspending them in the air, allowing only their toes to touch the ground.

The “shabeh” method I was subjected to was a bit different. They tortured me by hanging me from the cell door. The door was made of iron, and I had to hold on to the top bars with my hands. My knees were pressed against the lower bars. I stayed in that position for about half an hour. This method was much harder than the usual tying method because when you’re tied, the rope supports you – but here, I had to rely entirely on my own muscle strength to stay hanging. Over time, my hands started to slip, and eventually, I fell to the ground. When I fell, a soldier came and started kicking me, then ordered me to hang myself back up again. So even falling became an additional form of torture.

About half an hour later, an interrogator arrived, saying that his car had broken down. He opened the doors of the adjacent cells and asked the detainees if any of them knew about cars. One prisoner replied, “I do.” The interrogator began asking him questions about the vehicle. At that moment, I waited, hoping to be noticed as well. I thought perhaps he would see me and spare me from further torture. He turned to me and asked, “How long have you been waiting here?” “I don’t know, I’ve been here for a long time,” I replied. Then he said, “Take him down.” The soldier beside him hesitated, but since the interrogator had given the order, they took me down. However, shortly afterward, the same soldier came back and started beating me again. “Who took you down?” he asked. “The interrogator,” I said. “How do you know the interrogator?” he insisted. “I recognized his voice because he was just here, talking about the car,” I said. The soldier replied, “Alright then, let’s take him back for questioning and have him sign.” After a detainee signed all their statements, they were taken to a special ward known as the “pressure cell.” There, it was decided whether the detainees would be sent to court or transferred elsewhere. I had the opportunity to speak with other prisoners who were there. We asked one another what we had gone through and what we had been forced to confess.

Interviewer: *When were you released?*

O.T.: I was released on January 12, 2014. My detention lasted about 45 days. Usually, the length of detention varied depending on the duration of the torture. The last 10 days were relatively better for me because I was no longer subjected to torture. Finally, they transferred us to Adra Prison in Damascus. The military judge in Homs refused to accept us and sent us to the Counter-Terrorism Court in Damascus. That was a civilian prison; there was no torture, and there were facilities for food and hygiene. I stayed there for 4 days. Then they took me to the Damascus Courthouse, and I appeared before a judge. Since the Homs court had rejected us, I appeared before a judge for the first time after 42 days. The following evening, I saw that those who had appeared in court with us had bribed the police and were able to meet with their families. I, too, told them that I had been unable to contact my family and, in exchange for a bribe, was allowed to call my father. I told him that I was in

Damascus, that I might be released within a day or two, but that we needed both a lawyer and money for that to happen.

Interviewer: *Was anyone else in your family detained like you?*

O.T.: Yes. My elder brother was arrested on December 13, 2012. We waited for his release, along with the other prisoners in Sednaya, but we could not find any trace of him. Later, when we investigated the cases of those who had died in the civil prison in Damascus, we learned that my brother had been executed two and a half years after his arrest. The charges against him were carrying a weapon and participating in protests. He was executed on August 22, 2014, but we only learned this information on December 8, 2024.

Interviewer: *Was there a court ruling regarding him?*

O.T.: The death sentence was issued by a military field court. Neither a lawyer nor a judge can approach these courts. Legally, they operate as a completely closed system. The field court consisted of three members: The prison director, a military judge, and an intelligence officer or a security branch official.

The process of issuing a death sentence was very simple: the prisoner would be summoned, asked their name and the charges against them. Then they would be asked, “Is this true?” and the prisoner would answer either “Yes” or “No.” That was all – only these three questions were asked. Afterwards, the prisoner would be forced to sign a document containing the death sentence. This was how the field court operated. No one ever “disappeared” there, because no one was secretly made to disappear – they were executed directly.

Interviewer: *Thank you very much for the information you have provided. We hope that this testimony will be used as evidence in court and will become part of a report to inform the world about what happened. People knew that such things were taking place, but they did not know the details. Even during the revolution, no one realized that torture was carried out in such a detailed and systematic manner. So once again, thank you.*

O.T.: Thank you. I hope these events will not be forgotten and that justice will one day prevail.

Record No: 6

Date: 21 January 2025

Location: Association for Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP)

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarik ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: Q.T., 37 years old, Syrian citizen, electrical technician, and government employee in Syria.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Have you been detained in Syria before?*

Q.T.: Yes, on December 12, 2012.

Interviewer: *Where were you working in Syria?*

Q.T.: I was working in a government office.

Interviewer: *Where were you detained?*

Q.T.: I was detained in the Homs governorate. They took me from inside the company, from the establishment itself. I was there on official business, coming from the Tadmur (Palmyra) region. It was in rural Homs. I had some work to handle at the main company in Homs, dealing with documents. They told me, “A signature is needed at the Political Security Office; it’s no problem, just take the document and have it signed.” I went there to get it signed. I told someone in the office, “I just need to get this document signed,” but the man said, “Wait a bit,” then closed the door and left. After a while, four officers came, blindfolded and handcuffed me, and took me to the Political Security Branch. The charges were participating in demonstrations, insulting the President, and similar accusations. All of it was related to the revolutionary movement in Syria. That was the charge.

They took me to the Political Security branch, where I stayed for about an hour. They asked questions regarding this charge; there was neither a court order nor any other official document. It was completely arbitrary. For about an hour, they recorded my identity information and my statement. Then they took me downstairs for interrogation.

First, they stripped me completely naked and searched my clothes. Then they began hitting me directly. They cursed, insulted me and my family, even cursed Allah, and made threats. This went on for about two hours. After that, they threw me into a single-person cell. By “single-person cell,” I mean a space of about 1.5 meters near the toilet. There were 7 or 8 of

us crammed in there. It was so narrow that we couldn't sleep; we had to sit, pressed against each other. I remember there was no water. Food was almost nonexistent – sometimes just two olives, sometimes a small amount of jam. There was really nothing that could be called a proper meal.

We were taken for interrogation every day or almost every night. How did we know night had come? The horn sounds and human activity outside would stop, and everything would become quiet. That's when we realized it was nighttime. They took us for interrogation at night. With our eyes blindfolded, they tortured us – beatings, electric shocks, hitting all over my body, insults... Then they would take us to the interrogation room and ask questions like, "Who directed you? Who gave you instructions?" This situation at the Political Security continued; I stayed there for one and a half months.

Then they took me to the State Security Branch. When I was being transferred from Political Security to State Security, they returned my belongings, and I thought maybe I would be released. They gave me my bag and personal items. At that time, I had about \$1,000, plus around 50,000 Syrian pounds. The money they returned to me didn't even amount to 1,000 Syrian pounds – they said, "This is your deposit." When I asked, "What about the rest?" they didn't care and simply said, "That's it." I had gone out to handle my work in Homs, but I had been missing for 1.5 months, and my family had no news of me.

Interviewer: *So, no one informed your family, is that right?*

Q.T.: No, neither my family nor anyone else was informed. Then they put me in a car. My eyes were uncovered when I got in. Someone was sitting next to the driver, and I said, "Why have you kept me like this? It's been more than a month, my family knows nothing." He replied, "Well, you have a file. They say you're a terrorist." Then he added, "If you pay, I can get you out." I said, "I'll give you whatever you want, just let me go." All the torture I had endured was already more than enough. He said, "Actually, I'm not supposed to tell you this. We're going to State Security now. Compared to State Security, Political Security was like paradise. But I'll try to help you if you pay." I said, "Alright, I'll pay – just get me out."

Then we arrived at State Security. They blindfolded me again, handcuffed me, and took me inside. The first thing they did there was strip me naked. They ordered me to face the wall, raise my arms, and lift one leg. It was utterly humiliating. The officers were shouting, and sometimes they came close to threaten me. They said things like, "You'll start missing what you went through before," and "Now you'll see what real torment is." I just said, "May Allah help us." They took down my personal details again, and then immediately began the torture method known as Shabeh – the hanging.

I was suspended in the method called Shabeh; I was standing on my tiptoes, completely naked, and blindfolded. I remained hanging like that. I was only allowed to go to the toilet twice a day – once in the early morning and once at the end of the day. Even then, a guard stood over me. As soon as I stepped inside, insults and curses would start; they wanted me to finish quickly and get out immediately.

They gave me only one meal a day – and even that was so little that a child couldn't be satisfied with it. For example, a bit of bulgur with two chickpeas on top... It wasn't enough to feed even a two year old child. In this way, more than ten days passed while I remained hanging, without interrogation, just waiting. Every time the guards passed by, they hit us with whatever they had in their hands – sticks, whips, anything. We were hanging in a very narrow corridor, perhaps a hundred meters long. Along that corridor, there were many others suspended just like me.

Then they took me for interrogation. The questioning was the same: “Who joined the protests with you? Who directed you? Who incited you?” they kept asking. Afterwards, I was hung up again in the “Shabeh” position and then returned. Finally, when I was completely exhausted from interrogation, they put me in a communal cell. This cell was about four meters by four meters in size, but there were over seventy people inside. Imagine – four meters by four meters with more than seventy people... The situation there was the same. Almost every day, groups of seven or eight Shabiha would enter; they carried thick sticks or sometimes iron rods. They would beat us and then leave, as if for amusement. This continued over and over.

I stayed under these conditions for nearly three months. At the end of the three months, we were transferred to a four-person committee called “el-lecne er-rubaiyye”; this was the security committee in Homs. It consisted of four branches: Military Intelligence, Air Intelligence, Political Security, and State Security. When we were previously at State Security (Aman el-Devle) and spoke with each other, we would say, “Hopefully they send us to Damascus or Sednaya, just don't send us to this four-person committee.” Because its name was “el-lecne er-rubaiyye,” and it was said that anyone who ended up there was sent to hell.

Then one day, they put us onto buses. There were about 150 people. Even while boarding the bus, we received a beating equivalent to all the beatings we had endured before. We traveled for about an hour or more. We thought we were going to Damascus. Our eyes were blindfolded, and our hands were handcuffed behind our backs. Those standing over us kept hitting us with electric cables, thick sticks, and batons. We had no idea exactly where we were. Then the bus stopped, and they made us get off. “People said, ‘This must be the place of the four-person committee.’ It turned out that this was the military prison called ‘Al Balouna.’ In Syria, the number one military prison was Sednaya, the second was Tedmur,

and the third was Al Balouna. It was also the central headquarters of the security committee in Homs. When people said, 'Al Balouna, the four-person committee... this is literally the gateway to hell...' everyone's last hope was extinguished."

It really was like that. All the beatings and tortures we had suffered before seemed like a mother lightly striking her child compared to what we were about to see. When we first entered, we were made to wait on our knees with our hands behind our backs and our heads bowed. This time they did not blindfold us, but there were soldiers and officers in the room. "Sign this!" they shouted - we didn't know what we were signing. They just yelled, "Sign!" When they called a name and said, "Come here!" as soon as someone stood up, the beating would start immediately. Our bodies were already bruised from previous torture. We waited kneeling for about three hours. Anyone who stood up, moved, or spoke to a friend was hit on the head and back at once.

Then they took all our information, and the procedures were completed. Suddenly, an attack began; every officer who entered started hitting us with whatever they could get their hands on. At that moment, 3 people were killed on the spot - all of them were friends we had known from the State Security Branch. Two of them were young, and one was older person. They made excuses, saying, "His heart stopped; he was already sick." They kept repeating, "He was sick from the beginning; we took him in when he was already ill." While we were still at Political Security, there had been a man in his 60s who was brought to us. He used to transport fruits and vegetables from the Homs region. The man was already exhausted and distressed. We tried to comfort him, to support each other, but the situation was beyond what we could handle. One night, they took him for interrogation. He went - and then they brought him back later. Before being taken for interrogation, he had told us, "My family is waiting for me; my children are waiting," and he was crying. His daughter had asked him for a special kind of fruit, insisting, "Father, bring us some fruit." He told this story in tears, saying, "My daughter must be waiting for me now, my family must be waiting; they have no one, Allah knows what has happened to them." He went to interrogation and later returned - completely exhausted. They threw him back into the cell as if tossing an object. He could neither speak nor respond; he was only moaning. After 1 or 2 hours, even the moaning stopped. We realized his heart had stopped, he was no longer breathing - he had died.

Interviewer: *So, he was killed during a single interrogation, is that correct?*

Q.T.: Yes, he went into only one interrogation, and that was it. We knocked on the cell door and said, "Someone has died." The officers came, took a brief look, and started beating us. They even hit the dead body and cursed at it. They said things like, "This man was sick from the beginning, a terrorist, his heart exploded." We had heard similar words back at

Political Security, but now the main issue was the four-member committee, known as rubaiyye. Right after we were brought in – before even being taken for questioning–3 people among us died. The men holding hoses, cables, and sticks attacked again; they beat some with hoses, some with electric cables, and some with sticks. Our eyes were blindfolded, we were completely naked, and no one knew where the blows would land. It could hit the head, the hands, or the back. Some people were dying, and we would lower our heads to protect ourselves – so that maybe fewer blows would hit our faces. Eventually, they separated those who had been killed from the rest of us. Then they took us upstairs, where they recorded our identity information. After that, we were taken back down to a large cell. The cell was about 100 square meters (10 by 10 meters), but there were more than 400 people inside. We were literally piled on top of each other, like animals crammed into a stable. There was a toilet in the middle, but most of the time there was no water. I stayed there for about 5 months. During that entire time, I never saw clean water. We had nothing to wear except underwear. The blankets they brought us were soaked with urine and filth from others. I remained like that for 5 months. There were people whose wounds became infested with worms because they could no longer endure the conditions. Their skin and backs had opened up, and worms were coming out of the wounds. The man in front of me had a wound on his back about 2 centimeters deep, and worms were crawling out of it. With constant beatings and injuries, our bodies felt like they were rotting away. We were taken for interrogation almost every day. My interrogations were conducted by Military Intelligence. Others were interrogated by Air Intelligence, Political Security, or State Security. My interrogator was from Military Intelligence. Before every interrogation, they would beat us again, using methods such as dulab (forcing the victim inside a car tire and beating them), satiriyya (whipping or beating with a strap or stick), and shabeh (hanging by the wrists while handcuffed). After that, I was taken to the interrogator. He would ask irrational questions – such as, “Which vehicles did you blow up? Which women did you rape? Which state properties did you loot?” I am speaking of the end of 2012, before the armed clashes had even begun. Since none of it was true, we denied everything, and then they would come and beat us again. Later, they took me back to the cell. It was so filthy that the stench was unbearable. The humidity made it hard to breathe. There was filth and urine all over the floor. I stayed there for about 15 days. No one ever came to check whether we were alive or dead. Once a day, they gave us a piece of dry bread – but you couldn’t even bring yourself to eat it. Even if they had brought lamb, you wouldn’t have wanted to eat. We were living at the edge of death. People were dying of starvation, beatings, or stress. Some lost kidney function, some lost their teeth, others lost their ability to speak. More than 15 people died from hunger, beatings, and exhaustion. Some received severe blows to the head, survived for a day or two, and then died. Among those who stayed with us, some went insane. One day, a prisoner knocked on the door and called for the guard. He started saying, “My family came by car; they’re downstairs – let

them in so I can greet them.” Then he turned to us, laughing and saying, “They brought the bride, they brought the bride!” Of course, they took him away, beat him nearly to death, and threw him back into the cell.

We were about 400 people in a single room – maybe even more. Speaking was extremely difficult. There was a small vent, like a hole in the door, and if the guard opened it and saw you talking to someone, your chances of survival were very low. He would take you out, beat you, and then bring you back. When you returned, you would stagger and mumble incoherently. The vent was so small that you couldn’t even see when it was opened or closed. They would just shout, “You! Come with your number!” One time, a guard saw me talking to someone and called out to me. I said, “There’s no water in the toilet.” They had cut off the water in the toilets for a long time. He said, “Do you want to go to the toilet? Then go and sleep there!” I pleaded, “Sir, please don’t.” He replied, “Go! Sleep in the toilet.” I went – the toilet was a horrific sight. Everyone had diarrhea; it was covered in filth. He said, “Lie down inside the toilet bowl.” The toilet was directly across from the prison door. The soldier stood there, watching me from outside. Then he said, “Now put your head into the hole.” I put my head into the hole. He laughed and said, “Alright, go back to your friends.” There were many such incidents – not only me, but most of the people there suffered similar punishments.

Interviewer: *We’ve heard there are some notorious torture methods in Syria. How were these methods applied? We need to write some details for the report.*

Q.T.: The “dûlâb” method is like this: Your legs and head are put inside a wheel (a car tire), making movement impossible. Your head and feet stick out of the tire while your legs are bound inside it, so you cannot move. Then the people around you begin to beat you – they strike your feet, they strike your head. They do not only beat your legs; they hit your head and whatever part of the body they choose, targeting any area they deem appropriate.

When they hit my feet, the pain was unbearable. I wanted to move my legs, to pull them away, but I couldn’t. When I tried to protect my head out of instinct, they started hitting my head instead. Because my head was trapped inside the tire, I felt completely defenseless. Sometimes they hit so hard that I thought they would break my arm or shatter my hand or wrist. When they beat you with this method, they struck wherever the blows happened to land – sometimes the hands, sometimes the head. In that moment, you were completely at their mercy.

Let them break my legs or my back – it didn’t matter. They started hitting my head. I was begging, saying whatever I could, but it was useless; it didn’t stop. It just went on like that. Then they pulled me out of the tire. They made me stand up, but as I stood, my head was spinning, my insides were spinning – I felt like I had turned around myself 360 degrees –

and I collapsed to the ground. When I fell, he saw me and said, “Oh, you’re lying down, huh?” and started hitting me again. He struck me with the stick wherever it landed; I couldn’t get up because I was dazed. There was no food, no water – none of the basic things you need to stay alive. I was trying to stand up, but even if I managed to get on my feet, I would fall again. I said, “Okay, I’ll get up, it’s fine, just stop hitting me,” but I had no strength left to stand. Then they moved on to the shabeh method (hanging by the wrists). In Rubaiyye (a four-person committee), this shabeh was a bit different: They would hang me from the prison door. The door was large – about 3 meters by 3 meters. They would hang me there with my arms and legs spread open. For example, they tied my hands and then pulled my legs with a rope, stretching them as far as possible. That tension – when your muscles and nerves are being pulled – creates an indescribable pain. While you were hanging there, you always felt like a guard could appear at any moment in the corridor. Those guards carried massive batons and never stood still for even a second. They kept hitting – sometimes with electric shocks, sometimes with sticks – wherever the blows landed. They especially liked to hit the knees. If they saw you half-conscious while hanging, they would aim for your knees to jolt you back to awareness.

We stayed like that for almost five months. They addressed us by two-digit numbers; no one knew who anyone really was. Yes, you were given a number, and instead of your name, they used only that number. In this way, you were deprived of your identity as well.

At last, toward the end of the interrogation, while my eyes were still blindfolded, I was being beaten in front of the interrogator. The officer asked me, “Are you going to confess or not?” I finally said, “Enough – I’ll confess.” He kept writing and writing, recording something. I asked, “Are you tired?” He said, “Yes.” Then I told him, “Everything I said is a lie, just so you know. I didn’t actually do anything, but I’m exhausted from the beatings and torture.” He replied, “Whether you did it or not doesn’t matter. You will accept it here. You’ll sign the statements, and then you’ll be brought before a military judge.” He said it exactly like that: “He’ll hang you or cut you down – doesn’t matter to me. My job is to get your confession signed. I don’t care whether you committed the crime or not.”

Then they took us to the judge. There were a civilian judge and a military judge. The civilian judge brought various charges like “participating in demonstrations,” and the military judge added other accusations. When I said, “Your Honor, I do not accept these – everything I signed was under beatings and torture,” he answered, “You have confessed to these crimes; I will not consider anything else.” Even when I said, “Sir, they forced me, they beat me nearly to death,” the man paid me no attention. I thought, “If you were in my place for even an hour you’d confess twenty times over,” but the judge did as he pleased. He found me guilty and sent me to prison.

Thus, I was sent to Homs Central Prison (a civilian prison). Compared to military prisons, I could say the environment was somewhat more bearable. But I couldn't stay there long because a revolt broke out in the prison. Security forces fired tear gas bombs, and people were killed. I remember that in one incident, more than twenty people died. They opened fire, and although we tried to intervene, we couldn't stop it – those who were hit died. After that, I remained in prison for about a year and three months. Eventually, by a court decision, I was supposedly “released,” or more accurately placed under something like “trial without detention.” But in reality, you had to pay a middleman to get out; there was no legal way. They arranged it that way, and in June 2014, I was set free.

Interviewer: *So, your release wasn't through a legal process?*

Q.T.: No, of course not. It was entirely a form of brokerage. You pay money, and that's how you get out. I was released in June 2014.



Record No: 7

Date: January 21, 2025

Location: Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP)

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: S.B., 42 years old, civil engineer.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Mr. S., have you ever been detained in Syria before?*

S.B.: Yes, I was detained in Damascus.

Interviewer: *On what date?*

S.B.: In 2013. Actually, it was at the end of 2012 – in the last month of 2012.

Interviewer: *Was there any charge against you when you were taken into custody, or was it based on an official decision?*

S.B.: It was something like a “shabiha” – type situation – meaning it wasn’t an official arrest. It wasn’t by a Ba’ath Party member, but it was connected to pro-Iranian militias.

Interviewer: *So, do you mean they were affiliated with Iran’s party or the regime’s party? Were they Iranians?*

S.B.: There were Iranians – for example, in the Jobar area, in Karn al-Bayda, they were assigned as guards. In Damascus, they acted together with the regime. They had authority in the administration, like us, but in reality, they were loyal to Iran.

Interviewer: *So, it wasn’t an official detention, is that correct?*

S.B.: No, it was a brigade – paramilitary forces of the regime.

Interviewer: *Yes, could these people be the pro-regime militias known as the “National Defense Forces”? What were their names?*

S.B.: We used to call them shabiha – pro-regime militias...

Interviewer: *How did it happen then? Why were you captured?*

S.B.: My husband was a member of the Free Syrian Army; I believe that was the main reason. No one in his family had been martyred, but he was with the young men who were defending their land and homeland. We were staying at my husband’s uncle’s house. That uncle was an opposition supporter. My husband didn’t want me to mention his name, and

we didn't have his permission. He was a strong opponent who had personally witnessed the chemical attacks in Syria. We migrated several times. One of our relocation points was a place called "Biltu." We were staying in a shelter there. It never occurred to us that "they might come." It was around 7 a.m. My daughter was going to kindergarten. At that very moment, they unexpectedly knocked on the door. At that time, I was holding a small baby in my arms; my husband, my mother, my late uncle, his wife, my sisters-in-law, and my co-sister's daughters were all there. Armed men burst in, almost breaking down the door, and interrogated everyone. They pressured and threatened us. Out of fear, I left without even taking my ID, with only a single piece of paper in my hand. Right before our eyes, they carried out a mass killing in the nearby houses. We had left that house three days earlier - they had slaughtered everyone inside. It later became clear that the attackers were Iranian militias; their machetes were inscribed with the words "Ya Hussein."

Interviewer: *How long were you held by them?*

S.B.: Eight days. On the second day they told us, "You can never stay here; this is a strategic point, we want to take it." So, we hurriedly left. It was an important position overlooking many streets and locations. They wanted to take us too, but by Allah's will we managed to escape at that moment. They did not pursue us. We fled at night in a car wearing only the clothes on our backs.

Interviewer: *Were you subjected to physical torture - such as beatings, insults, or verbal abuse?*

S.B.: There was verbal abuse, insults, and psychological torture. I wasn't subjected to severe physical torture myself, but my brother went through similar things. He was detained for a year and a half - they completely shattered his hand. It was all done by Hezbollah.

Interviewer: *Where was he detained?*

S.B.: He was detained in Lebanon, by Hezbollah. As far as I understand, my brother was serving in the army there. He, too, was among those defending their people, their land, and their dignity. He fell into Hezbollah's hands and was tortured for a year and a half. They crushed his hand - it's now permanently disabled.

Interviewer: *Do you have any other family members who have been detained?*

S.B.: My eldest brother was also detained - in Lebanon as well. He was held for a short time and released two months later in exchange for money. Another brother of mine was taken to a military prison during Hafez al-Assad's rule. He was eventually released but suffered from severe psychological trauma. Although he received treatment for three years, the doctor said, "If he experiences another crisis, his condition will worsen again." Unfortunately, my brother later passed away due to psychological complications.

Interviewer: *Was your husband martyred?*

S.B.: Yes, he was martyred. How did it happen? He was the commander of a brigade – one of the opposition brigades. His family suffered many losses. For example, some of his relatives are still missing today. Documents have surfaced showing that some of them died under torture, but two of them remain unaccounted for – no one knows whether they are alive or dead. We don't even know exactly who took them or for what reason.

Interviewer: *Did you receive any official notice or document from the police or the state explaining the reason?*

S.B.: No, it was all done in a Shabiha-style, arbitrary manner. Then during interrogations, they pressed me, “Where is your husband? Where are your in-laws?” I said, “My husband works in Homs.” They replied, “No – he's fighting,” and they came down hard on us.

Even our house was destroyed – it was a witness to everything. There was a sniper right in front of our home. That house no longer belongs to us. We went through extremely difficult days and experienced so much. In the end, we reached Türkiye. Türkiye became like a compassionate homeland for us. Even my sister married a Turkish man. I was talking to her today and said, “If I ever had to leave Türkiye, it would be very hard for me.” Truly, Türkiye has been the country that embraced Syrians the most and helped them the most – and Qatar as well.

As I mentioned before, we have been entrusted to Türkiye and Qatar. Qatar supported us within its means, and –just like Türkiye– has always stood on the side of justice. I told them about the persecution my family suffered. For example, they drove into our area in cars. Their appearance was terrifying. They entered the Bab Amr gardens, Kiferhaya, Jobar, Homs... Then the city... At first there was the Jobar massacre. This issue was important to my husband. Everyone talks about the Hula massacre, but the Jobar massacre is barely heard of. Yet many of our young people were arrested there and had their throats slit. Even now –may Allah help them– we later learned that some of those detained died from torture there. Some were shot in the head; others they did not kill. Now if I say, “Let me go back to my homeland, to my street,” there are no men left... How are we supposed to return with our children? They were all wiped out.

For 13 years, no other country has cared for these many refugees, but Türkiye did. Maybe not everyone here shows a smiling face, but the majority are kind-hearted. Still, I would like to return to my homeland, to my destroyed home. However, Bashar's regime and those around him have represented the Syrian people very poorly. Yet most Syrians are good, understanding people. Thanks to everyone who helped us – we have all become like one nation.

I am a widow, my children are orphans, and our home has been destroyed. The house of our elders has also collapsed.

Interviewer: *Syria will be rebuilt, and hopefully, you will all return safely to your homeland.*

S.B.: This interview is very important. Testimonies are crucial. There are events the media has never mentioned. At the very least, the world should know. When Syria was partially liberated, we also learned the details of the torture. For instance, Sednaya Prison was already notorious, but we discovered what other military branches had done as well. These places are not referred to by their official names – we realized that torture was carried out in unofficial locations. There may still be places we don't yet know about. Allah willing, everything will eventually come to light.

For example, I witnessed barrel bombs, airstrikes, and missiles; I saw civilians being used as “human shields.” Thank Allah, for now, we have escaped from all that. Honestly, I still can't believe I survived. On that “day of liberation,” I was so excited that I couldn't sleep for two nights. Yes, Allah willing, everything will get better. Allah willing. Thank you very much, thank you.



Record No: 8

Date: January 21, 2025

Location: Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP)

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: M.S.

Questions:

Interviewer: *What is your level of education? Where are you originally from?*

M.S.: I studied in Syria, but I couldn't complete my education because of the revolution. I am originally from the countryside of Damascus.

Interviewer: *Have you ever been detained in Syria before?*

M.S.: Yes, I was detained. When the Syrian revolution began in 2011, I had already been working as a paramedic for the Syrian Red Crescent since 2007. I was captured while working in field hospitals. My first detention lasted twenty-four hours, and I was released the next day. This was carried out by a security unit in the countryside of Damascus.

Interviewer: *Were you tortured during that time?*

M.S.: During that first detention, we were subjected to torture. However, because of a wound on my hand, they released me shortly afterward with a recommendation for medical treatment at one of the regime's checkpoints.

The second detention was completely different. A field court had issued an execution order – it was supposed to be a street execution. But just then, clashes broke out between the Free Syrian Army units and regime forces, so they couldn't carry out the execution. We managed to escape from the group that had captured us. That time, I was held for about a day.

In 2012, while going to pick up a wounded person by ambulance, I was detained again, accused of "helping armed militants." Another field execution order was issued against us. When fighting broke out, we managed to escape a few hours later. The torture was both psychological and physical, but since we were being held in the street rather than in a closed police station, it wasn't as severe as before.

Interviewer: *When did you leave Syria?*

M.S.: At the end of 2015.

Interviewer: *Did you ever witness the use of prohibited weapons?*

M.S.: Yes. In late 2012, the regime besieged the Eastern Ghouta belt of Damascus and other areas, and this blockade lasted until early 2018. For six years, food and electricity were completely cut off from the region. The goal was to starve the people and force them into “reconciliation.” During those years, many violations occurred, including chemical massacres.

Chlorine gas was used for the first time in Harasta; at that time, I was part of the team providing medical assistance to the wounded. After that, chlorine was used several more times, and finally, in August 2013, sarin gas was deployed in Zamalka. The loss was immense – around 1,500 people died; most of the victims were civilians, including children and women. While responding by ambulance, we witnessed heartbreaking scenes – a little girl who had lost her entire family, a mother who had lost all her children... That day, Eastern Ghouta truly experienced a catastrophe. The international media, including Al Jazeera, reported it as the “Eastern Ghouta Massacre.”

The regime also used Napalm-like incendiary munitions, which are banned under international law. My uncle and aunt were struck by one of these incendiary rockets and were martyred with severe burns. Thermobaric missiles, vacuum bombs, chlorine, and sarin were all deployed one after another. Chlorine is relatively less lethal, while sarin is deadly enough to paralyze the body with a single breath. In Eastern Ghouta, sarin was used multiple times – the first being the 2013 massacre, which nearly wiped out an entire neighborhood.

On the day the chemical attack took place, I was far from the targeted area; our duty was only to receive the wounded. Staying in Douma, we directed patients brought from all over Eastern Ghouta to the Red Crescent’s facilities. After working for three or four hours, when I stepped outside, I saw countless bodies piled up in front of the clinic. With conventional injuries, you see blood and tissue – you can somehow make sense of it; but with sarin victims, there were no cuts, no blood, only lifeless bodies... The human mind cannot comprehend it.

Interviewer: *Do you have any missing persons among your relatives or close circle?*

M.S.: Four of my colleagues are missing. In June 2012, before the blockade began, they were stopped at a checkpoint while returning from duty in a Red Crescent ambulance; four paramedic colleagues of ours were detained, and we have heard nothing from them since that day. The regime also used ambulances, doctors, and hospitals for its own purposes, turning ambulances into military targets.

As Red Crescent personnel remaining in Eastern Ghouta, our names were reported to the General Intelligence Directorate. The regime's order was that anyone on this list caught at a checkpoint was to be arrested immediately. Yet we were only doing our jobs – we were involved in neither terrorism nor armed activity. Despite this, the Syrian authorities directly placed the names of ambulance workers – whether members of the Red Crescent or medical staff from field hospitals – and media workers on the “immediate arrest” list. Instead of focusing on capturing armed individuals, the regime sought to intimidate and silence medical personnel and journalists.

There are also severe cases in my family: my cousin was arrested by the regime in 2015, two years after leaving the area. When he was released, his ribs were broken, there were drill marks on his back, and he had become almost a skeleton. The reason for his arrest was his participation in earlier demonstrations. Two of my maternal uncles had also been taken by the regime long before – for the same reason: Political protests and opposition activities. Both were subjected to systematic and severe torture because they had been among the leading political activists of that period.

Our personal testimonies and the data we have collected about methods of torture and the use of chemical weapons are very important. Our hope is that these documents will contribute to bringing the regime's senior leadership to trial before international courts.

Interviewer: *Thank you very much. Allah willing, the witness statements we have presented will one day help ensure that those most responsible within the regime are brought to justice.*

Record No: 9

Date: 21 January 21, 2025

Location: Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP)

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: M.A., 59 years old, dual citizen of Türkiye and Syria, from the city of Hama; was unable to continue their education beyond high school due to imprisonment.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Have you ever been imprisoned in Syria before?*

M.A.: I was arrested in 1980 when I was 15 years old, and I remained in prison until 2009. During that period, the Syrian government referred to what it called an “Islamic movement.” Repression began under Hafez al-Assad’s regime and its Defense Brigades.

The Syrian population was predominantly Muslim, and the government began provoking Islam and its followers. People were prohibited from attending mosques, prayers were banned, and women were forced to remove their headscarves. In 1980, soldiers from the Defense Brigades under Rifaat al-Assad entered Damascus and other provinces, forcibly removing the veils of women. This provoked anger among the Muslim population and led to uprisings in several areas, including Hama, Aleppo, Homs, and parts of Damascus. I was arrested as a result of these events.

Interviewer: *What exactly was the reason for your arrest? On what date were you detained?*

M.A.: They accused me of being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan). Some Muslims rose up to defend their honor, their women, and fellow believers. However, the criminal regime did not allow them to defend themselves. Instead, it resorted to violence – just as it did after 2011 – imposing repression, arresting, and killing people. Some managed to leave Syria and were forced into exile. But exile was not a better option than prison, because even in exile, Muslims faced hardship, suffering, and humiliation. I was arrested in July 1980 and remained imprisoned for about 24 years and 8 months – nearly 25 years.

Interviewer: *Was any notification made at the time of your arrest? Was your detention lawful?*

M.A.: Of course, it was not lawful. The situation in Syria was not like in other countries. There was a state of emergency in place, and the entire system was controlled solely by the President. He could issue any laws he wanted. The People’s Assembly was completely subordinate to him. Whatever the President said was done – if he said “applaud,” everyone

applauded; if he said “do not applaud,” no one did. The President could enact any law he wished. For example, the laws applied against us were enacted in this way. We – meaning all the Islamists detained during that period – were prosecuted under an extraordinary law known as Law No. 49. This law was imposed specifically on the Muslim population of Syria by force. Even the People’s Assembly had no real will of its own; the law was dictated to them as well.

Interviewer: *What was the content of this law?*

M.A.: Anyone who was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun), provided direct or indirect support, or even showed sympathy toward them, was to be executed. No such law has ever existed anywhere else in the world. For example, if a man shook hands with another person who happened to be a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, he would be sentenced to death. Even if someone offered tea or coffee to a member in the street or in a café, it was considered a crime – and that person would be arrested, even if he was just a coffee seller. When this law came into force, the regime began prosecuting all Muslims and the entire Syrian population under it. The law was called the “Emergency and Security Law.” I was one of those tried under this law. I was 15 years old when I was arrested. Nowhere in the world does any legal system treat a person under the age of 18 as a criminal. Even under Law No. 49 in Syria, a person under 18 was supposed to receive a maximum sentence of 6 years in prison. Yet the regime that created the law did not even abide by its own rules. The law turned into the law of the jungle. Everyone who was detained with me was sentenced under this law. We were taken to Tadmor Prison (Palmyra Prison) and then transferred to various branches – Military Security, State Security, Political Security, the Palestine Branch, and others. The entire Syrian population was punished under this oppressive law and subjected to mass arrests.

Indeed, Syria was – and still is – a vast prison. Imagine this: the criminal regime fell barely a month ago, yet even now, some of our friends still cannot speak – still live in fear of talking. They are even afraid to speak here in Türkiye. And why is that? Because this oppression has lasted for 50–60 years. There has been tyranny for 54 years. For 54 years, generations have grown up under injustice and repression. I am now 60 years old, and when I first opened my eyes 50 years ago, the only thing I saw was the Ba’ath Party. I opened my eyes to minority rule, to the crimes of the Assad family. So, what can one expect? What kind of person could I become? Of course, I grew up in fear. While I was in prison, I always told my family and friends, “When I get out, I will speak about everything.” Yet even after prison, some still cannot speak—because no one knows what might happen, even after a death sentence. According to Syrian law, I was sentenced to death. However, since I was a minor, my sentence should have been reduced to 6 years. Instead, they reduced it to 12 years because I

was underage. And what was the result? They were supposed to keep me imprisoned for 12 years, but they kept me for more than 24. That is oppression upon oppression! What does it mean to spend almost 25 years in prison? It means a human lifetime – a quarter of a century!

Interviewer: *Were you subjected to torture while in prison?*

M.A.: To me, that question sounds almost funny. Yesterday, I was listening to the testimony of a Shabiha—one of Bashar al-Assad’s personal guards. They were asking him the following question:

“Is torture being carried out on people in the prisons?”

The man replied as follows:

“When we put someone in prison, do you think we serve them coffee and a hookah? Of course they will be tortured, of course they will be crushed, of course they will be humiliated.” He said these words mockingly, in his own dialect.

Interviewer: *What was the torture process like during your time in prison?*

M.A.: My imprisonment consisted of several stages. In the first stage, we were held in the security branches. I stayed for about 3 months at the Security Branch in Aleppo. After that, I was held for 10 to 15 days in the prison of the Aleppo Military Hospital – but in reality, this hospital was a torture center under the authority of the Military Security Branch. There were about 20 political prisoners there. The prisoners were first taken to a doctor. The doctor would write a paper stating the prisoner’s medical condition. Then a nurse would come, take the prisoner, and bring him to the torture room. Those who were supposedly taken there for treatment were, in fact, tortured to death. Prisoners whose bodies had been broken during interrogation, whose skin was burned, or who were weakened from blood loss were sent to this military hospital. They kept me there for 10 days.

Interviewer: *Where were you transferred afterward?*

M.A.: They sent me to Hanano Prison. Hanano Prison was an old horse stable dating back to the Ottoman era. In other words, we were imprisoned in the very stables where horses had once been kept during Ottoman times. Hanano Prison used to be a barracks belonging to the old Ottoman army, and inside there were about 13 or 14 rooms. Each of these rooms was around 3 meters by 2 meters in size – just large enough for a horse to fit in. Yet, in those tiny spaces, 27 or 28 of us were crammed together! We could neither sleep, eat, rest, nor see daylight. Praise be to Allah, I stayed in Hanano Prison for only three months—but some people remained there for years.

Interviewer: *Where were you sent after Hanano?*

M.A.: After Hanano, we were sent to Tadmor Prison (Palmyra Prison). It may sound strange, but when we heard we were going to Tadmor, we actually felt relieved. We thought it would be more spacious and that the torture would be less severe. Having already become “experienced” in torture, we knew that what happened in the security branches was far worse than anything we might face in Tadmor. In the security branches, new prisoners were brought in every night, and we could hear the sounds of torture until morning – the screams, the electric shocks, the insults, and every form of physical torment. The regime treated torture as an experiment, testing every possible method. One day they would apply electric shocks to the feet, the next to the ears, and then to the genitals. For them, torture was an “art.” Hanano served as a transfer point where prisoners were kept before being sent to Tadmor or the central prisons. Those who had already been tortured in the security branches were later transferred to Tadmor Prison, Aleppo Central Prison, or Kafr Souseh Prison.

Interviewer: *What did you experience after entering Tadmor Prison?*

M.A.: I entered Tadmor on October 30, 1980. I was among the third group brought there after the Tadmor Massacre, which had occurred in June. I was transferred in October and placed in the fourth ward of Tadmor Prison. Tadmor Prison was built in three stages: the first section was constructed by the French during the 1920s and 1930s; the second was built by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1958 during the Arab Union period; and the third section was added by Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s. The prison consisted of approximately 44 wards, 38 of which were main wards. Inside, there were 7 major sections, each added at different times. One of them was a room referred to as a “refrigerator for the dead,” where the bodies of those who died from illness or torture were dumped. Forty-four of us, including myself, were transferred there from Aleppo. Among us, 8 or 9 were under the age of 18. Everyone else was executed. We were spared only because we were minors, but 36 others were tried in a military court and executed.

Interviewer: *How did these courts operate?*

M.A.: What they called a “court” wasn’t even a real judicial process. The judge was a short man named Suleiman al-Khatib, and beside him sat a large man they called his “assistant.” When a prisoner entered, they would only ask one question: “What is your name?” If there was any accusation in the file, they would issue the sentence immediately, without any interrogation. Some prisoners, under torture, gave false confessions. For example, they would ask someone, “Did you kill so-and-so?” and unable to endure the torture, he would admit to a crime he never committed. These courts were the most terrifying of all. There were people executed simply because of a dream they had. This tyranny was a system unlike anything ever seen in history.

First, let me tell you three stories so that you can understand the kind of oppression and torture the Muslim people of Syria have endured for years. A man once entered the court. The judge, a man named Suleiman al-Khatib, asked him, "Are you a doctor?" The man replied, "Yes, I am a veterinarian." The judge continued, "You were in a certain village on a certain day, weren't you? There was a sick cow there that belonged to my family, right?" The man said, "Yes, sir." Then the judge said, "You treated the cow, but it died." The man explained, "Sir, they called me when the cow was dying so I could try to treat it. I wrote a prescription and even notified the pharmacy about the medicine, but the owners didn't follow up, so the cow died." The judge then said, "I will hold you accountable for that cow." Fifteen days later, they executed that man-because of the cow.

Another poignant story goes like this: While a man was sitting in Tadmor, he dreamed that there had been a revolution and that Hafez al-Assad had been overthrown. This story circulated among different people in 1982-83; everyone was telling the dream. One day some people were brought to a military branch. A weak man, under torture, confessed who had seen it: "So-and-so dreamed that the President was overthrown." That man was brought to court and the judge asked him, "Did you see the President's overthrow in your dream?" The man replied, "Sir, it was only a dream, something beyond my will." The judge said, "If you had not thought of his overthrow, you would not have had that dream. Go - I have converted your sentence to the death penalty." Thus, that man was executed simply because he had dreamed.

And finally, let's move on to the third and last story. There was a famous poet among us named A.B. One day, a man was reciting one of his odes that he had written about Tadmor.

حتى ولا أمر الجنود بسوقه..

حتى يحاكمه القضاء العسكري

كلا ولا أمر القضاء بسجنه..

عشرين عاماً في صحارى تدمر

Neither was there an order from the soldiers to take him by force...

Nor a decision from the military court to put him on trial,

Not even a decree from the court to imprison him...

Yet he spent twenty years in the deserts of Tadmor.

The man was brought before the court, and the judge asked him, “You recited this poem; did you say in it, ‘twenty years in the deserts of Tadmor?’” The man replied, “Sir, I only recited the poem.” The judge said, “Go, I have issued your sentence; your punishment will be ‘twenty years in the deserts of Tadmor.’” He was released before completing the twenty years due to illness, but this remained an example of how uncontrolled and arbitrary the judges’ decisions were.

In fact, my words carry the tragedies of the Syrian people; this will never leave one’s mind. No one – near or far, minor or major, politician or intellectual, reader or writer – can remain unaffected by it. Just like now, when the crimes committed by Jews in Gaza come to light...

There were some Sunni torturers in the prison. They tortured us even more harshly than the Nusayri torturers. Why? So that they would not appear to be showing us any mercy. One day, they brought in a prisoner who had been severely tortured. It turned out that his cousin was also a soldier there. The cell door was old, and through a hole in it, he happened to see his cousin. In shock, he said, “Young men, that’s my uncle’s son.” When his cousin saw him, he tortured him even more brutally – so that no one would think he was favoring his own relative.

Why did they act that way? Because the officers, fearing that they might appear sympathetic or emotionally connected to the prisoner, would inflict extreme torture on him. They did this to avoid giving any impression that they felt empathy toward the detainees. In this way, the officers tried to conceal any sign that they might show compassion or treat someone related to them differently – so they subjected that person to the harshest torture imaginable.

In the first stage, when we entered Tadmor Prison in 1980, the traces of the infamous massacre were still visible. I was placed in Ward No. 32. It was a long ward – about 20 meters in length and around 5 meters wide. There were about 173 to 175 of us crammed inside. Some of the young ones were there because we were all minors – I was 15 years old at the time. They placed us at the very back of the prison, where there were remnants of shrapnel, traces of bombs, fragments of human bodies, and clumps of hair. I have always liked to help with small tasks, to serve others, especially the younger ones. When we went inside, we cleaned up. There were two toilets, and the sewage areas were utterly inhumane. We gathered all the filth and waste and threw it away.

Rifaat al-Assad came. Around 900 to 1,000 people – I don’t know the exact number – were packed into the cells, and they opened fire on them with machine guns. From above, they also threw hand grenades. About two hours after the gunfire and explosions stopped, Rifaat al-Assad and five or six of his guards went around the wards, checking: “Is anyone left? Is anyone still breathing?” If they found anyone alive, they killed them with a pistol. Most of those people’s only “crime” was being “Islamists” – meaning they prayed or were religious. After that tyrant (Assad) fell, we, all of us Islamists, began thinking about founding an

association to restore the rights that have been denied since 1980. The people have suffered an immense tragedy, but how much can we really do? Together with the brothers who were imprisoned during the same period, we are trying to form an association or a support organization. Most of them are now over 60 years old – many are sick or disabled. For example, my eldest child is 17, and my family depends on me. I'm 60 years old – what can I do? I'm doing the best I can. Allah has blessed me, and I am grateful, but the situation of others is dire; they survive only through aid.

The traces of the massacre were still there – we entered in 1980, about four or five months after it had taken place. Later, we were moved to Ward No. 26. Ward 26 was somewhat better – slightly larger, with fewer prisoners. The transfers to Tadmor never stopped; they continued until the year 2000. According to statistics, between 40,000 and 50,000 people were sent to Tadmor Prison over those twenty years. Perhaps only 2,000 or 7,000 of them ever came out; the rest were executed – or died there. It's estimated that around 90% of those who entered Tadmor between 1980 and 2000 were buried there. Executions, in the early years – around 1980 to 1982 – took place four or five times a week. Every single day, and then sometimes they would pause for two or three days. The numbers were smaller at first because new groups were still arriving at Tadmor. When I entered, there were only about 500 to 600 people there. Then, with the new transfers, a group would arrive every Friday, and another every two weeks. At the same time, the courts were active. And what did these courts do? Immediate executions – death sentences. For example, some would stay for two or three months, and then be executed. In my group, there were 43 of us. Thirty-six of them were executed.

During the periods known as 2/83, 3/83, and 2/88 – what were called the Hama events – perhaps you have heard of them. At that time, the 117th and 121st units entered and destroyed the neighborhoods of Hama, just as his son later did. The number of deaths during this period ranged between 35,000 and 40,000. People in Hama were killed; their homes collapsed over them. New groups of detainees from Hama were brought to us. We felt a little relief for a while, but February 1982 was an extremely difficult period for prisoners. There were torture, humiliation, executions, and death. In January 1982, we heard an order from the prison administration or military branches saying, “There will be deaths every day.” The command was that from the 32 wards, one person from each ward would be executed daily – meaning 32 people every day. This order was implemented during the time of the Hama events. One day, it was our ward's turn. Subhanallah, a person's life is truly in Allah's hands. In our ward, 13 or 14 prisoners died. Because we were minors, they were somewhat “merciful”; they did not torture us as severely. “You are young; stand aside,” they would say. That was a relative mercy – for example, if adults received 100 lashes, we would receive 20.

They brought a car tyre (dûlâb). First you place your head inside it, then you bend your legs and pass them through it so you're doubled over. They come and kick you. When you're

kicked you fall onto your back and your legs fly up. Then they bring the falaka (beating the soles of the feet with a stick). One person holds you from one side, another from the other side. To prevent your legs from moving, they tightly tie a rope and pass your feet through it – sometimes both feet together – and pull it very tight. This kind of whipping with a stick, the falaka, is more painful than a lash. Imagine a rope or an electric cable being pulled like that: the blood circulation in your legs is cut off, the flesh rots, the skin tears. The muscles of the legs tear from the extreme strain. At the same time, two or three people on the other side strike you at will with a whip or cable. These are the whippings, the dūlāb (torture performed by placing a tyre around the body) method, and the “basat al-rīḥ” method (binding hands and feet, laying the victim down and beating). “Basat al-rīḥ” was used in the security branch. In the “basat al-rīḥ” method they lay a person on a board in a cross position, then flip them over; your head is up, your feet are up, your head down. You are tied by the hands and the feet, and then the torture begins. It can go as far as killing you. This happened at the branch. Thank Allah, I was not subjected to “basat al-rīḥ.”

There is also something called the “kursi”, meaning the torture chair. It is a large, iron chair. They place your legs behind you and tie them there. Then they lift the chair upward and bend your back downward. They push your spine until it cracks. Your chest and back are tied together – they break your bones. They twist you like a gymnast, like a toy... They keep forcing your back until it snaps with a “crack.” Then they raise your legs and beat you with a cable or a whip. These were the torture methods used in the interrogation branches. Praise be to Allah, I was not subjected to the “basat al-rīḥ” or the chair; I was only whipped using the “dulab” method.

Among the other torture methods, there was also something called “hizq” (the stake). You could call it a Nazi-style torture method – similar to what the Jews suffered during the Inquisition. May Allah curse them... They would impale a person on a stake until it pierced through the top of the body, killing them there. In our case, however, death did not come immediately. They would bring a glass bottle – for example, a gasoline or wine bottle – break off its neck, place it in front of you, then force you to sit on it. The inside of the bottle was filled with glass shards. As they pushed you down onto it, your flesh would tear, and blood would gush out. This bottle method was also practiced in the interrogation branch. There was a brother I knew from Tartus; perhaps he was martyred. When I left Hennano three months later, I left him there – he was in the third room. He had been placed in complete isolation. Every Thursday, when the guards got drunk, they would take him out, rape him, and commit every kind of vile act imaginable. Then they would bring him back crying. The poor man was utterly devastated. Even now, when I remember this – despite having been out for twenty years – I am still forced to confront my entire life, because the memory, the brain, records everything. Think about it: twenty-five years away from your family... Say you began life at twenty, and you spent at most five years with your family – what remains after that? We were together there twenty-four hours a day. The brain records continuously

for twenty-four hours. I am certain that there is a section in the brain for memory, and that section still holds everything. I still see the prison in my dreams, and so on.

About nine years later, I was transferred from Tadmor to Sednaya. Sednaya was somewhat more bearable, praise be to Allah. Yet still, your mind remains with your brothers, friends, and loved ones who are still being tortured in Tadmor. Yes, things got a little easier – there were no more beatings, no more of this or that. Sixteen and a half years here, eight and a half there... A total of twenty-five years.

During the period when we were sent there, Sednaya was somewhat better. Before the revolution and before DAESH, Sednaya was a relatively “comfortable” prison, or rather, the treatment there was somewhat better. There was no torture, and the food was decent. If you had money, you could manage and live with dignity. Of course, at the end of the day, it was still a prison – you were not free in Sednaya either; the essence of it was that your freedom had been taken away.

In 2002, the prison director arrived – his name was Lukeya al-Yusuf. It seemed as though he had been assigned this position directly by the administration or intelligence services. Between 1993 and 1998, security officers would come and speak with us. For example, Hasan Khalil, Hasan Nishan Mukhtar, and a criminal named Yusuf, as well as Mustafa al-Tajir from the Aleppo region – all of them came to conduct interviews with us. The purpose of these meetings was to decide who would be released. They would say things like, “Your situation doesn’t look good. Haven’t you died yet? You’re probably going to die in prison. We should have released you a long time ago.” These were entirely personal conversations. They were high-ranking security officers. Hasan Khalil, for instance, was the head of military intelligence at that time and also the head of the Syrian delegation negotiating with Israel. In 1993, the same Hasan Khalil who negotiated with Israel would come the next day to ‘negotiate’ with us. But we were neither Israelis nor Jews – why would they be negotiating with us? They would ask questions like, “What work do you do? What are your activities? What do you think? Have you confessed to your crimes? What do you think about the situation in Syria? What is the solution?” What could we say? How could we answer? It was all for show, completely meaningless. People only wanted to get out, to be freed. In the end, they would just say, “Your case isn’t finished yet. I’ll review it next year.” And that was how it went – endlessly.

Interviewer: *How were you released from prison?*

M.A.: Of course, by the grace of Allah. Then other developments took place that concerned everyone still in prison – they already knew the overall situation. In July 2004, they called us and said we would be released. There were 150 of us in total. Out of that group, 50 were sent back, and 50 were actually released. Among the 150, there were about 6 or 7 old detainees like me. They separated us from the others and prepared us for television interviews.

Bouthaina Shaaban would come, along with Major General Hasan – I think his name was Hasan Khalouf, I don't remember exactly. They would come and conduct interviews with us. They filmed these to send to senior state officials. They told us to speak and say things like, "By the permission and pardon of the President," or "We are remorseful." But after 24 years, what kind of remorse can one show? I spoke, but my heart wasn't at ease. Then they began asking questions again. Bouthaina Shaaban was not satisfied and said, "Take him back again." So they kept me again from August until December. After that, they brought me once more before the President.

At that time, there were negotiations between the European Union's troika delegation and the Syrian government. Our names were also on the lists of international institutions – what you might call Tribunals – because it was known that we were unjustly imprisoned. Hafez al-Assad would pressure the Europeans or this troika, saying, "These people are dangerous. If we release them, they'll stir up trouble." He would tell them, "You leave them to me, and we'll pay you the required compensation. Let them stay here with us." Every year, an amnesty would be announced, but 6 or 7 of us would remain inside. They refused to release us, claiming, "These ones are serious criminals." Europe and the United States were also funnelling money to Hafez al-Assad, creating the appearance that, supposedly, "These men really are criminals – let them stay imprisoned."

Then, in 2004, pressure began to mount – people were saying, "It's been too long; these are old cases now." By that point, even the newest detainee among us had already spent 25 years in prison, and some had been held for over 24 years. One of our friends was martyred, another is still imprisoned, and there are those who have been detained for 14 or 15 years. Eventually, the Presidency learned about our situation and we were released. Honestly, they did it reluctantly – they were forced to let us go. But by the grace of Allah, we were finally freed. Alhamdulillah.

The suffering and hardships we went through were immense. In fact, the entire Syrian people are living inside one great prison – a vast prison without walls. Yes, people eat, drink, go outside, and can see their relatives. But at any moment, they might be stopped at a checkpoint and thrown into prison. Then, to find out where their loved one is, their family may have to pay thousands of dollars. And even if they manage to learn the location, they will still have to pay another price just to be allowed to visit.

Interviewer: *Thank you. May Allah reward you with goodness.*

Record No: 10

Date: January 21, 2025

Place: Association of Detainees and the Missing in Sednaya Prison (ADMSP)

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: A.H.A., 46 years old, Syrian.

Questions:

Interviewer: *What is your occupation?*

A.H.A.: My profession is primary school teaching.

Interviewer: *In which city were you working?*

A.H.A.: In Aleppo.

Interviewer: *Were you previously arrested in Aleppo?*

A.H.A.: Yes, I was arrested in Aleppo.

Interviewer: *When was that?*

A.H.A.: On May 12, 2014.

Interviewer: *What was the reason for your arrest?*

A.H.A.: I don't know. I realized that someone had filed a report about me, but during the interrogation they never told me the exact reason. From the questions they asked, I concluded that it might have been the school janitor – the one we knew had ties to military intelligence – who informed on me.

Interviewer: *Who arrested you – the police or military intelligence?*

A.H.A.: Military intelligence. That day, I was returning to my village from Aleppo. I boarded a bus at the terminal, and there was a checkpoint nearby. They collected everyone's IDs, and while handing them back, they asked, "Who is A.H.A.?" I said, "That's me." They told me, "Get off!" then put me in a vehicle waiting behind and took me to the branch – the Military Intelligence Branch. The officer in charge was Virdan Mahfuz, also known as Abu Nabi.

For four days, no one said a single word to me. The moment you step into that branch, it's like falling from heaven into hell. After four days, the interrogation began. Through his

questions, the interrogator hinted that the person who had written the report about me was the janitor working at the school. I still don't know exactly what was written in that report, but the questions were all related to the school. We already knew that man was an informant for military intelligence.

It was the early days of the revolution; the school was quiet, but we teachers would talk among ourselves in the staff room or in the courtyard – asking things like, “What’s happening in Daraa? Why are people dying in Homs?” The principal and his assistant were pro-regime, and the janitor carried a weapon – first a pistol, then a Kalashnikov with a double magazine. We never spoke in front of him. One day, he barged into the administrators’ office, slamming the door, and said, “Some teachers didn’t attend the rally held in support of Bashar.” While blood was being shed in Daraa and Homs, they tried to force us to join the demonstration. I told him, “Why are you accusing us? If your complaint is about the female teachers, go talk to them.” Most likely, that remark ended up in his report about me.

As soon as I was taken to the branch, the beating, insults, kicks, and slaps began. Even while being put into the vehicle, you are treated as less than human. I was not subjected to severe torture myself, but I witnessed with my own eyes the horror that others endured. As someone who knew nothing beyond teaching, I felt hell down to my very core.

When you reach the door, the guard grabs you by the arm and hurls insults, shouting: “Who’s this? Where did you bring him from?” If you try to say a single word, you get punched. You want to say, “I haven’t committed any crime – I just expressed my opinion.” but they silence you. My “crime” was nothing more than not liking the regime and whispering to one or two colleagues in the teachers’ lounge, “People are being massacred in Daraa; Assad is cleansing the population.” In their eyes, the words of the person who wrote the report are like divine revelation. They don’t listen to your testimony. After they arrest you, they open a separate security investigation about your village, your family, even your home.

The filth in the cell was up to your knees. In a ward packed with hundreds of people, the space allotted to you was roughly the size of 1.5 floor tiles – you could only fit if you curled your elbows in and tucked your head. There was a sleeping arrangement called “seyf”: You had to lie on your side and compress your body like a blade – one person would press their feet against your face, another would press their back to the wall, and whenever space opened up the newcomers would be shoved and squeezed in. You were allowed to go to the toilet once a day. After you knocked on the door, you had exactly 1 minute; if you were 10 seconds late, you would be beaten three times as hard.

In all that chaos, I didn’t speak to anyone – I was too afraid, so I just listened. Many times I found myself thinking, “I wish I were dead.” Once, a tiny leaf drifted in through the ventilation

grate. I thought, “So there are still trees and flowers up there on the surface, while I’m a creature rotting underground.” At that moment, I felt as though my entire life had been stolen from me. But violence does not kill those whose time has not yet come – and I survived.

My family had no idea where I had been taken, and it wasn’t easy for them to find out. By coincidence, a man from my village who worked with the Shabiha saw me being taken from the terminal and sent word to my brother, saying, “Ali was taken by military intelligence – the one in charge is someone named Virdan Mahfuz.” My brother worked at the civil registry office. He collected money to try to save me, but he couldn’t go directly to the branch – if he had entered, he would have been locked up beside me. They didn’t dare contact a lawyer either, because even if you were a lawyer, there was a fifty percent chance you’d end up in prison yourself. They tried using acquaintances with military rank, hosted dinners, and paid large sums to intermediaries, but all of them turned out to be frauds – they took the money and disappeared.

In the end – and I was surprised myself – thirteen days later I was transferred from the military intelligence branch to the court. The military prosecutor, as a mere formality, sent the file to a civilian judge, and the judge ordered my release without asking a single question. Mine could be considered a short experience. I saw so many people there wasting away for months and years. Still, I can never forget the humiliation, the oppression, and that cramped space of “one and a half tiles.”

The judge knows you are innocent; without asking a single question, he says, “Release him” – that is, if they actually let him go. But if you are transferred to Damascus, as they say, “Goodbye.” Unless an official release order is issued, you cannot take a single step outside. Usually, every day, a transport convoy called “cenzir” arrives – it takes detainees from Aleppo and transfers them elsewhere. Cenzir is not a release; it’s their own method of moving prisoners from Aleppo amid the war. In 2014, the country was in pieces. Some said that members of the resistance disguised themselves as the wounded and were transported to Damascus by ambulance – we heard such rumors. Most of those taken from Aleppo were first sent to Homs, held there for three or four months, and then transferred to the Counter-Terrorism Court. From that point on, as the lawyers used to say, it was “farewell.” The lawyer-broker promised to keep my case in Aleppo. For that alone, he demanded six hundred thousand Syrian pounds – around ten thousand dollars at the time – even though that was less than what others were asked to pay. In the end, we lost about one hundred fifty thousand lira, nearly three thousand dollars, and got absolutely nothing in return.

Interviewer: *Was there anyone else in your family who was detained?*

A.H.A.: During the security investigation, they said, “This is an educated family; they have no activity against Assad.” so they left us alone. But among my extended relatives, there are missing persons – one cousin and one uncle’s son have been missing for a long time. We also tried to save them through the same unofficial means. The broker claimed he would secure my cousin’s release and took one million Syrian pounds –about twenty to twenty-seven thousand dollars at that time. In the end, my cousin came out of the Air Intelligence Branch dead. We couldn’t get the money back; the broker said, “I got him out – but it was a corpse.” and kept the money.

Interviewer: *When did you come to Türkiye?*

A.H.A.: I crossed into Türkiye in the tenth month of 2015.

Interviewer: *Did you personally witness the use of chemical weapons?*

A.H.A.: I witnessed the chemical attack on Khan al-Assal, which is about ten kilometers from my village. We were not directly affected, but people coming from there said it was the regime that struck. Even though the regime blamed the opposition, everyone knew it was Assad’s doing.

Thank you very much. May Allah bless you. Hopefully, we will see better days for our people.



Record No: 11

Date: February 5, 2025

Place: Informal refugee camp in Azaz, Syria

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarik ÜNALDI - Assistant Expert

Interviewee: H.I.A.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Hello, welcome. Where are you from?*

H.I.A.: I'm from the countryside of Maaret al-Numan, the village of Ma'saran.

Interviewer: *Were you also subjected to forced displacement (forced migration)?*

H.I.A.: Yes, we were subjected to displacement.

Interviewer: *How did it happen? Could you tell me your story?*

H.I.A.: The displacement began roughly five or six years ago. The regime was bombing us with warplanes and rocket launchers, and it also used chemical weapons. They forced us to leave our homes. Our houses were destroyed, bombed from the air. Anyone who fell into the regime's hands was subjected to severe torture. For example, my nephew – he was a university student – was arrested and sentenced to twelve years in prison. Twelve years! In the end, he was tortured, crushed – they did everything to him. We haven't heard from him since. So we asked ourselves, where could we go? We decided to head north. First, we went to the countryside of Aleppo and stayed there for about ten days, but then they started bombing that area too, with planes and rockets. Because of that, we withdrew even farther north, toward northern Syria. We took our families with us – we wanted to protect our children.

Interviewer: *When exactly did this happen?*

H.I.A.: It was around 2018.

Interviewer: *Did you witness use of chemical weapons?*

H.I.A.: Yes, near Khan Shaykhun, the regime carried out a chemical attack. People were terrified – we saw the gas spreading and people collapsing, unable to breathe. Even when the bombs were dropped from a distance, the chemical effect reached the surrounding areas. We had no masks or medicine, nothing to protect ourselves. Many died instantly, while others died later because there were no hospitals or doctors nearby. It was horrifying.

Interviewer: *Were you personally exposed to the chemical weapon?*

H.I.A.: Yes, it happened in an area close to us. It was said that they used chlorine. They also used what they call “cluster bombs”, which explode in the air and spread over the entire area. For example, if a small child finds one and picks it up, it explodes instantly. That's why we were forced to leave our homeland.

Interviewer: *Were you attacked during the displacement – for example, while on the road?*

H.I.A.: Yes, there were machine guns firing on the main road. They were dropping things like barrel bombs and targeting cars. We hid under trees or tried to escape while under fire.

Interviewer: *When did you arrive in Azaz?*

H.I.A.: I came to Azaz about four or five years ago.

Interviewer: *To this camp?*

H.I.A.: I came to the camp three or four years ago.

Interviewer: *How are the living conditions here?*

H.I.A.: It's very difficult. For a short while, we received some aid, but then it stopped completely. Now they've cut off our aid just because there was a revolution in Syria. Our homes, our villages – everything has been destroyed. We can't go back. We need schools, hospitals, and water. There's no life left there. And here, the aid has ended – we don't even have money for bread. People here are suffering greatly because there's nothing – no bulgur, no lentils, nothing at all.

Interviewer: *Is your family here with you as well?*

H.I.A.: Yes, my family and children are here with me.

Interviewer: *Do you have children?*

H.I.A.: Yes, I have three children, all under the age of 13. We send them to school here in Azaz, but we have to pay for transportation every day. Sometimes we have to borrow money to cover it. There's no work here, no income – even when you find a job, you can barely earn enough for bread. If there were any opportunities back home, we would return, but our houses are destroyed. If we went back, there would be no schools, no hospitals – no services at all.

Interviewer: *After the region was liberated, did you see your hometown again?*

H.I.A.: Yes, I saw it. All our houses were completely destroyed – my own home as well. The village of Ma'saran was utterly devastated by airstrikes, tank fire, and missiles. That's why we took refuge in the north.

Interviewer: *Has anyone in your family been martyred?*

H.I.A.: No, none, but many people in that area were martyred – there were even foreigners among them. Thankfully, no one from my family was martyred.

Interviewer: *Thank you. May Allah bless you and protect you.*

H.I.A.: May Allah bless you. Thank you very much.

Record No: 12

Date: February 5, 2025

Place: Informal refugee camp in Azaz, Syria

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: M.A.C.

Questions:

Interviewer: *You experienced forced displacement in Syria. How did this displacement happen?*

M.A.C.: Honestly, sir, we were displaced about four or five times. We were living in Aleppo. In 2013, a Scud missile hit my house and completely destroyed it. We were forced to go back to our village. The village is about twenty kilometres east of Aleppo – they call it Suran Halab. We stayed there for a while. I used to work as a truck driver, doing international trips back and forth, but that work disappeared; things became chaotic. We also had livestock – cattle and sheep – but nothing was left. Then DAESH came, and we had to flee again. That’s when we came to Azaz.

Before coming to Azaz, we returned to Aleppo for a while and stayed in a relative’s house. After spending some time there, we had to leave again during the period of mass displacement from Aleppo – they were dropping 200 barrel bombs every single day. This was in 2016. The cruel regime that dropped those bombs kept saying, “I won’t stop until everything is levelled to the ground.” In the end, Aleppo was taken, and people were loaded onto the so-called “green buses” and sent to the northern countryside. That’s when we came to Azaz and settled here.

Interviewer: *So you suffered greatly because of both DAESH and the regime, is that correct?*

M.A.C.: Yes. DAESH took our livestock and belongings – we were left with nothing. The regime seized our refrigerated truck (the trailer) and it disappeared. Our house in the village was destroyed, and our house in Aleppo was destroyed as well. In the end, we were left with absolutely nothing.

Interviewer: *So, everything you owned, everything you lived on, was lost?*

M.A.C.: Yes, everything is gone. Now we rely only on Allah’s mercy. For example, I still have land in the village, but the house there is destroyed – the house in Aleppo too. I had two homes, and both are in ruins, reduced to rubble. The truck, the animals – all gone. The regime’s “4th Division” took the truck. They even ripped out and stole the iron frames from

the doors and windows of the house. They left nothing behind. So, we came to Azaz and started from zero. Thank Allah, we are still alive.

Interviewer: *Has anyone in your family been martyred?*

M.A.C.: Yes, my wife was martyred. May Allah have mercy on her.

Interviewer: *Were you attacked during the forced displacement?*

M.A.C.: Yes, the biggest attack we experienced was in Aleppo. The regime was dropping 200 barrel bombs every day. They used every kind of weapon – Scud missiles, vacuum bombs, cluster bombs... There was no weapon they didn't use in Aleppo.

Interviewer: *Were these attacks planned, or were they random?*

M.A.C.: Completely random. They were carrying out a “scorched earth” policy – they wanted to burn and destroy everything. Their goal was to take Aleppo by any means; they didn't care if people died. In the end, they packed everyone into the green buses and drove them north. Many people I knew at that time were taken to Sednaya or other places while leaving Aleppo – I never heard from them again.

Interviewer: *If you wanted to return to your hometown now, is there a house left to stay in?*

M.A.C.: Both houses are completely destroyed, reduced to rubble. My house in Aleppo was demolished in 2013 by the first Scud missile. The house in my village is also in ruins – I can't return to either of them. My livestock and my truck are gone; I have no source of livelihood left. The regime's soldiers stole the truck, and everything we owned was lost. There's nothing left to go back to.

Interviewer: *Why did you choose to come specifically to Azaz?*

M.A.C.: This area, the northern countryside, was safer compared to other regions. There was heavy bombing around Idlib – in Maaret al-Numan, Saraqib – constant attacks. In some areas, DAESH was also present. Azaz was relatively safer. Still, there was the threat of the YPG here; sometimes they launched rockets, sometimes the regime attacked. But we arrived around the end of 2017 or the beginning of 2018. After the Afrin Operation (Olive Branch), the situation here changed somewhat.

Interviewer: *Is there anything you would like to add?*

M.A.C.: Honestly, sir, living conditions are extremely difficult. Among the refugees who came here, there are widows, young women, and wives of martyrs who later remarried. For example, I have three wives – all of them are either widows of martyrs or wives of detainees.

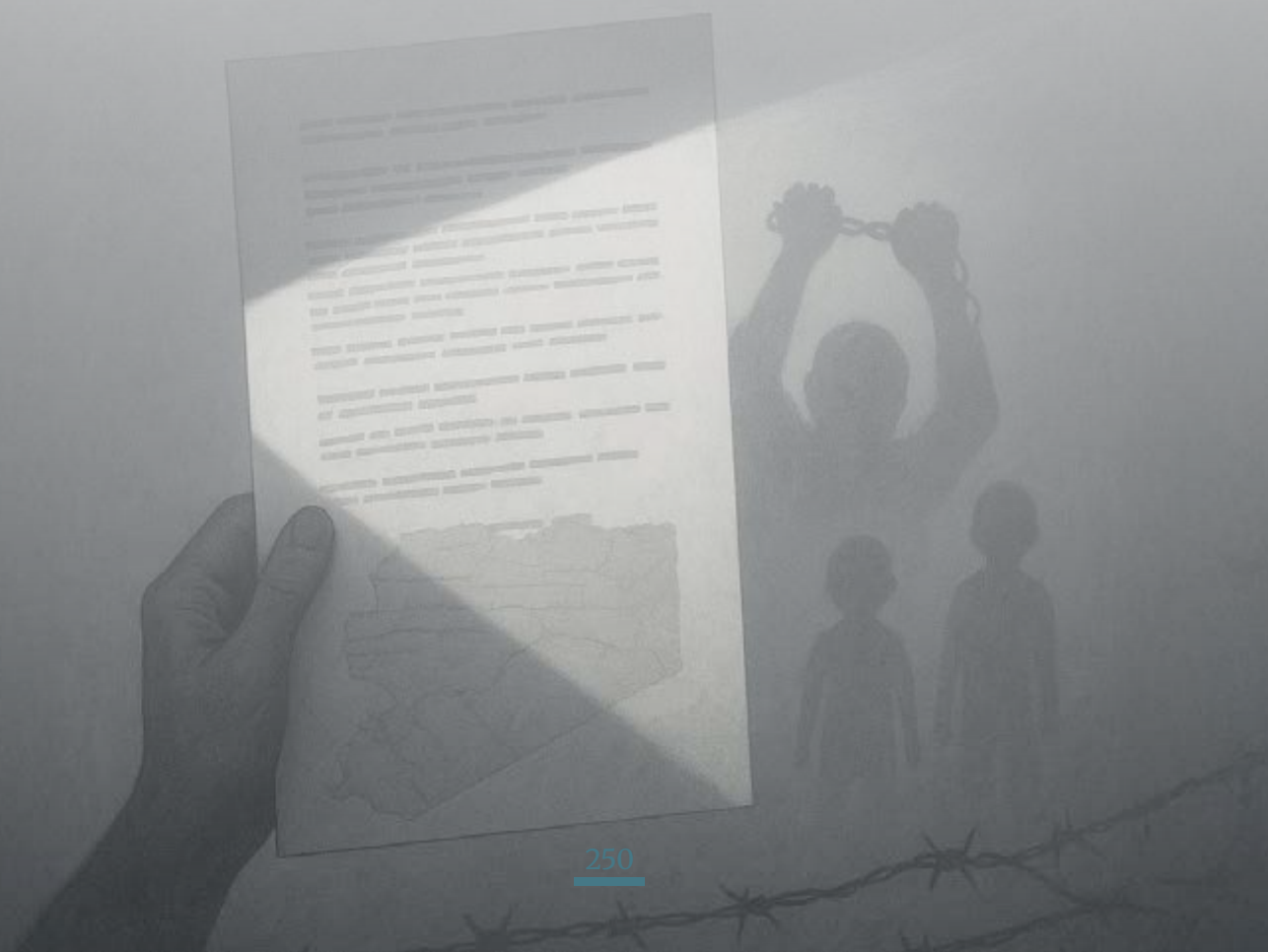
I have a total of twelve children. Our financial situation is very limited, and the children have almost no access to education. In the past two months, prices have risen even more – bread is more expensive, water is more expensive. There used to be some organizations that offered aid, but even those have stopped now.

The aid here has almost completely stopped coming. The situation has gotten much worse. If someone falls ill, there are hardly any doctors or hospitals that provide free treatment. Life is expensive, and making a living is extremely difficult. Many people can't even use a heater or a stove in their homes – imagine, that's the simplest example. There's no stove or gas, no food or bread... Living conditions are terrible, and prices are extremely high.

Thank you, sir. You may use the information I've provided in your report and, Allah willing, as evidence in the courts. I hope you can present the situation exactly as it is. Our homes have been destroyed – even if we wanted to return, there's nothing left to go back to. If any way can be found, and if you could also help us, we would be grateful.

Interviewer: *Yes, Allah willing, when deliverance comes and things begin to improve, the day will come when you too can return safely. We hope that everyone will be able to go back to their homeland, their families, and their work, and that Allah will lift the hardship from the entire ummah. Hopefully, Syria will be rebuilt and see beautiful days once again. Thank you, sir.*

M.A.C.: You're welcome, sir.



Record No: 13

Date: February 5, 2025

Place: Informal refugee camp in Azaz, Syria

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarik ÜNALDI - Assistant Expert

Interviewee: A.A.A.

Questions:

A.A.A.: My name is A.A.A. I'm from Idlib province, from the village of Ma'saran, in the Maaret al-Numan region.

Interviewer: *How did the displacement happen? I mean, why did you leave your region? When and how did you come here?*

A.A.A.: The Assad regime - with the support of the Russians, Iranians, and other similar brutal groups-attacked us with its weaponry. They used every kind of weapon: aircraft, artillery fire, and missiles launched from the sea. They applied a scorched-earth policy. There was nowhere left to remain in our villages.

We fled with our families wearing only the clothes on our backs and sought refuge here, in northern Syria, hoping to find some measure of safety for ourselves, our families, and our honor. We left behind our property, our livelihoods - all we asked for was the safety of our children and relatives. The regime used every systematic method of repression against us. Even while we were here, the bombardment did not stop: planes, missiles, tanks, and artillery continued to strike without pause. Our homeland is now completely destroyed. Our villages and houses have been flattened; there is not a decent house left standing. They even cut down the trees - after we left, they uprooted them. Their aim was to render the area uninhabitable, to strip it of humanity and turn it into wasteland. Their generals and soldiers even said, "We will plough the land, bury you in it, and plant something else in its place." And they did, they literally ploughed those lands.

Interviewer: *What was your life like before the war started?*

A.A.A.: Before the war, we were living in our homeland; everyone was busy with their own work. My profession was farming. I had a combine harvester - I used it for harvesting, and I worked in agriculture. I had farming equipment; I knew that work well. We were living comfortably and happily, and I had no dealings with the government. Of course, there was long-standing oppression - Bashar al-Assad's regime had always been cruel. We couldn't get close to his inner circle, but still, we were living in our own land, minding our own business. Everyone was happy with their work, no one was bothering anyone. When things broke

out, I even left my harvest behind and fled—my children and I barely escaped with our lives. I left my farming equipment, my combine harvester, all of it behind.

Interviewer: *Do you remember that day—the moment you left your homeland? What was it like?*

A.A.A.: I can honestly say that death would have been easier. You would have seen people's condition along the road: a massive congestion on the highway, everyone spilling out onto the roads with their children. Those without cars clung to the vehicles of others or tried to walk. It was a horrific sight. Even though cameras recorded events, they could not capture the full horror—it was far worse than could be shown. It was truly equivalent to death. People set out into the unknown wearing only the clothes on their backs. It was winter; the weather was bitterly cold and the snow covered everything. The displacement took several days before we reached the north. Thankfully, charitable people received us and hosted us for a few days, which allowed us to recover. It was an experience close to death. This happened in 2018. We left the area in 2018. Others had left earlier, but our area was also hosting people who had come from different places. People from the city and countryside of Hama, from Homs, and from Damascus were sheltering in our village. When the army launched its final offensive, it advanced toward Aleppo, up to the eastern side of the highway. Everyone there—including those we had been hosting—fled. About 3 million people headed north.

Interviewer: *Was this a single-stage event?*

A.A.A.: It happened in multiple stages. First, we fled towards the western countryside of Aleppo, thinking it would be safer there. But the attacks continued along the entire line. We said, “We have no other choice, let's head to the Türkiye border. Maybe they won't be able to reach that far.” So we came here— and thanks to Allah, we found safety at the border. We are truly grateful to the Türkiye state and the Türkiye people. They supported us immensely and extended their hands to us in brotherhood. We thank them deeply.

After that, when the revolution succeeded, of course the tyrant Bashar al-Assad was toppled, with the support of honorable people in the world like Mr. Erdoğan. May Allah prolong his life—he truly became a support for the Syrian people.

Interviewer: *After gaining freedom, do you plan to return to your region?*

A.A.A.: Yes, we want to return, but how can we go there before proper living conditions are established? Can anyone live alone in the desert? There's no hospital, no school, no infrastructure, no houses. There is no life there. If you go, you'll be left all alone in the middle of nowhere. That's why we will stay here, pray to Allah for relief, and wait. If at least some infrastructure, a bakery, a school, a hospital, or a health center were rebuilt in our region—if we could reconstruct our homes—then we would return. For example, we might even borrow money to rebuild our house.

If I had the money here, I would buy concrete blocks and build my own house. But for now, we are here, living in tents, waiting for relief and deliverance. May Allah grant ease to all of us and to all Muslims. Amen.

Interviewer: *How many children do you have?*

A.A.A.: I have three children with me. Additionally, two others are a bit older and past childhood age. I have three children under the age of thirteen. We enrolled them in schools in Azaz. Every day, we hire transportation to take them back and forth, and we pay the fees ourselves.

Interviewer: *Isn't there a school here? Do you take them to Azaz?*

A.A.A.: Yes, we rent a car for them to go to school. They take them in the morning and bring them back in the evening.

Interviewer: *During this displacement, is there any event that stayed in your mind? For example, a very painful situation or an accident...*

A.A.A.: Yes. During the displacement, a vehicle in front of us had an accident. But with planes flying overhead, we didn't dare stop and help. We kept going, just trying to reach the north. As we approached Sarmin or Dana, many people lost their lives on the road. Some didn't die at home but in traffic accidents along the way. There were so many stories like that. When we arrived here, there wasn't a single house left to take shelter in. The area was already overcrowded – people from Aleppo and its surroundings had already fled here. We were part of the last wave of displacement, coming from the southern Idlib region. All the existing houses were full. People were sleeping outdoors, and it was winter. I saw families sleeping inside their cars.

After about ten days of effort, Allah brought someone good into my path and gave me a half-finished house. It had no door or windows, but we covered it with plastic and started living there. That was still a good solution. Some people couldn't even find that. When I went out early in the morning, I would see people spending the night inside their cars in the cold. Then, at sunrise, they would start looking for a place – a tent or a house. People suffered greatly during the migration; only Allah truly knows. When this victory came, it really came with Allah's help. The people here showed such patience that no one had seen or experienced anything like it. We endured, for better or worse, and were patient. Then Allah granted relief, praise be to Him. Now we wait. Hopefully, our homeland will revive, and everyone will return to their lands and homes safely.

Thank you all very much. May Allah help us; praise be to our Lord. Thank you so much, sir, may Allah bless you.

Record No: 14

Date: February 6, 2025

Location: Aleppo Bar Association

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Specialist

Interviewee: H.M., 38 years old, from the city of Azaz.

Questions:

Interviewer: *Were you detained or arrested in Syria?*

H.M.: I was in Lebanon for work, and on my way back to Syria, I was stopped at a military intelligence checkpoint in the Khan Shaykhun area. They took my ID, saying they needed to check it in the system. I handed it over, and they searched to see if I was wanted or if I had evaded military service. I had been traveling back and forth before, and there had never been any issue. However, they discovered that one of my childhood friends – someone I had spoken with on the phone – had joined the Free Syrian Army. They accused me of leaking information to them and arrested me on charges of “treason against the state.” In reality, our conversations were nothing more than ordinary chats – I would just ask things like, “How are your wife and children?” But they treated it as a major act of betrayal.

They took me to the Military Intelligence Branch in Aleppo, known as Branch 290. For the first few days, no one called for me, and no one said a word.

Interviewer: *Did they tell you what you were accused of?*

H.M.: No, no one told me what my crime was. The people at the checkpoint told me, “Go to the branch, maybe it’s a witness, maybe a traffic accident or something else.” So a person goes without knowing. They took me there very respectfully. For the first three days no one even mentioned my name – no interrogation, nothing. Then they called me at night. They asked, “Are you such and such person?” I said, “Yes.” They asked, “Is this phone yours?” I said, “Yes.” “Look, here’s a conversation between you and this person. That person is a commander in the Free Syrian Army. Don’t you know him?” they said. I said, “I know him as a civilian.” I said I hadn’t seen him since the 2000s and hadn’t been in contact since then. “He works in Türkiye, I stayed in Syria,” I said. “We have a childhood friendship; I don’t know his profession, I don’t know what he does.” Of course, I deleted the number from my phone and so on... The interrogation started; they insulted me. “Are you a traitor to the homeland?” they said, cursing and humiliating me. I said, “Are you judging me based on these phone conversations? If you caught me at the front, would you execute me immediately?” they told me, “You deserve the harshest punishment.” I asked, “Why?” We had some back and forth. I said, “Tell me what I did; if I’m to be executed, execute me.” They said, “You are leaking information to them from here.” I replied, “If they have intelligence services and states behind them, are they reduced to relying on my information? And you call them terrorists

- what business would I have with them?" But my words were of no avail. I stayed there for about 45 days. We couldn't tell whether it was day or night...

Interviewer: *During these 45 days, were you brought before a court or able to meet with a lawyer? Was your family informed?*

H.M.: Then the "Rubaiyye" (a four-person security committee) would get involved. During those 45 days, I neither went to court nor met anyone. The arrest wasn't official. There were no lawyers. If anyone tried to ask where you were, they would include that person in the same accusation as you. So, it wasn't a formal detention. When the time was up, the branch would send a notice to other security units. The logic is the same in all security branches in Syria: for example, the branch in Aleppo writes a petition to their higher authority saying, "We have this person, here is the situation. What should we do? Send them to military court, release them, or transfer them to another branch?" Then a sealed envelope would come from above. Inside the envelope would be orders like "Try this person," "Send to military court," or "Release." It doesn't matter if you're a civilian - if your case is with the military branch, you will definitely be referred to military court. By chance, my file stayed there, and they took me to the military police in Aleppo. There is a "security room" there called "Room 1." It's reserved only for security detainees; other rooms hold regular prisoners who are allowed visits from family and receive food. But in Room 1, none of that is allowed. They put "terror" detainees there. I was surprised and asked, "Can't my family see me?" A few soldiers came, and I asked them, "If I pay, can I make a phone call?" I said, "Let me at least inform my family because I have money." They allowed me to make a call for a price. About an hour later, my wife, mother, and children went to the prosecutor's office. From the military prosecutor, they learned, "He is detained, here is his file." They were told, "No visits until the investigation is over." I found this out later. Meanwhile, I was worried they might harm my family or take my wife for interrogation since she is registered in Idlib, or take my mother. I waited anxiously for four or five days. Then through an acquaintance, they sent me news: "Your family is fine, we're trying to save you, hopefully it will be okay." That relieved me a little.

We stayed there for about a week, five to six days. One evening, they told us, "You will be transferred chained together to Damascus." We didn't know the reason. First, they took us to Homs; there was no judge or any official procedure involved.

Interviewer: *During the time you were held there, were you subjected to torture?*

H.M.: We were under heavy pressure at military intelligence. Later, when we were handed over to the military police, there were insults, curses, and beatings... Yes, they beat us there as well. But it wasn't the kind of beating meant to kill - it was meant to break you, to intimidate you. For example, they wouldn't hit your face or head. It was more "controlled", but they still used sticks and whatever else they could find to strike you.

When they handed us over, they treated us as if we were “entrusted” to them. Then we spent a night in Homs at the Military Police, in a prison called “Al Balouna.” The next day they took us to the military centre in Ka’boun and from there to Damascus. There, a team from Branch 235 (known as the Military Intelligence – Palestine Branch) arrived and said, “You are needed at 235.” We asked, “What does 235 mean?” By then we were hearing only numbers, not names. They said, “That’s the Palestine Branch.”

They took us by car to the Palestine Branch. Before reaching the building, they brought us into a huge courtyard. The Palestine Branch is a large place that looks like a nice hotel from the outside, but in reality, may Allah forbid anyone from ending up there. In the courtyard, they told us, “Listen, once you enter here, everything changes. Once inside, you disappear, no one can find you. If you get out, it’s like being born again.” At that moment, I tried to ask the soldiers who brought me, “Can I let my family know where I am?” They said, “Even if the commander knew where you are, he would stop you.” When they added, “Don’t worry, your family will find out,” I felt a little relieved.

They separated us there – those who had done military service and civilians. They blindfolded me and first threw me into a crowded room, then into another ward, and finally, the next day, into a single-person cell. They held us without any interrogation. From time to time they would say, “We will interrogate you.” In that interrogation room, in front of other people, they beat people with sticks and iron bars. Unlike in Aleppo, it felt here as if the intention was to kill, not to get information. They struck our heads, our vital organs, my genitals... The methods of torture varied. For the first, second, even third time they didn’t question me; they only showed me what they did to the others. Ten days passed like that. I kept thinking, “Maybe now it’s my turn.” Then on the fifteenth day they actually interrogated me. “Do you know the commander of that Free Army? What is your connection to him?” they asked. I said, “He used to be a friend from the neighborhood; I think he’s in Türkiye now.” I tried to make up a lie too, hoping I might get out that way. But during the questioning someone kicked me in the leg and said, “Liar!” He hit me so hard it started to bleed. I said, “Okay, I may do a lot of things, but a Muslim does not lie,” and that drove them mad – they all attacked at once. I spoke so naively, and because of that sentence they began to beat me from every direction with sticks and iron bars. There was no flesh left on my body; my nerves froze, and from the pain I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was in a solitary cell. It was so filthy that you wouldn’t believe it even if you imagined it. I don’t know whether I stayed there five, six, or seven days; you lose track of time. There is a small opening under the door where they pass the food through. Rats and insects run everywhere; they eat half of the food anyway, and then they become your companion... This is the truth, honestly. It’s a dark place – you can’t tell night from day. From outside you constantly hear shouting and sounds of torture; the noises never stop. At one point they took me for interrogation again. They rattled off, “Do you know so-and-so, so-and-so?” I knew some of the names, others I didn’t. I said, “If I don’t know these names, I

don't know them." They beat me again and sent me back to the cell. Later they asked, "What is your name?" I told them my name. "No - forget that from now on", they said, and gave me a number. "From now on your name is this..." they imposed a new identity on me. Then I went into interrogation again; they asked my name and I said H. "Are you an idiot, what did we tell you! Your name is 3400. This number is your name", they said. There, a person is nothing but a number - if you die, they erase the number and that's it. In the following days they would ask "Who are you?" "3400." "Okay, go back!" After a while you accept it and begin to forget your name, your past, your identity. The first three months passed like that, all full of torture. According to Syrian law a person cannot be held in security branches for more than 90 days. Within that period they must either be brought before a judge or released - no matter who you are, whether a terrorist or something else. But what they did was restart your detention every 90 days as if you had just been newly arrested; they would register you again and give you a new number. Then my new number became 3200. During that time they continuously tried to break down the relationship I had mentioned with my friend. In the end I said, "Even if this person is a terrorist, how could I have helped him? I'm a civilian; I work in clothing business, not a soldier. I don't know anything about the military."

They told me, "You provide information. Because you provide information, we will make you disappear." Every other sentence it was, "We will make you disappear." I saw how they remove people. Not by shooting directly or by execution, but in a different way here. They put you into a situation, "Go to the toilet!" they say. The floor is wet with water and other things, slippery. While you walk, they strike your head with a metal pipe. In the forensic report it's written that he died from the impact: "He hit his head in the bathroom and died." Do you see the logic? They don't shoot you so it won't be noticed that way. Sometimes a person dies from many blows. Then they put them in a room in the Palestine Branch they call the "salt room." There the corpse rots; a very strong smell comes out. I stayed there a long time and I understood how things work. The Palestine Branch has more than one wing. They move you from one wing to another; soldiers go in with you. There's a transfer every week. For example, today I'm in this cell and have been here four or five days, then they take me to another cell. That way you can't form friendships or recognize those around you. Maybe someone might get out and take news, so they set up this order. For example, they keep you there, observe you sitting and resting, then tomorrow put you somewhere else, seat you at a table. So you can't learn who a person really is. They tell you, "We insert others among you." For example, if a friend or your teacher comes and argues a single word with you, he will fear you and you will fear him. We cannot tell each other anything, cannot reveal secrets. Talking is forbidden. I make an intention inside myself; I stand for prayer with my eyes. I told someone, "I pray." He said, "Then they will make you disappear." So you will say, "I am Abu Jahl." You will say, "I don't believe." All my connections, all my circumstances were like this during those transfers. You see, they move you from that room to that room. There is a different kind of torture there. Each room or wing tortures with its own methods. For example, one room is entirely composed of armed types; they torture in

a certain way. Another room has soldiers and civilians. The Palestine Branch is not entirely for “terror” – there are prison regime officers there. For example, thieves are also held. It has become a fully centralized place. They put you in a room – maybe the “drama” there is lighter-but you still suffer torture with them. In my first year I stayed four to five months in solitary cells, I was transferred for two to three months, underwent four to five months of interrogation, and in the last year they forgot me. That was the hardest torture, because when you are interrogated you understand there is something going on: “Why are they interrogating?” But if no one calls you or asks about you, that is a greater torture. You keep wondering, “Why was I put here?”

Every day, they would take people’s fingerprints as if they were going to take them to court or somewhere else. We never knew whether they were being released or executed. All you do is sit and wait your turn. You keep thinking, “Will my turn come?” Until the very end, my turn never came. I became so depressed I couldn’t speak anymore. When I got a fever, it lasted for about a month. I’m still receiving treatment because my voice keeps fading in and out. I can’t speak properly; I explain things by writing. I’m afraid of everything. Even now, if a group from the government were to sit here with us, I would feel that same terror all over again. Only those who lived it can understand. If a police officer walks past me, or if I see someone holding a gun, I start trembling in fear – because they could shoot for the slightest reason. They beat us until we were about to die, but Allah didn’t take my life – it seems my time had not yet come. Many people died after only two or three days; the beatings were so severe that a person could die just from that. They would say to you, “We will make you disappear”, and they didn’t even hide it. For the sake of humanity – if someone was beaten to death or died in some other way – normally you would say, “Let’s help him.” But not there; they just said, “He’s dead”, and moved on.

When they put me in a crowded room, because of the crush I had to lean on someone. I didn’t know how many people there were – maybe more than fifty. You might get the space of only a single tile. Think about that tile on the floor – I have no idea how we slept. But you get used to it. For example, one person spreads his legs and the next person squeezes up against him. We lie side by side, back to back, with only one side of our bodies on the floor. If one person’s head is here, another’s feet are there. When it’s more crowded someone ends up on top of someone else – and that’s not even considered a problem.

Interviewer: *How was the air circulation? Didn’t this situation cause illnesses?*

H.M.: There were all kinds of illnesses. They keep you there to suffer and die. If Allah allows, you survive; it’s Allah’s will. They put you there to die. The most common illnesses were scabies, lice, malnutrition, and asthma... Those with asthma or difficulty breathing would die from the smell. For example, today in one room there is no water; our drinking water comes from the bathroom or toilet. I’m even ashamed to say this. On the first, second, and third days of being without water in the cell, on the fourth day, I drank my own urine. When a person is desperate, they do things like that.

Interviewer: *How was the food?*

H.M.: As for food, sometimes we were given one potato a day. For example, two people would share a single potato. At first, your stomach feels sick from hunger, but later you start starving to death. They gave maybe two or three small pieces of bread a day or half a potato. It was so little – just enough to keep you alive. They knew exactly how much food a person needs to barely survive. If one milliliter was enough to keep you alive, that’s what they gave you-never two. When I entered there, I weighed 90 kilos and was athletic. When I got out, I was down to 50 kilos – I lost 40 kilos.

Interviewer: *How many years did the torture last?*

H.M.: In my last year, I was no longer subjected to physical torture – only psychological torture. The first year, however, was entirely filled with torture in every detail. For me, it lasted that long; normally, others would confess to the accusations within 15 days or a month and then be taken to court or to Sednaya, I don’t know. But every person’s situation was different. Each one had a particular case. I don’t know why my situation was so severe. During this time, my family tried to reach intermediaries to find out where I was, but they had no idea where I had been taken.

In the Palestine Branch, the head of the branch couldn’t give orders to a soldier, nor could a soldier influence him. Our state was a state of corruption and bribery. Those intermediaries who could get things done with money were directly connected to the President (Assad) himself and took orders from no one else.

Even the prison guards were so brutal – think about it: for two years we never saw the face of the guard who brought us food. As soon as you heard his footsteps you had to immediately turn to the wall. For two years we didn’t know the face of the person who brought our food; we didn’t know him at all. It felt like I left there blindfolded. When they opened your blindfold, it meant you’re being “disposed of.” In other words, you don’t recognize the face of any of them.

Interviewer: *We have seen that the people we spoke with were subjected to various methods of torture, and that some of these methods are widely used. Were you also subjected to torture using these methods?*

H.M.: The methods of torture start gradually – rubber hoses, electric shocks... But there are other, more horrifying methods. For example, they tie your genitals and force you to drink a lot of water. Then they give you diuretic pills, which make you need to urinate. But since your genitals are tied, you can’t. That kind of torture is worse than the rubber hose, worse than electricity – worse than anything. They tie you in such a way that your arms and legs are pulled tight, your joints are locked. Your body fills with fluid, and naturally it reaches your kidneys, so you have to urinate. They force one or two liters of water down your throat. With the diuretics, you feel everything in your sides, your back – the pain becomes unbearable.

At that point, you'll agree to anything, you'll sign anything. I went insane from the pain. If they had told me, "You are Osama bin Laden", I would've said, "Yes, I am, and so is my wife." It didn't matter – I just wanted it to end. Death is easier than torture. I experienced that once. Just once they did it to me. I said, "I will give myself up for this to end. What do you want? I will sign it, I'll press my fingerprint. Bring it to me, I'll put my mark on it. Fine, whatever you want, write it down – I'll take the blame for anyone's crime left unclaimed." When they finally untied me, I immediately urinated and fell to my knees. They dragged me back inside. They know torture very well – they're experienced; they know exactly how to inflict pain. One of their methods is attaching electric wires to the testicles – that's one of the torture techniques. There are others too. When they beat you, your skin splits open – naturally it tears. Then it gets infected, and maggots start to grow. The worms crawl inside your body. Normally, we say that worms consume a person after death, in the grave – but there, they eat you while you're still alive. You say, "Brother, please, take us to the doctor." There is a doctor, but not for us. I saw him. The doctor would come, give a sick prisoner a few yellow pills, and that was it.

Interviewer: *How did you regain your freedom? How did you find out that Assad had fallen?*

H.M.: No one spoke about what was happening. Until the last two hours, before we regained our freedom, the people who used to bring food didn't come. When the food didn't arrive, we sensed that something was happening. We began to hear some noises from the doors and taps. Strange sounds were coming from the water pipes. The water pipes were our way of communicating with other rooms. We heard that Aleppo had fallen. We did not expect the Free Syrian Army or Hay'at Tahrir al Sham to take Aleppo. We wondered whether the PYD had taken it. "Only Allah knows", we said. We hoped maybe an amnesty would be declared and they would release us. Not because we expected to be freed – amnesties had been issued before, but they didn't include people like us. Amnesty was only for their own people. They released thieves, robbers – even those who stole metal – but they didn't free detainees or people like us. Four or five days after we heard them saying, "Aleppo has fallen", all of a sudden, we began to hear gunfire inside the branch – the sound of heavy clashes. We understood that it was over, that all of Syria had fallen. For a prisoner, this is a very difficult moment, but Allah inspired us – we said, "It has fallen." When fighting broke out inside the security area where the Palestine Branch was located, we realized something major had happened. We waited. We heard gunfire, and then they opened the doors and said, "Get out." The ones who opened our door also came in blindfolded. When we saw them, we thought they were taking us for execution. At the same time, we heard people running. People began to go out, and we left with them.

So, everyone started to get out, and we left with the others. It was like beginning an entirely new life. I got out and went down to Aleppo. I saw my daughter – I wanted to speak to her, but she wouldn't talk to me. When I was detained, my daughter was in seventh grade. The time that passed in between feels like an empty space without boundaries. Now she's in

ninth grade. Among my family, my wife was the only one who was certain I was still alive. In the Civil Registry system, if your record shows “deceased”, then you’re officially considered dead. Every six months, they report to the Civil Registry who has died and who is still alive – in six month or yearly intervals.

My wife was able to obtain documents proving that I was still alive, but she didn’t know where I was. For example, she went several times to the Sednaya Branch, but there they told her, “We have no such name.” Even if I had been there, they wouldn’t have told her. She also went many times to the Palestine Branch, but I wasn’t there. She went to the 48th Branch and to Military Intelligence as well, and they said, “He’s not here.” For them, our names were nothing more than numbers. And even those numbers weren’t officially acknowledged – they didn’t recognize the names or the numbers. My wife would go and ask, “Do you have H.M.?” They would say, “No.” But maybe in their records I was registered as 3400. That’s how it was.

Interviewer: *You mentioned the “salt room” in your talk. Could you please elaborate on that?*

H.M.: In the branch we were held at, there was a place called the “salt room.” Bodies were kept there. They were left to decompose naturally. They decomposed naturally because there was no mass grave site.

Even now, if I stay outside for more than an hour, my wife becomes worried. We haven’t been able to shake off the fear. The fear, and the image of blood that has seeped into my mind – that horror – it still continues. We came close to death many times. A normal prison would be much better, because there, you are taken to court, there is a judge. Maybe an intermediary or an acquaintance can intervene. You can make contact through bribery or other means.

But when you’re locked up in a cell... You’re forgotten. Completely forgotten. Thank Allah Syria was saved, thank Allah – this is one of the greatest blessings Allah has given us.

Interviewer: *Are you receiving any psychological support?*

H.M.: No – my support is being with my family and acquaintances; that’s my only support. Life goes on. When I first got out, I would even hide, startled, at home. As for work, honestly there is none. There are no jobs on the market anyway. Whereas before, thank Allah, I had a car, a workshop, a factory. In 2007 I worked in Türkiye. Back then I was producing sweaters and sweatshirts under the “B...” brand. I designed them myself. I had friends and relatives there. I used to go back and forth by car from time to time. When the events first began, everyone started leaving Syria. They told me, “Come, let’s leave.” I said, “I love my home. I don’t want to leave.” I endured the bombardment and barrel bombs. But I never imagined I would end up in prison. Still, praise be to Allah.

Interviewer: *Were there any martyrs in your family?*

H.M.: In 2017, two of my brothers were martyred at home in Haydariye. They bombed the area from the air. There were women and children there as well. We managed to get them to Razi Hospital. There, they told us, “Tell the media, ‘The Free Army did the bombing.’”

I still don’t have the courage to go out and look for work. I’m afraid to go outside, worried I might not be able to come back. Psychological pain is worse than physical pain. For example, if your hand is cut off or your leg is broken, you can somehow get used to it – but psychological pain is different. With my children, through faith and the Quran, I try to overcome it. Praise be to Allah, I am a faithful person; I pray, and even today I am fasting. Their disbelief and the curses they spoke were terrifying. We heard words as if they had all been invented by themselves. Even Abu Jahl would seem mild compared to them. Maybe he would even enter paradise, but these people never will... They used such foul language.

Interviewer: *What kind of curses were those?*

H.M.: They were people who denied the existence of Allah and the Prophet, who made irreligious, blasphemous statements. But beyond the usual curses we hear, they had invented entirely different, brand-new curses. They insulted both Muslims and Christians alike. Among those who were tortured, there were also Christian brothers. There was a Christian friend next to me who was also detained. Later, we lost contact with each other. During the release process, I tried to find his family but couldn’t find any trace.

Interviewer: *Do you remember the names of the officers there?*

H.M.: No, they never mentioned their names in front of us. They were very afraid about that. Maybe they thought we could be witnesses, so they kept our eyes blindfolded. They also didn’t allow us to see their faces.

There are still places outside the officially known prisons; for example, this building—its six basement floors may also be a prison, and no one knows. Sednaya became famous, everyone talked about it, but how many people actually came out? Very few survived, yet there were many other prisons whose names we still don’t know. Those who survived Sednaya were few; as for the rest, it’s unclear where they are. Syria lived through a catastrophe. They talk about reconstruction, but they speak only of what is above the ground, whereas beneath the ground there are countless unknown torture centers. Allah has forbidden oppression for Himself and for His servants, but these tyrants became worse than Pharaoh. Even Pharaoh did not go to such extremes. Syria was a great prison.

Interviewer: *As Türkiye, we want the atrocities committed in Syria to be made known and for those responsible to be punished. For this reason, we are preparing this report. We are also collecting this data to present it to international courts, and we want to take a step in this matter on behalf of humanity. We thank you very much for sharing the events you experienced with us.*

Record No: 15

Date: February 7, 2025

Location: Khan Shaykhun

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarik ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: M.H., human rights activist, Khan Shaykhun.

Questions:

Interviewer: *What is the significance of Khan Shaykhun in terms of human rights?*

M.H.: Of course, Khan Shaykhun has been subjected to numerous bombings and massacres since the beginning of the Syrian revolution. Many martyrs and civilians lost their lives, most of them children and women. In particular, during the chemical massacre, there were more than 100 martyrs and over 500 injuries. The chemical bomb fell right on this road, at this very spot. This is the place where the chemical bomb hit. The bomb was dropped by an aircraft belonging to the Assad regime on April 4, 2017, between 7:00 and 7:15 in the morning. This neighborhood is where the people were exposed to poisonous sarin gas. In that attack, about 100 people died from suffocation. Most of the residents of these houses you see here were children. Some families were completely wiped out – children, women, and older people died from suffocation. I documented this massacre and collected evidence from this site. I handed over the evidence I gathered to the relevant authorities conducting the investigation.

Interviewer: *You are a victim as well.*

M.H.: Yes, I was also affected by the attack. While I was collecting evidence – since my home was nearby – I was exposed to the chemical attack and suffered from its effects for three days. The chemical exposure continues to affect people's lives even now. Especially children have suffered from respiratory problems for years. Pregnant women were also affected; some babies were born with disabilities. There are many such cases. Older people, in particular, experienced prolonged breathing difficulties, and some later died. In addition, those who nearly suffocated at the time still suffer from psychological trauma. The people of Khan Shaykhun were forced to leave the city. When regime forces entered the city in 2019, the people opposed the oppression and injustice imposed by the Assad regime and fled. As you can see, the people of Khan Shaykhun have been displaced since 2019 and still have not been able to return. The destruction in the city is immense. For example, there used to be a grain silo here – it's gone now. This bakery is almost completely destroyed. Most of the

houses are ruined and uninhabitable. The reconstruction of Khan Shaykhun will require a long and difficult process.

Interviewer: *How many martyrs are there in Khan Shaykhun?*

M.H.: There are an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 civilian martyrs.

Interviewer: *Did the chemical attack happen only once?*

M.H.: The chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun happened only once. Before that, the city had been bombed with poisonous chlorine gas. No one was martyred in that attack, but there were injuries. Khan Shaykhun has been subjected to many types of assaults – from chemical weapons to explosive barrels, internationally banned cluster bombs, and other prohibited weapons.

Interviewer: *As a human rights lawyer, what do you demand from the international community?*

M.H.: First and foremost, we demand international prosecution. Secondly, we call on countries supporting these trials to ensure that everyone involved in the bloodshed of the Syrian people is brought to justice. It's not just Khan Shaykhun; all of Syria has suffered. There are hundreds of thousands of martyrs and hundreds of thousands of detainees. In Khan Shaykhun alone, there are about 500 detainees; most never left Sednaya Prison and died under torture. We documented the 250 detainees in Sednaya. We hoped they would be rescued with Syria's liberation, but we learned that none of them survived. We have demands from the international community. We want the new government to fully implement transitional justice. We also request assistance from involved states to hand over perpetrators to justice and ensure they are tried in national courts. If an observation mechanism needs to be established, we are ready for that as well. Trials should be conducted openly. Currently, the intervening states are talking about national peace and peacebuilding. That is, of course, important, but first, justice must be achieved. Victims' rights must be protected. Transitional justice should include steps such as uncovering the truth, holding perpetrators accountable, compensating victims, restoring the rights of those whose homes were destroyed and whose children were detained, and clarifying the fate of the disappeared. However, at present, the intervening states only talk about peacebuilding and are not ensuring justice first.

Interviewer: *As the HREIT, we are ready to document these crimes and work toward ensuring justice. Allah willing, we will work with you to establish justice and human rights in these lands. We thank you for the courtesy of coming here. We see you as a brother and want to express that we are ready for any kind of documentation and cooperation. Thank you.*

Record No: 16

Date: February 7, 2025

Location: Khan Shaykhun Cemetery

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: M.H., human rights activist, Khan Shaykhun.

Questions:

M.H.: *Here we see a martyrdom site and excavated graves. What are these?*

Interviewer: To clarify the situation, this is the Martyrs' Cemetery in the city of Khan Shaykhun. Most of the section you see belongs to the martyrs of the Khan Shaykhun massacre that occurred during the visit of the Arab League observer delegation.

(The building across from the cemetery) This part is actually a facility belonging to the Syrian security forces. During the regime period, the security personnel stationed here forced families to exhume their children's graves under the pretext that "the sight of these martyrs bothers us." The cemetery had previously suffered extensive damage, and the former regime even planned to completely level these graves with a bulldozer and turn the area into a park.

Here you can see an open grave; a martyr who was buried here has been moved to another location. These are the remains of the martyrs, and these stones belong to them and are still in place. As you can see, this site has been attacked repeatedly. The cruel regime did not even leave the dead in peace – not even the martyrs were spared from its oppression.

All of those buried here are martyrs who fell to artillery fire, sniper bullets, or mass killings; they are all martyrs of the Syrian Revolution... May Allah have mercy on them and grant them a place of honor.

Record No: 17

Date: February 7, 2025

Location: Khan Shaykhun

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: A.Y., resident of Khan Shaykhun

Questions:

A.Y.: I am A.Y., from Idlib-Khan Shaykhun. On the morning of April 4, 2017, at around 6:30 a.m., warplanes belonging to the regime launched four airstrikes using sarin-loaded munitions. At first, we didn't realize it was sarin gas because there was no explosion sound. It fell about 100 meters from here, at the intersection, across from the bakery. People there were suffocating, and my siblings were among them. May Allah have mercy on them—they were martyrs.

At 6:30 a.m., at first we thought this wasn't real, but soon we realized the seriousness of the situation. I took my children, my twins A. and A., and told my spouse, "Let's get out of here." Our car was nearby, but we couldn't move immediately. We left that spot and headed down this road. Our neighbors were shouting at me, "Come, help us!" When I went to them, foam was coming from their mouths, they were shaking violently, and their eyes had a fixed stare. We carried them to the cars and helped other neighbors as well. Then I went to my family's home. My brother Y. was there, trying to save his 5-year-old son, A. A. couldn't breathe, and then he too was martyred.

I went to my other brother, A., and he had also lost his life. He was in front of the door. Y's wife and my sister's 15-year-old daughter were there as well. They all lived in this building. I handed my children to my spouse and said, "Get away from here." I thought my spouse had left the area. I tried to save my siblings but was unsuccessful. Then I lost consciousness and found myself on the ground. They took me to a medical point. First, I was taken to Rahmet Hospital in Khan Shaykhun, but it was full of wounded people, and they wouldn't accept me. Later, I was transferred to a medical point in Jirjanaz. The situation there was also terrible; people were suffocating and fainting—it was a complete massacre. Most of our neighbors had died in their cars. A few days later, when I returned, I learned that they had been martyred.

After my treatment, I left Jirjanaz Hospital and went home. It was as if I had lost my memory; slowly, I began to remember everything. I asked about my siblings; they told me that Y. and A., Y's spouse, and the others had been martyred. Then I began searching for my children and spouse. I couldn't find them. I asked many people, but they weren't in any hospital. I

asked our relatives, acquaintances, and searched everywhere, only to discover that they had been in the basement under our house all along. When the planes came again, they had taken refuge in that basement. There, my spouse, my children, and four more children from our neighbors were hiding... They all had been martyred there. May Allah have mercy on them.

Interviewer: *As far as we can see, there is no military point here, only civilian settlements. Why do you think they attacked this place?*

A.Y.: There was no military target here. This was entirely a civilian area, with grain silos, a bakery, and homes. There were no military elements at all. Even if it had been a military zone, such an attack would be strictly prohibited under international law. In this attack, more than 93 people were martyred and over 500 were injured. We are still feeling the effects today, especially psychologically. Why? Because the perpetrators are still free. We demand the trial of Bashar al-Assad. I have 25 martyrs in my family: my children A. and A., my spouse D., my brother Y., his spouse S.H.A., and their children A. (5 years old), M. (13 years old), and my sister's daughter Ş. (15 years old) ... They were all from my family and relatives.

Interviewer: *Have you applied to any institution regarding this crime against humanity?*

A.Y.: Regarding this crime, of course, we contacted Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Commission of Inquiry. Through the White Helmets, we provided evidence. They collected evidence during and after the incident, even taking blood samples. All investigation teams conducted their inquiries at that time and confirmed that Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons. They verified that chemical weapons were used in Khan Shaykhun. On April 22, they confirmed the use of chemical weapons and, through observers, determined that the plane had taken off from Homs and Shayrat Airbase. The plane was identified as Quds-1, and the pilot's name was confirmed as Muhammad Yusuf Al-Hasuri. He was from the city of Talkelah in Syria. His identity was established, and of course, the takeoff time from Shayrat Airbase and the exact time the chemical attack occurred in Khan Shaykhun were determined. Observers were issuing warnings along the way.

Some organizations, foremost among them the UN Security Council, condemned the use of chemical weapons and confirmed that Bashar al Assad used them. Thank Allah, by Allah's will, we returned to Syria. However, Bashar al Assad is currently a fugitive and has not yet been brought to trial. We hope the Türkiye government or any other institution that can assist us will help achieve our goal of having Bashar al Assad fairly tried for the use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun and elsewhere, and for other violations in Syria.

Interviewer: *Are the effects of the chemical weapon still ongoing?*

A.Y.: Of course, first and foremost, the psychological effects continue. In addition, there are

people experiencing shortness of breath due to exposure to the chemical gas. Some of my relatives developed paralysis-like symptoms from inhaling the gas. Some pregnant women lost their babies. The psychological impacts are even more severe than the physical ones.

Interviewer: *At that moment, how did you try to protect yourself from the attack?*

A.Y.: I tried to do whatever I could, helping those who were able to assist others. That's why our Civil Defense teams intervened immediately. We were in shock when we realized it was sarin gas. We never expected such a massive crime, that sarin gas would be dropped on a civilian area. Many people who came from outside to help also were martyred because they hadn't taken precautions or had never experienced anything like this before. That's why the disaster was so severe.

Interviewer: *Is there anything else you would like to add?*

A.Y.: As I said, once the evidence and proofs are presented, a fair trial must take place. The impact site is clear - there was no military depot or facility there. It was entirely a civilian area; there were no fighters or armed groups. Today we insist on the facts. Anyone can return and see what happened. Our goal is to ease the pain of the martyrs we lost in the chemical attack and to ensure that Bashar al Assad is fairly tried in international and Türkiye courts. We are awaiting help from our Türkiye brothers.

Of course, I can never forget, and I am grateful for the kindness of our Türkiye brothers who stood with us from beginning to end, especially Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. You were by our side in our most difficult times, and when we had martyrs in Khan Shaykhun after the chemical attack, you welcomed me with great compassion. I will never forget what you did. The Türkiye people stood with the Syrians, and we will always remember this. We are brothers, we love one another. I respectfully acknowledge President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the entire Türkiye nation. Allah willing, you will always be well and healthy.

Interviewer: *Thank you for the information you have provided. May Allah have mercy on our martyrs. Allah willing, the information you shared will serve as evidence at the the International Criminal Court, and our report will contribute to the trial of Bashar al Assad..*

Record No: 18

Date: February 24, 2025

Location: Apartment in Douma where the chemical attack occurred, impact site, Damascus

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarik ÜNALDI - Assistant Expert

Interviewee: Â.Z.

Questions:

Â.Z.: During the attack in Douma where chemical weapons were used, I was the regional coordinator for the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) in Douma. The spot where we are standing now is exactly the same place I stood in April 2018 – seven years ago. The hole beneath us is the very hole through which the gas leaked from this building and adjacent buildings, causing the death of the victims. Standing here again after seven years is very difficult. That day, many people suffocated to death from the chemical attack. I now remember the difficulties and suffering we experienced while trying to rescue the injured and victims in the attack area. At that time, Douma was under intense military assault. There was a significant lack of healthcare services and medical personnel. However, thank Allah, after seven years, we have great hope that justice will be served for the victims of chemical weapons and, more broadly, for all the victims of the Syrian war and revolution. We believe that international organizations and human rights groups can accompany us in this process of justice.

Interviewer: *Thank you, Mr. Â. Returning to the arrival of the munition – who dropped it and how was it delivered?*

Â.Z.: The bomb was dropped from a helicopter – a rotary wing attack helicopter targeted this area and it fell right here. We documented the moment of impact. I filmed that moment from where I'm standing now, recording the condition of the bomb and the type of gas leaking from the barrel. I collected evidence and samples from this house. That day I risked my life and my family's to transport the samples to northern Syria so they could safely reach OPCW laboratories for analysis. Thanks to that, the type of chemical agent used and, consequently, the party that used the weapon could be identified. I gave testimony to various teams associated with the OPCW – the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), the Fact Finding Mission (FFM), and the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT). The reports prepared indicated that the agent used was high concentration chlorine and that the perpetrator was the Bashar al Assad regime. Even details such as the aircraft type and its code were provided to the competent authorities.

Initially, the Syrian regime and its allies propagated that the White Helmets were behind the attack. They claimed, “No chemical weapons were used; the White Helmets staged a play.” When the report confirmed the presence of the chemical agent, they shifted to the lie that “The White Helmets gassed themselves.” Later, when it was established that the perpetrator was the Assad regime, they again tried to discredit the White Helmets and questioned our evidence collection methods. However, we had received the necessary training and collected the samples using a highly professional system, safely delivering them to the OPCW. Laboratory analyses confirmed the type of chemical agent, and our testimonies were used as key evidence in identifying the perpetrator.

Interviewer: *We appreciate the White Helmets’ efforts in documenting this massacre and assisting the victims. Mr. Â, what was the inside of the building like at the moment the munition fell?*

Â.Z.: As we began ascending the stairs, the victims were spread from the building’s entrance up to the fourth floor, which is the floor we are standing on now. This was a residential building, entirely civilian. The neighboring building’s residents were also in the basement floors. There was no military target or armed element anywhere. All those who lost their lives in the chemical weapon attack were civilians...

As I mentioned earlier, the area was under heavy military threat. That’s why people had truly gone down to the basements, trying to protect themselves from bombs and flying shrapnel. However, when they inhaled the poisonous gas, their first thought was, “Gas is heavier than air; let’s go up.” They immediately decided to climb toward the fourth floor. Yet, with each floor they ascended, the gas concentration increased – they were literally walking to death with every step. On the fourth floor where we are standing now, this hole in the stairwell was the very source that spread death. If you look at the videos and photos we took that day, you will see that the victims were piled on the stairs from the building entrance up to the fourth floor.

Even in the basement floors, some people tried to reach the medical point or hospital about fifty meters away, but they couldn’t make it; some died on the way, others inside the tunnel (a hospital built underground by the opposition). We will now show you that tunnel, the medical point, and the tunnel entrance. The Syrian regime claimed that the tunnel was used for military purposes, but this is not true. The tunnel was dug solely to transport the injured safely to the hospital – that is, for medical and emergency aid purposes. It had no military or offensive function. Why was it dug? To allow rescue workers to protect themselves from shrapnel from barrel bombs while getting the victims to treatment.

Interviewer: *In your opinion, what was the regime’s purpose in using chemical weapons in this area?*

Â.Z.: The main objective was to exert pressure to force the armed groups out of Douma. However, the Syrian regime applied that pressure directly to civilians, aiming to compel the armed factions to negotiate with the regime and withdraw from the city. The armed groups' initial decision was to accept those conditions, saying, "Enough is enough."

There was a severe lack of medical resources. From 2013 to 2018, Eastern Ghouta was under siege. During this period, we were deprived of all protective equipment and personal safety materials, and even the most basic medications. Many of the amputation cases that occurred at that time were due to the collapse of the healthcare infrastructure and the inability to provide necessary treatment. All of our friends in Eastern Ghouta endured immense suffering during those days.

Under these conditions, there was only one option left: to accept the Syrian regime's terms and agree to forced displacement, leaving Douma.

Looking back, we see that the area was being viciously attacked with barrel bombs to prevent people and the wounded from reaching the field hospital, to stop the Civil Defense teams from coming to help, and to erase the traces of the crime. The whole neighborhood was set on fire and flattened in order to destroy any evidence that chemical weapons had been used. When we arrived, the pain and hardships we endured while trying to gather the bodies are still vivid in my mind. May Allah have mercy on the dead and grant patience to their families; I hope that one day justice will be served for these victims and their loved ones.

Now let's look at the two buildings across from us: the highest number of martyrs and wounded occurred in these two structures. People still live in these buildings. At that time the basements had been opened up to one another; the residents of Douma were living underground to protect themselves from wartime shrapnel. The basements were connected by passages so that if doors were shut, people could escape through the neighboring basement to save their lives. I went into those passages and descended as far as I could; there were injured and dead people.

Now, speaking as a documentation officer, a first responder, an evidence collector, and a survivor, I want to share this: on April 7, when this place was bombed, I was exposed to the chemical weapon. While assisting the injured and transporting them to the hospital, I myself experienced symptoms - relatively mild, I would say.

The next day, when the Russian military police entered Douma and declared, "No chemical weapons were used", I moved to the second site where another rocket was still slowly leaking. At that time the head of Civil Defense (the White Helmets), Raid al Saleh, ordered, "While they're in the city, you must go and document it." This was an extremely risky task. We had to both film the leaking rocket and record the date and time.

Together with the media team, we entered that site; we turned on the camera and recorded, “Right now, the Russian military police are denying chemical weapons in the city, while we are at the second barrel loaded with chemicals, which is still leaking.” We immediately evacuated the surrounding buildings and did not touch the barrel, because the slightest mistake could have released the gas rapidly and caused a second massacre. By Allah’s will, this barrel did not explode suddenly like the first one; in the initial explosion, there had been 43 martyrs and 600-700 wounded.

As the barrel slowly released all its gas, we filmed and collected evidence. Then, when they said “International inspectors will enter the city,” we decided to leave the barrel as it was. A day or two later, as we set out on the forced displacement to northern Syria, we took with us all the evidence we had gathered, the footage we had recorded, and the memories of those last 48 hours in Douma – the deaths, the horror, and the farewells.

May Allah have mercy on those who died.



Record No: 19

Date: 24 February 24, 2025

Location: Douma, Damascus

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI - Assistant Specialist

Interviewee: Local Resident

Questions:

Interviewer: *Peace be upon you. Do you live in this building?*

Local Resident: Yes, on the fourth floor.

Interviewer: *Is anyone else living here now?*

Local Resident: Yes, people are still living here.

Interviewer: *Sir, were you here during the chemical attack as well?*

Local Resident: Yes, I was at the location where the incident took place; I am from the Mahbani family.

Interviewer: *Did you lose anyone from your family in that attack?*

Local Resident: My nephew's daughter died in this building, and everyone inside was injured. I remember all the victims who were taken out of this building that day. We were talking about a total of six hundred injured; the entire neighborhood was affected, but those who went from the basement of this building up to the fourth floor, where the gas was most concentrated, died instantly. Those caught in the cloud of gas died, and those outside it were severely affected. We were here and survived, but everyone across the street died.

Interviewer: *What was the munition like? Did you see it?*

Local Resident: No, we didn't see it. It fell inside the building. We heard it as a cloud of smoke descended. We were constantly hearing airplane noises, and the sound of barrel explosions wasn't missing either. They said, "They hit with chemical weapons." At first, they told us, "Cover your mouths with a wet cloth." but we couldn't manage it in time. Then they said, "Go upstairs." We went up and stayed for about two hours; there was no smell, or anything left. Then they shouted, "Run, run, go to the kitchen." We ran, they gave us something like a respirator, and we recovered a little. The children were in terrible condition, and even we adults couldn't breathe, but the children were devastated. Later, they took us to a medical point in a side street. Four people managed to crawl out of the building; the rest died. At

that moment, if someone had said, “It’s safe here, come over.” no one would have died, but no one said anything. We thought chemical weapons had been used across all of Douma.

Â.Z.: At that time, Douma was under a very intense military attack; this prevented the Civil Defense from entering immediately, giving correct instructions, and carrying out evacuation and first aid in the first minutes. Although we entered a bit later, we were able to rescue a large number of injured people. The deceased had to be left in place until the next day. Then we gathered them all in this square, carried out decontamination for the injured, and transferred them to the medical point; the deceased were shrouded and buried in a newly opened cemetery, as the old cemetery had become a target for snipers.

After we left, the regime dug up the cemetery and moved the martyrs’ bodies to an unknown location; to this day we still don’t know where they are. Among them was my brother, who died from shrapnel wounds and had been buried in that same cemetery. The bodies were taken – their fate is unknown, and no one knows what dark procedures they were subjected to.

Interviewer: *You are civilians, and your neighbors were civilians as well. Were there any armed groups around?*

Local Resident: I think the main goal of the bombardment was to hit the tunnel and disable the medical point at its end. The regime was putting immense pressure on the armed groups and was targeting every medical facility it saw. Even the Civil Defense centers were among the first to be bombed. Every medical point in the neighborhood was destroyed. After we were evacuated to the north, to the safe zone, they entered the area and completely changed how it looked.

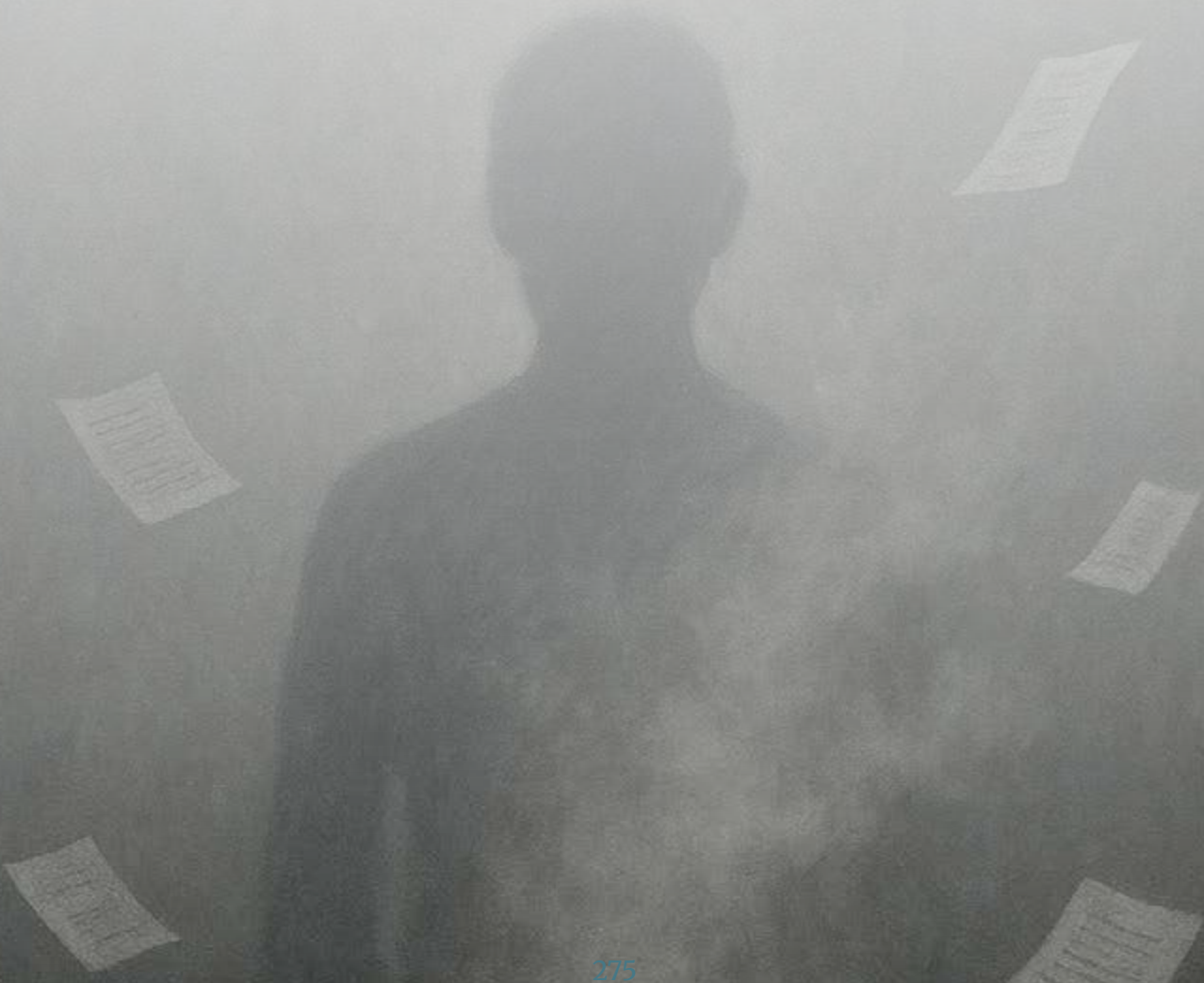
Then a Russian delegation came for an “interview.” Accompanied by armed soldiers, they stopped me in front of this building. They said, “We will go to the forest; you will sit on a chair there.” My spouse and my nephew were with me. They asked, “Did you see anything?” They knew what effect answers given under pressure would have. Whether I said, “I was also a victim.” or not, the outcome was the same – I didn’t want to speak. These “interviews” were meant to distort the evidence. Residents of the building and the neighborhood were forced to give statements claiming that no chemical weapons had been used.

“They asked me, ‘Do you know these victims?’ I said, ‘No, I don’t.’ Yet they were all people I knew – my nephew’s daughter, my friends E.A.Ş., E.A.B.... We used to pray together at the mosque. Even so, we couldn’t say we knew them. Think about what would happen to you if you told the truth. Our neighbor E.A.B.’s daughters in law were martyred; simply for saying, ‘My daughters in law were killed by chemicals,’ he was imprisoned for four months. When the regime says, ‘There is no chemical attack,’ if you don’t deny it, they silence you.”

I know that shop – it had been closed for years. They broke the lock and went inside, brought tools and set them up; then they called the cameras and said, “Look, terrorists were manufacturing chemical weapons here, they were going to poison the whole city.” It was all fake. They returned under the pretext of an “interview.” I began to run away. They once forced me to speak. After that I refused all interviews because they were all lies. You know the truth, but if you speak you’re forced to lie; if you tell the truth there is torture, imprisonment, even death. If someone from our building is arrested they might be thrown into one of the Damascus prisons – their fate would be no different from the some 340,000 Syrians who are still missing today.

We hoped that with the fall of the regime, most of the missing would be released – but where are they? Thank Allah I’m still alive. I survived the chemical attacks, and I also escaped falling into the regime’s prisons – and that alone would have been enough to end my life.

Interviewer: *May Allah help you and grant you patience. May Allah bless you.*



Record No: 20

Date: 24 February 24, 2025

Location: Douma, Tunnel

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: Â.Z.

Questions:

Â.Z.: We are now in front of the entrance to the tunnel that allowed us to reach the hospital, that is, the health center we call “Point 1” with the ambulances. The entrance went underground; we would drive the ambulances down this tunnel, go all the way to the emergency room lobby, unload the injured, and then take them back to the surface through the exit on the other side.

The local people who were present here at the time dug this entrance. The purpose was to prevent the entrance of the health point from being targeted by warplanes. Whenever there was an intense military raid, the ambulances would gather in front of the hospital. The tunnel was used only for emergency transport. Since it was dug between two buildings, it could not be seen by surveillance drones. The ambulance would enter through here, deliver the injured to the emergency room, and exit through another exit, thus being protected from the bombing of the hospital or the health point.

Victims who inhaled chemical weapon gas also came from 50–60 meters away and entered this tunnel, receiving treatment in the emergency room. Currently, the tunnel is closed. Hopefully, in the coming days, we will clear this debris and reopen the tunnel so that everyone can come and see with their own eyes why and for what purpose it was dug. Contrary to the regime’s claims, it was not for attacks; it was intended to safely transport the injured to the emergency room while protecting medical personnel and Civil Defense teams.

We are now inside the tunnel. This is the exit gate of the tunnel that passes through the very heart of the medical point. We are now moving deeper into the tunnel. The regime’s media had slandered this tunnel as an “attack route used by terrorists for military purposes.” In reality, however, this was the ambulance entrance. When the city was under heavy attack and ambulances gathered in front of the hospital, the regime and its allies would bomb that spot twice in succession, preventing the injured and Civil Defense teams from reaching the health center. For this reason, the tunnel was dug so that one could enter from one side and exit from the other, ensuring that ambulances would never pile up in the same place.

The tunnel is very close to the attack point we just stood in front of. The ambulance would enter from there, move through this corridor, unload the injured here – in the emergency admission hall – and then drive out through the exit on the other side. The goal was to never allow ambulances to pile up at any moment. This hall was where victims of chemical weapons received first aid. All casualties from both conventional and chemical bombardments were treated here.

Interviewer: *What were the memories that affected you the most?*

Â.Z.: I find it hard to put into words. For years working in Civil Defense our goal was always to bring living injured people to this gate. For that we risked our lives in the middle of the double bombardments. For the wounded, reaching here meant clinging to life. Standing in the same place again after so many years knots my throat.

I can still visualize the floor of this hall: red blood mixed with white foam from the chemical gas. On one side, people torn apart by conventional weapons were losing blood; on the other, white foam flowed from the mouths of those who had inhaled chemical gas. The medical personnel were completely insufficient, so we quickly created a partition within the emergency room to manage the situation. We moved the conventional casualties to another section. This area became the decontamination and treatment room for chemical victims. After first aid, decontamination, and medication, they were transferred to the inner sections of the hospital.

We followed the same procedure for those who lost their lives: we decontaminated their bodies on the scene and took them to the shrouding unit inside the hospital. All of them were shrouded and gathered right here in this tunnel. Afterwards, they were transferred to the cemetery we mentioned earlier, which the regime later dug up to destroy the evidence. This entire process was extensively recorded and documented in the Civil Defense archives.

The tunnel is a bit long; if you like, we can walk through a portion of it. As you can see, it is wide enough for an ambulance to fit easily.

The far end of the tunnel is closed. The exit on the other side – the one we showed outside earlier – is blocked with debris after regime attacks. It is possible to walk to the end, but the other end is completely collapsed.

At the end of the tunnel where we are now, there is the route that ambulances used to enter. It is very close to the point where the chemical weapon was used, where we stopped earlier. Ambulances would enter from there, travel a fairly long distance, and reach the casualty admission hall. The second branch you see was the exit route; the entrance and exit were at completely different points. The main purpose was to safely transport the injured to the

hospital building while protecting Civil Defense teams and medical personnel. This was necessary because the Syrian regime deliberately targeted ambulances, especially during military operations, and bombed health centers with “double strikes”.

The tunnel was dug toward the end of 2017. We first started using it at the beginning of 2018, as soon as the large-scale attack on Douma began, and for about four months, we saved the lives of countless injured people. This way, ambulances, Civil Defense, and Red Crescent personnel were protected from double bombings.

The tunnel connected in places to a network that descended as deep as 25 meters and was also used by civilians as shelter. That depth was enough to protect against barrel bombs and missiles dropped from aircraft; but because chemical gases are heavier than air, taking refuge in tunnels during such an attack was actually a fatal mistake. To be honest, no one had imagined we would experience a chemical bombardment as intense as the one on April 7.

People were in the basements that day; when they inhaled the gas, they thought, “Let’s go upstairs – at least we’ll die from shrapnel instead,” and headed toward the stairs. Dying from suffocation was so terrifying... I was also exposed to the toxic gas during that attack. It’s hard to describe, but I can still remember its effects on my body. All the injured were treated in this hospital.

That night, we received 600-700 people affected by chemical gas – most brought in on foot – into this hall. We moved those injured in conventional explosions to another section. This area was transformed into a decontamination and treatment zone. The next day, we collected the bodies of the martyrs, decontaminated them on the scene, shrouded them, and gathered them all in the tunnel we are currently in.

Then, just before we were forcibly removed from the city, we transferred them to the new cemetery we had opened. After we left, the regime dug up the graves and moved the bodies to an unknown location. The aim was to erase any trace that would prove they had been killed with chemical weapons. In fact, the double strike on the same area also had the single purpose of obliterating the crime scene.

The regime did not stop at destroying evidence; it also threatened and silenced witnesses, victims, and their families. Doctors who were forced to give false testimony stated, “No chemical was used.” Today, in 2025, many of those physicians have come forward on social media, apologized to the victims, and confirmed that the regime did indeed use chemical weapons.

The regime pressured doctors and witnesses to deny that chemical weapons were used in Douma. I, however, made a decision and vowed to collect the evidence, compile it, and

transfer it safely. This put both my life and the lives of my family who remained in Douma in great danger. Still, it became a priority for me because I believed in it wholeheartedly. Chemical weapons posed a direct threat to my life. I swore to secretly get that evidence out and into safe hands by exposing the plight of my family who were trapped inside.

The Syrian regime and its allies threatened us, saying, “You will not speak; you will deny it!” But we believed in our cause and in the rights of the victims; as I said that day, my life and the lives of my family are not more precious than the lives of the martyrs. Whatever the cost, we will tell the truth. From the moment we volunteered for Civil Defense, we have documented and exposed the truth. We were the first to reach the field and therefore the first witnesses to the regime’s crimes.

What bothered the regime and its allies was not the white helmets on our heads, but the cameras attached to those helmets. Because those cameras recorded every element of the crime and showed the international community the atrocities the Syrian regime committed against unarmed civilians.

Even today, Russia continues to demonize the White Helmets and tries to damage our reputation: one day they call us “CIA agents”, another day “members of the Nusra Front”, and the next “DAESH fighters.” They have made countless accusations. Thankfully, people’s awareness has rendered this propaganda ineffective. The public knows very well who the White Helmets are, what service they provide, and whom they represent. They trusted us, and that trust proved the exact opposite of the lies spread about us by Russia and the Syrian regime.

Thank you all.



Record No: 21

Date: February 24, 2025

Location: Douma Cemetery, Damascus

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: Â.Z.

Â.Z.: This is the cemetery where we buried the victims. Moreover, it is not only those who died from chemical weapons; everyone who lost their lives during the intense three-day attack – including those torn apart by barrel bombs, missiles from warplanes, and rocket launcher shells – was buried here.

As far as I remember, the first three martyrs buried in this cemetery were our volunteer colleagues from Civil Defense (the White Helmets). They fell on March 21. Since the city's old "Martyrs' Cemetery" came under regime fire, there arose a need for a new cemetery. Thus, we opened this area and first laid those three volunteers to rest here. Later, we officially adopted this site as our cemetery, and on April 8 – one day after the chemical attack – we also buried the victims of the gas alongside the other martyrs here.

After we left the city, the Syrian regime came. Graves were dug up, and the bodies of all the chemical victims and other martyrs were removed and taken to an unknown location. As you can see now, it no longer looks like a cemetery. Even today we still do not know where those bodies are or what happened to them. The purpose was clear: to erase any trace that would lead investigation teams to conclude "These people died from poisonous gas." and to completely destroy the evidence. Thank you.

Record No: 22

Date: February 26, 2025

Location: Khalidiyye Neighborhood, Homs

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: M.T., from Homs, journalist

M.T.: We are currently in the Khalidiyye Neighborhood, at “Freedom Square,” or as the people call it, “Paradise Square”. Khalidiyye was one of the first districts in Homs to rise up against the Bashar al Assad regime in 2011; this square in front of you was the epicenter of peaceful demonstrations against Assad. Thousands of people from Khalidiyye and neighboring districts used to gather here. Abdülbasit Sarut from Bayadze would also come with the crowds, and the people of Khalidiyye would welcome them. Our slogan was, “Down with the regime, we want freedom.” Our demands were very simple, and we never imagined we would face such brutality. Freedom, reform of institutions, the dismissal of the governor – that was all. Our first slogan was, “Oh Deraa, we sacrifice our lives and blood for you; revenge for the children of Deraa!” Those words might have been redeemed. But while the revolution in Homs was still a month old, the “New Clock Square Massacre” occurred, and that became a major turning point for Homs and its surroundings. After that day our demonstrations united around demands no less than the overthrow of the regime. Because this brutal regime was not fit to govern a free and dignified people.

At the start of the revolution, we did not take to the squares because of economic hardship; we, the people of Homs, were already suffocating. We had been burdened with sectarianism, but we were not raised that way. The regime, from the very beginning, constructed this and implanted the idea “We are the rulers”. into the minds of a particular sect. Some people from that sect also joined the revolution; they were not actually sectarian. The regime, however, planted the fear “If these people come to power, they will slaughter you.” in their minds. This was completely wrong. The proof is this: when we entered the city there were no such massacres, everyone lived in peace. If it were going to happen, it would have happened long ago. Over time their view changed too; they realized that supporting the regime for 14 years had been a mistake.

As you can see, Khalidiyye has turned into ruins today. A few houses were later repaired. When the regime took control of the district, the Shabiha entered; they looted civilians’ property. They stole everything – from electric cables to taps and water tanks – leaving nothing behind. On top of that, there was a horrific bombardment from planes and tanks.

The resistance only had light arms. We left Homs in 2014; I was part of that forced evacuation, the first major exile in Syria. When leaving, we felt shattered. In fact, I had dropped to 35 kilograms from hunger. There was no food or drink left; at the end, we were eating tree leaves and grass. When the regime took Khalidiyye in 2013, we were besieged in neighboring Juret al-Shiyah, Arbis, and the old districts of Homs. For two years, we could barely move. We were close to starving to death – a complete blockade. By Allah’s grace, we survived; thus, we were able to continue witnessing this noble revolution and the violations of the brutal regime.

Homs was not called “the capital of the revolution” and “mother of martyrs” for nothing. In the first year of the Syrian revolution, Homs stood alone. Although the regime suppressed many parts of the country, Homs continued to resist. Therefore, this title was not given by us, but by other provinces; they witnessed the heroism of Homs’ youth and people. There are no precise statistics on the number of martyrs because many people disappeared or their fate is unknown. The population of Khalidiyye alone was 120,000. Not everyone joined the revolution; some said, “I will not participate.” However, if someone’s ID said “Khalidiyye, Homs”, the regime would ask at checkpoints, “Are you from Khalidiyye?” and detain them, forcibly to disappeared them.

Look, this is U’s mother. U. was a journalist, a friend of mine. He was arrested in 2012. When she saw her son’s body among the “Caesar Photos”, her heart broke. Her house had burned down; she rebuilt it and still lives in Khalidiyye. What was her crime? Being from Khalidiyye! When the regime retook the district, we were allegedly declared “terrorists” and expelled from Khalidiyye. Imagine, now there is no electricity, no water, not a single base station in Khalidiyye. The regime’s justification was labeling the district’s residents as “terrorists”. Only about 2-3% of the residents were able to return; 97% are still refugees. My aunt returned here and repaired her house. Now she will personally tell you what she witnessed when the regime took over.

We were utterly devastated. Khalidiyye Neighborhood has practically fallen victim to the regime’s wrath. There are other districts in Homs, like Baba Amr, Rastan, and Talbise; all of them rose up due to peaceful protest movements. After the ensuing conflicts, the situation in these areas is the same.

Record No: 23

Date: February 26, 2025

Location: Khalidiyye Neighborhood, Homs

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: N.A.

Questions:

N.A.: We are Syrians, especially from the people of Homs. By Allah, we really love guests. I stopped the cars coming from Idlib and said, “Please, let me offer you celebration sweets on the road.” They stopped here, and I said, “May your victory be blessed, come, come safely.” We are so happy that I want to offer you victory sweets. The joy of victory is so immense, so indescribable, that words cannot convey the feelings and excitement inside me. I am past sixty-five; I have never tasted such happiness in my life, and I don’t think I ever will. The exhilaration of victory is priceless and beyond description. For years, we endured humiliation, oppression, and insults; wherever we went to official offices, we were degraded, our heads under the soldier’s boot. We suffered greatly. Especially in Homs, the capital of the revolution, they harbored great hatred against us. In Khalidiyye Neighborhood, countless martyrs, arrests, and destruction occurred; there is not a single house that was spared from devastation.

After these destructions, the Shabiha, whom they call the “National Army”, looted the houses. They tore out everything, from electric cables to water pipes, leaving the houses as bare skeletons. Now many people – including my brother – want to return from Türkiye, but they cannot because there is no house left. People have nowhere to return to.

They arrested my son in August 2012. Since the first days of the revolution, he participated in demonstrations and documented the regime’s crimes, sending them to Al Jazeera. Before his arrest, he had been injured by a mortar; four months later, he was detained and died under torture. My brother and nephew also lost their lives in torture.

Interviewer: *Where was he tortured?*

N.A.: My son was killed at the Palestine Branch. My daughter was also arrested three months after my son. She was hung from the ceiling and tortured at the Military Security Branch, and a month later transferred to the Palestine Branch. While she was being tortured there, another soldier came and told her that my son U. had died. My brother and his son were at Branch 215 in Damascus. My son, a high school senior, had only one “crime”: participating

in a demonstration. Informants in the neighborhood reported them. However, my son's "crime", was documenting their massacres. They attacked our house to kill him. Missiles entered through our balcony. Normally bombs fall from above, but we were on the first floor; the shell came straight through the balcony, the walls collapsed, the floor and ceiling were pierced, and the house was completely burned. When the "National Army" entered, they smashed everything, bending and breaking iron sheets into pieces. Not a single door panel was left in the house. By "National Army" here, I mean no one other than the Shabiha, all loyal to the regime.

They devastated Khalidiyye; destruction, arrests, martyrs... Things got completely out of control. The revolution began first in Khalidiyye and Baba Amr; in my opinion, Khalidiyye rose up before all the others. Ten days before a bomb hit our house, my son was injured by a mortar, again due to an informant's tip. He was going to the field hospital inside Nadhir Zeytoun and Zenubya schools to get medicine. The mortar landed to his right, shattering his neck. If you want, I can show you the photos.

He underwent surgery at Al-Kindi Hospital and then had three more surgeries in Lebanon. The injury occurred at the beginning of the fourth month. On August 18, on the eve of Eid al-Fitr, he was arrested. That day he was returning from Türkiye. He had met with Hillary Clinton and had a conversation with her. At that time, there was no airport in our area. He traveled from Türkiye to Lebanon and was caught while trying to enter to the Syria from Dabousiyye.

Interviewer: *After your house was destroyed, where did you take shelter?*

N.A.: When our house was destroyed, we migrated from Idlib. We had left the house ten days before my son was injured. We stayed one month in Ghouta and six months in Damascus. Then I rented a house in al-Khadra Neighborhood in Homs and lived there for nine years. No one helped us repair the house. It was dilapidated, and no organization offered assistance. We installed the exterior doors, but there were no doors for the rooms, so we hung blankets instead.

Another resident: The same suffering is happening here as well. My children were injured; everything N.A. described happened to us too. Every family has at least one injured person, multiple tragedies. I had five sons; now only the youngest is with me. When we left Khalidiyye, he was in seventh grade; now he is in university. The others were scattered – some injured, some dead, some alive... It's all the same pain. What my sister (N.A.) described is exactly what we all experienced. The only difference is who has a martyr, who has someone detained and who has their house completely destroyed. Even if the house is structurally intact, it has been looted; only the skeleton remains. Repairing the utilities costs millions, and I have received no assistance.

N.A.: I have received no support for my house. By Allah, I haven't received a single lira, and no organization has offered help. I went to the Nuns' Association and said, "My house is basically ready, but I have no doors. I need doors to be able to live in it." They did not accept.

Interviewer: *We see that international sanctions are a major obstacle to the reconstruction of Syria. What would you say about this issue?*

N.A.: Yes, there are sanctions, but even before the revolution, the people of Syria were under sanctions. The best and most luxurious cars entering Syria were going to the regime. So-called solar panels were brought under the pretext of "no electricity". But I don't have the means to install a solar panel-where am I supposed to find the money?

May Allah show no good to Esma al Assad. May Allah not show Esma al-Assad any good. May her heart burn for her children, just as she burned the hearts of so many mothers! She and her husband only allowed even a single watt to enter the country for themselves. Esma al Assad later even established solar panel factories. In other words, some things are put into service solely for the regime and its circle, while they are forbidden to the public. It seemed as if the sanctions were being applied to the regime along with the people. We don't know what the situation is now; the burden still falls on the people. Hopefully they will be lifted so that these people can breathe. We want electricity - electricity!

Right now I'm sitting in my house without electricity or internet. Khalidiyye, so-called a "terrorist neighborhood", has been deprived of services. The operations manager of the electricity company, Iyad Hazuri - may Allah not be pleased with him - said, "You are a terrorist neighborhood." We have no internet at all; I have to go outside the neighborhood to access it. How can I go up to the roof when it's cold? Even on the roof, it doesn't work. The "terrorist neighborhood" label is still on us, and my situation has still not improved.

Sanctions are being applied to the Syrian people, the government, and Bashar al Assad alike; this is indeed a very important issue. We thank you. We are honored that you came all the way to Homs, especially to Khalidiyye Neighborhood. A thousand welcomes, you have honored us. We sincerely thank you for your visit and express our gratitude. My name is N.A., I am from Khalidiyye, Homs. Welcome again; you have honored us - many thanks.

Record No: 24

Date: February 25, 2025

Location: Yarmouk Refugee Camp, Damascus

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: E.S., from Yarmouk

Questions:

Interviewer: *Hello, welcome. What is your name?*

E.S.: I am E.S., may Allah protect you. Please, you honor us with your presence. I am from Yarmouk. I am originally a Palestinian who was displaced from our land in 1948. Everyone here is also from the Palestinians displaced in 1948.

Interviewer: *The Bashar al-Assad regime used to say, “We are fighting for the rights of the Palestinians,” but look at what they did to the Palestinian Yarmouk Camp. What do you think about this?*

E.S.: It was once said that Sharon declared, “Yarmouk, I will come for you one day.” Sharon died, but Assad’s men fulfilled those words to the letter. They left no stone upon stone and spared no soul. First, they destroyed the people, then the buildings and the land itself; they committed unimaginable massacres. We witnessed our youth dying from hunger and thirst. May Allah bring goodness to this country – hopefully, things will improve with the newly established government.

Interviewer: *Were you attacked as well?*

E.S.: Yes, my nephew was killed. All we can do is say, “Lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh.” A child died, and my brother was also wounded. Our wounds are deep – words cannot describe them; even pages full of writing wouldn’t be enough. You must have heard about what happened in the prisons, the scenes we witnessed.

Interviewer: *Were you forcibly displaced?*

E.S.: Yes. Entry and exit to the camp were forbidden, and there was no food or drink; people survived by scavenging from trash bins and market leftovers. The siege lasted for about a year. In the end, they destroyed the entire camp because there were maybe 100 armed people left inside. You see with your own eyes – only ruins remain.

Interviewer: *How were people living during the days of the siege?*

E.S.: We were left to Allah’s care, nothing else. You could be full with a falafel sandwich or with some wild greens... Life? There was no such thing left called life. We ground lentils to make bread; may Allah help the people. Still, we give thanks and say “Alhamdulillah.”

Interviewer: *What was the population of the camp?*

E.S.: About 1.6 million people lived in Yarmouk. Now, there are only fifty thousand people left in the entire camp. Yarmouk and Tadamon together, with a population of over 3 million, were the capital of the Palestinian diaspora; it was the largest Palestinian refugee settlement in the region. Even our Syrian neighbors lived like Palestinians, and there was no discrimination between us. Now, you can't show me a single family without a martyr. Even my own family lost 10% of its population. We can rebuild the buildings and the land, but the place of the lives lost can never be filled.

Like the resistance in Gaza, we too are trying to return and rebuild life here. You see with your own eyes – we are building something.

Interviewer: *Our organization has submitted a report on the genocide in Gaza to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Now, we want to prepare a file on human rights violations during the Assad era and submit that to the ICC as well.*

E.S.: My brother, good luck with that, but know this: That court is also at the mercy of the great powers. If the United States objects, no decision will be made. These matters are all Mossad and Zionist games... Palestinians fought not only against Israel but also against French, Italian, British, and American warplanes. Do you think the missiles that destroyed these buildings were Syrian? They are all European weapons, foreign ammunition.

Still, we lay our grievance before Allah. Even if the ICC does not bring us justice, we will not abandon our cause. The sanctions Europe has imposed on Syria hurt the people, not the regime; they hurt me, him, ordinary people... At least lift the embargo so that people can breathe a little.

Alhamdulillah, I am alive, my condition is good, and I am engaged in trade. But know this: today, a bundle of bread in Syria costs 4,000 lira. The average salary is 20,000 liras. Two bundle cost 8,000–10,000 lira, and when you add transportation expenses, there's almost nothing left. For a large part of the people, the salary is not enough for anything. The people here live almost by Allah's blessing. If someone doesn't have relatives abroad, they become truly destitute. I have seven sisters and no brothers. I am the only one from my family still in Syria. The same happened with my siblings – they all left the country. May Allah reunite us again and restore the country with goodness; we have no other wish.

Interviewer: *Did anyone die of hunger during the siege?*

E.S.: Thousands, tens of thousands... Children, older people, women, sick children, frail grandfathers – all of them lost their lives. Even the mosques were bombed. May Allah have mercy on them all. For example, a massacre took place at Abdülkadir Mosque, and no mosque was left intact. Still, by Allah's will and thanks to the efforts of good people, the mosques are being restored. Hopefully, by the upcoming Ramadan, all will be open for worship again.

Thank you, welcome.

Record No: 25

Date: February 25, 2025

Location: Sednaya Prison, Damascus

Interviewer: Muhammed Tarık ÜNALDI – Assistant Expert

Interviewee: I.H.L., former prisoner.

* This interview was conducted with a former prisoner who was previously subjected to torture in Sednaya Prison, based on accounts given at the locations where the events took place.

Questions:

(Sednaya Entry Section)

Interviewer: *Mr. I, when were you arrested?*

I.H.L.: I was detained in early 2012. I was taken to the Air Intelligence branch in Mezze, Damascus, then referred to court, and afterward transferred to Sednaya. From a list of thirty people, nineteen of us were chained together with thick iron handcuffs called “zincir”. When I was transferred to Sednaya Prison, the moment we arrived went like this: We were brought in with the first transport vehicle before our wounds had even been treated. We were nineteen people chained together. As soon as we were taken off the vehicle, they piled us on top of each other. We were handcuffed to each other. The person at the front began to vomit, then the second person as well, and we were trying to sit up. At that moment, guards came with batons shouting “Move, move!” and dragged us inside through the entrance gate. Then they took us upstairs and lined us up on the concrete floor. As soon as we arrived, they lined us up and stripped all our clothes off. When we were first taken off the vehicle, they brought us directly here, to this part of Sednaya Prison. They said they would first verify our identities.

When we were taken to the ground floor of the prison, we were first lined up. Then we were ordered to remove all our clothes. Not a single piece remained on us. The entire floor was wet. We were forced to lie face down on the ground. The officer responsible for recording our identities recorded our names as if we were property in custody, then dragged us down to the ward floor with baton strikes. There was neither a doctor nor any medical check... The registration and beating happened simultaneously.

When we went downstairs, the guard in charge of the cells “welcomed” us again with violence. The accusation against us was “terrorism”; my file stated that I had connections with armed opposition groups. When we were brought to court, only our fingerprints were taken – no questions were asked, nor was any defense requested; it was a completely fabricated trial. There were nineteen of us brought in on the same case; all of us were convicted on terrorism charges, based on a “field court” decision usually seen in military zones.

Most of the detainees in Sednaya were political prisoners. Among them were those imprisoned for military disciplinary offenses, murder, or minor escapes. However, the majority were civilian activists, demonstrators, or civilians accused of cooperating with opposition groups. All the wards were male – only. My family knew I was in Sednaya, but due to the conditions there, communication was almost impossible.

(Cell)

Interviewer: *How many of you were here?*

I.H.L.: Nineteen. It was actually impossible for nineteen people to fit into such a cramped space. Besides, we didn’t have a single piece of clothing on. The toilet and bathroom they referred to was just a hole in the corner. The floor was dirt, no blankets, nothing... Everyone had only one pair of underwear, that’s it. We were kept naked, without heating or light for about twenty days. We could only sleep by lying on top of each other out of necessity. At first, we were ashamed, but eventually, standing and squatting side by side became the only option.

Interviewer: *How did you eat the food?*

I.H.L.: We ate once a day; a coffee cup-sized portion of boiled bulgur and a quarter of a loaf of bread. Water was sometimes provided, but other times we went without it all night. The cell was normally pitch dark, with a tiny window covered by a thick metal sheet. We barely saw the sun for almost two years; only once, when I was taken to the yard, I saw sunlight for about five minutes. This place was designed from the start as a torture site. Being left naked alone was already a torment...

If we made any noise, the door would open, and the guard would drag us out and beat us. There was never any treatment for illness or wounds. If someone died, their body was taken away from the cell. During the first month, we resisted, but then we were taken upstairs and subjected to systematic torture. Visits were strictly forbidden. Even praying was a cause for death. Once, I was caught praying; I saw it with my own eyes. Seven or eight soldiers kicked and crushed my ribs, and I barely managed to crawl to the toilet.

Even going to the toilet at night was a risk. Those who held it out of fear became ill. Once, they pressed my chest to the ground and broke my ribs. On the first day we arrived at

Sednaya, they beat us in a narrow corridor with green plastic hoses; our skin split open and then became infected.

My cell number was 23. The place for sleep and torture was the same. I would rest my head in this corner, and another prisoner would lie beside me; sometimes, due to lack of space, they would squeeze us next to the toilet. The remaining seventeen people would spend the night either standing or squatting. We knew it was daytime by the thin line of light seeping through a tiny crack in the ceiling, and we tried to refresh the stagnant air inside with the faint trickle of air coming through that same opening.

Interviewer: *Could you please provide some details about the torture you endured here?*

I.H.L.: Let me tell you how a day of torture went. Here, “torture” begins the moment the guard hears the slightest noise. On a day when he’s bored, he steps out into the corridor, comes inside; whoever he catches, he whips and drags, then continues whipping them again.

The whip strikes peel the skin off our backs, leaving open wounds. Then the wounds become infected, pus flows, and we writhe in pain. There are no cloths, no dressing materials; we squeeze the pus from each other’s wounds and try to clean them with a few drops of water – there’s no other option. Even holding food containers in the cell is forbidden. If we try to save water, they immediately take it away. The only method used here is the whip, and it’s continuous whipping, always on our backs. All the torture happens right in this cell.

There is a guard responsible for this section; he informs the other officers, saying, “These chained ones, 20-30 people, are causing problems.” Ultimately, he is the one who decides the fate of these prisoners.

Interviewer: *We are currently in the winter season, and it is very cold here, with the temperature only one degree. How was the situation during the winter days?*

I.H.L.: Nobody cared about our condition during winter. Only if someone among them caused trouble upstairs would they bring that person down and give them a blanket—that is, they showed favoritism. As for us... they wouldn’t care even if we died. There were no blankets, that was it.

The device they call the “air conditioner” is here, but during the entire month I stayed, they never turned it on for a single second. Supposedly it was connected by cables for heating. Summer is somewhat more bearable compared to this freezing cold, though it’s still never cool enough. On cold days, they never turn on the air conditioner. Even if they do, including the upper floor, it only runs for about ten to fifteen minutes a day, which isn’t enough to warm the place.

Interviewer: *Did you witness anyone dying because of torture?*

I.H.L.: We never saw anyone being killed by torture during interrogation with our own eyes, but while in the cell, we constantly heard sounds of beating and painful groans. Then the noise would stop, and we couldn't tell if the person had died; if the sounds fell completely silent, it most likely meant they had passed away.

We live in constant fear as well; we don't dare to speak or shout, so we won't get beaten.

When the light is turned on, you realize this is an isolation cell, and the lower section is also designated for isolation. Supposedly built to block out the cold, but only a few blankets remain. It's impossible for each person to have a blanket. When they first stuffed us in here, there were thirty-five of us.

They shoved all of us inside and then pushed us until we were packed tightly. The clothes we wore at first were blue. Later, they changed those and dressed us in different outfits. While in isolation, we didn't even have underwear.

There's a so called bathroom/toilet over there - just a single hole. The moment you enter, a heavy, throat burning stench rises; may Allah not let my enemy experience it.

Interviewer: *What are these containers?*

I.H.L.: This is a food container. The food is brought in with this, and as soon as the serving is finished, the container is taken back out; it's forbidden to keep it inside. At the bottom, as you can see, only a tiny amount of bulgur residue remains. This was the amount of bulgur allocated for 35 people - just about a handful. The soup was the same, something like a ladle of water... This was the lunch.

The cheese given for breakfast was just the size of a needle tip. A little yogurt, and a total of 5-6 eggs... All of this was meant for 35 people. When they brought tea, sometimes they'd fill a tin can, but there was no sugar or any flavor to enjoy; they would even pour diesel into it.

Interviewer: *So, they were turning even food into a form of torture?*

I.H.L.: What you call "food" is itself a form of torture. There's no such thing as health. That toilet - bath you see... The water doesn't flow continuously; it comes from a small tank behind the wall. There's no hot water at all - it's always ice cold. When you need to wash, you just have to accept your fate and stand under that freezing water; there's no other choice.

(Ward)

One day, on the night they called "Martyrs' Day", the guards burst into the ward and began beating us to death on the back with iron pipes, green water pipes, and anything they could find. My brother and I were lying face down on the floor; first they stepped on my back, hitting me repeatedly. Then they let go of me and started beating my brother. I was yelling at him to pull his legs together (protect yourself), but he didn't hear me. When I raised my

hand and said the same thing, the pipe hit my hand, causing a fracture; it took a month and a half before I could move my hand again.

The beating took a fatal toll - my brother died the next morning. That morning, a guard came in shouting, "Anyone with a body?" We hid him until the second day, quietly washed him, dressed him in what we called a shroud - a simple shirt - tied his legs together, crossed his arms over his chest, and placed a cloth over his face. On the third day, they came to take the body away. Asking where they took it was strictly forbidden. Praying was also banned; we silenced a prisoner who threatened to inform on us, saying "I will ease my conscience." We silenced him by giving him two days' worth of food. We held the funeral prayer here, seated and in secret. We whispered Al-Fatiha. In the end, they took the body. We know he was dumped in a mass grave, but we have no idea where.

Interviewer: *Did your family find out about this?*

I.H.L.: Word reached my family. On visitation day, my mother asked me from behind the wire fence, "How did your brother die?" All I could say was, "He was sick, mother, may Allah have mercy on him." If I had dared to say, "They beat him to death." we both would have been killed. In the official death report, there are always only two standard causes: heart attack or brain hemorrhage.

After my brother's death, my mother ran from court to court. Of her three sons, two were gone, and one remained. Two or three days after the incident, the soldiers called my name and my brother's name. "Where is the other brother?" they asked. When I answered, "He's dead." they didn't believe me. They pushed me against the wall and called the ward officer. When he also said, "He was sick, he died," they took me down to the black section - the basement interrogation room. From two in the afternoon until eleven at night, I waited in line; then a sergeant left, and an officer came. They kept asking repeatedly, "How did your brother die?" Such deaths were, in fact, common in the prison, but for some reason, they wanted me to confirm the cause of death repeatedly. I kept saying, "He was sick, he died. He had a cold, he wasn't eating." In the end, they said, "May Allah have mercy on him." and let me go. May Allah have mercy on all the martyrs, and on my brother too.

When I first arrived, they took me to another ward, and that's where I first saw it. They've now installed a sheet metal plate on the floor; perhaps they've replaced the old one, perhaps they've installed a new one. They put your hand under this plate like this, and the guard hits your finger bones with an iron pipe from above until they pulverize them, then he laughs and thinks he's clever.

After breakfast, to pass the time we prepared Qur'an notebooks and practiced memorization. From time to time there would be a sudden cell search, and then they'd take us out for beatings; they'd put our legs into a rubber tire and give 10-20 lashes... "Inside!" they'd shout.

They throw everything we've written into the yard, and when we return, we begin writing again on scraps of cloth, starting with "بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم" (In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate). If the guard hears the slightest sound, he opens the door – from the moment he arrives his amusement is to beat; staying silent is impossible.

After 1 a.m., we would hear footsteps in the corridor. Prisoners would be taken downstairs – to what they called the "purge". You see those pipes they carry? That long green water pipe... We used to call it "Lakhdar Brahimi." They'd grab it from both ends and bring it down hard on your leg – enough to break bone. It was named after Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN envoy who came to mediate the Syria crisis back then – and the pipe was green, just like his name. So, we called it "Lakhdar Brahimi." Iron rods, tank chains, thick belts... it's all here. The objects you see around – they were left behind by released prisoners. They didn't even think of taking anything with them; when it was finally time to leave, just leaving was all they could think about.

Interviewer: *Were you able to communicate with your family via phone or letter?*

I.H.L.: It was completely forbidden. Even visitation was a form of torture. They would bring your relatives to the prison at 6:00 in the morning, and they wouldn't return until 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening. With the travel, permits, waiting, and body searches, it took 12 hours... We were allowed visits once every 15 days, but even then, you'd speak knowing the guard was standing right behind you. My brother (before he died) used to tell my mother, "Don't come, it's humiliating." As for me, I would just say, "Thank Allah, we're doing fine." and send her away.

Interviewer: *Were you allowed to meet with a lawyer?*

I.H.L.: There are no lawyers because the case file has been sent to the military field court. You would have to pay for a lawyer. This court used to be the State Security Court, then it was converted into a field court. The chief judge is Muhammed Kanjo, with assistant judges under him. Most of the guards are known only by nicknames: Abu Iskender, Abu Jafer... Not real names: sometimes they only use numbers, but here in Sednaya there is no numbering system – that's used in the security branches.

On visit days, they shout "Get ready!" as the doors open. While rushing to the door, some are pushed, some are beaten, and then lined up. Besides Sednaya, there are many other prisons in Syria; Tadmur, the Palestine Branch... All of them involve torture; there is no such thing as a good prison. Tadmur used to be considered the most notorious, but when the events escalated, everywhere became the same. In Sednaya, all prisoners appear to be under the same conditions, but if there is a Nusayri among them, the guard watches over him and

shifts the little extra food to him. For example, once 19 people received four bundles of bread. They threw away two of the bundles and took the bread to those they favored.

Everything depended on the guard's whim. Some say, "There were special cells reserved for Nusayri prisoners." No, the cells were exactly the same as the ones I showed you. However, when they went down to the cell, they were brought extra "support" with them; extra blankets, slightly better food... So, that's the only difference.

The guard storms in with a single motion, throws the food into the cell with one move, then closes the door and leaves as if nothing happened. Since we know what to expect, we stay alert on the floor, crouching to grab the food. We are forced to eat the food directly from the ground. But I can't eat properly; I can't bring it to my mouth, my stomach can't handle it, and even my hair starts falling out.

Interviewer: *How much did you weigh when you entered the prison? Did you lose weight?*

I.H.L.: When I entered the prison, I weighed around 70 kilos. When I was released, I had dropped to 40 kilos. I was nothing but skin and bones, but thankfully, I'm still alive.

People were truly dying of hunger, by Allah, they were dying...

The number of those who died was very high; I can't remember all their names. Look, I have this list here with me: Nineteen people entered Sednaya, only three came out. Can you open this paper? This is the list of those who entered together with me.

I obtained the list from the Ministry of Defense; all the names are officially recorded, including mine - a total of 19 people.

Interviewer: *How many people came out alive?*

I.H.L.: Only three: İ.L., M.R.B., and a friend with the last name D. The rest all lost their lives.

(Visitor's area)

They take me out of the cell and bring me to this waiting area. Meanwhile, they prepare my family behind that wire fence over there, at the visitation spot. Yes, we wait right in front of that grille. We sit here waiting for our turn, and only at that moment do we find out how many minutes they'll give us for the visit. Sometimes we sit for one hour, sometimes two. This place is called the "waiting room". Haircuts are done here too. Before being taken out, they shave our heads here so that when we appear, we look "presentable". That's how they bring us out.

Although this place looks like a waiting area, it's actually a kind of cell. Once, they handcuffed me to the iron bars here and made me sit, waiting for my turn in that state. The room is locked and dimly lit. You can't move until they announce the visitation time.

When visitation time came, the door would open, and they'd take me through the corridor to that iron-barred window which was always closed. Before reaching it, they'd give instructions in the hallway. A guard would whisper behind me, "What are you going to say now, I.? You're going to visit; what should you say?" I would then repeat the sentence I had memorized: "Alhamdulillah, I'm fine, everything is okay. How are you?" That's all - no more words allowed. There was always a soldier, sergeant, or chief sergeant standing next to us, monitoring everything we said and reminding us of the rules throughout the visit.

After the visit, I tried to see my father-in-law as well, but as soon as I stepped out the door, they put me on "punishment for the visit". The guard sitting at the desk was writing something in a ledger and said, "20,000 lira, 25,000 lira have been deposited." but I didn't see any actual money. They only handed me a small paper slip: "Go buy some food and drinks, a little laundry detergent, soap; only for laundry." Then they shouted, "Come on, get inside!" and started to beating me. Sometimes my body would bruise immediately from the blows, other times I got off with just minor scratches. Still, I kept telling myself, "At least I saw my family, thank Allah," and accepted the situation.

When I arrived at the door of the visitation corridor, the procedure was the same; as soon as the visit ended inside, my name would be called out, and I had to crawl out, looking down at the floor. I would keep walking with my face almost touching the ground. I wouldn't change my position until the guard said, "Get up!" Then someone would grab my arm and take me back to the cell.

(Nusayri Prisoner Ward)

Interviewer: *We see medications on the floor here. Were you given any medicine?*

I.H.L.: A military nurse with special duties would come in and distribute my medication personally. While they never gave this medicine when I was upstairs, here they did - but for the Nusayri prisoners, they didn't even come close to giving the full dose: They'd open the box, pour a single dose into my palm, and leave the rest for them. I would get only one pill a day, while they handed the entire box to them saying, "Here, all of you take this." Although their treatment was still harsh, there was a clear distinction in how they were treated compared to us.

The food was better for them compared to me. I have diabetes and need to take my medication regularly while imprisoned, but getting medicine inside was entirely up to the whim of the

guards. When I entered the cell, I was already suffering from back pain, and on top of that, I couldn't get my insulin. Although I needed to take three pills a day, they would only allow me to have one. For Nusayri prisoners, they provided a full treatment course, even vitamin supplements. They would gather my medications at the door and throw them away.

As you can see, there is clear discrimination here. By saying, "They are one of us." they grant every privilege, and by saying, "You are not." they deny even the most basic medical treatment.

Interviewer: *During your time here, did you ever have the opportunity to go outside for fresh air?*

I.H.L.: They drag us down like this. Guards stand on both sides of the corridor, and whip strikes rain down. We walk with our heads down, chained. When we reach the courtyard, the "sunlight area", we lower our arms and line up one by one; we sit in a circle and face the sun on the bare concrete ground. We are given five minutes, then the order comes: "Enough, get up!"

This "right to sunlight" was not given every day; it was only granted when I entered my second year of detention. After two years, the first five minutes of sunlight... The second time came only a month later. The same scenario... Armed guards lined up around the courtyard. Once, a guard came up to me shouting, "Are you from Dera?" and started hitting me. My name apparently reminded him of something. It turned out his brother, who was stationed in Dera, had died, and he acted as if taking revenge. The prisoner next to me said, "He is from Damascus, not Dera." Then he let me go.

The return journey wasn't without torture either: "Keep your head down, move faster!" Again, batons and kicks; lifting your head was forbidden. So, the so-called "sunlight pleasure" is actually a torture session lasting no more than five minutes in total; it's not for resting or warming up, but just a brief glimpse of the sky before being plunged back into darkness.

Right after a brief glimpse of the sun, the order "Enough, stand up!" is given. We stand up one by one and are dragged back to the cell. The same procedure every time... They don't care whether time passes or not. After living two years in darkness, if you ask, "Will we ever see the sun again?" the answer is clear: "No, there is no sun." The only light we see is a faint daylight filtering through the small grate on the ceiling, that's all...

Interviewer: *Mr. I., the information you have shared here is very important for us. The interview we conducted at Sednaya Prison will hold a significant place in the report we will prepare. Thank you very much.*

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