**The Syrian Network for Human Rights’ Report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee**

We present a report from the [Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)](http://sn4hr.org/), an independent, non-governmental, and non-profit human rights organization that does not adopt any political ideology. Founded in June 2011, SNHR aims to document human rights violations in Syria and to defend the Syrian people’s human rights in front of international forums and bodies. This report is submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Committee as it prepares to address several issues related to the Syrian Arab Republic at the 130th session. This report based on SNHR’s data and reports, and focuses on several of the violations committed by the Syrian regime during the past four years (from August 2016 until August 2020), which are related to Articles 2, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

# I. Extrajudicial killings:

Syrian regime forces carried out extrajudicial killings throughout the period covered by the report, primarily in the form of three main violations that continue to be practiced to the current day, namely:

Torture leading to death.

Execution following sentencing is imposed by courts that lack legality and legitimacy.

The indiscriminate or deliberate shelling of residential neighborhoods, which caused the deaths of Syrian civilians.

In its killing operations, the Syrian regime has used many types of weapons and barbaric techniques, from barrel bombs, up to the use of chemical weapons of mass destruction, with SNHR documenting numerous cases of the latter (52 attacks). Among the most prominent of these were the attacks on Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, 2017, and on Douma city on April 7, 2018, in addition to hundreds of missile and artillery attacks that hit residential buildings containing civilians without any mercy or warning.

It should also be noted that the Syrian regime was not satisfied with using bombing operations alone, also practicing a policy of systemic siege and starvation in many areas, preventing the entry of medicine, which resulted in the deaths of 109 civilians, including 33 children and 19 women, during the period covered by the report, according to the facts documented on our database. The area which suffered from the most severe siege was the Eastern Ghouta region due to its densely populated nature, with the policy of siege and bombardment targeting all residents, including women, children and elderly people.

Between August 2016 and August 2020, the SNHR documented the deaths of 13,278 Syrian civilians at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, including 2,773 children (1,805 male children and 968 female children), equivalent to approximately 21% of the proportion of victims, and 1,445 women (adult female), equivalent to approximately 11% of the proportion of victims, distributed by year as follows:

From August 2016 until the end of 2016, we documented the deaths of 3,149 civilians.

In 2017, we documented the deaths of 4,148 civilians.

In 2018, we documented the deaths of 4,162 civilians.

In 2019, we documented the deaths of 1,497 civilians.

From the beginning of 2020 up until August 2020, we documented the deaths of 322 civilians.

# II. Unlawful arrest and detention, and enforced disappearance:

Syrian regime forces detain citizens in connection with their political affiliations and dissident views, targeting them for arrest, which is more akin to abduction than legal detention and violates a wide range of basic rights. These arrests are carried out using the following strategies, each of which is a clear violation of citizens’ most basic civil and political rights:

A group of gunmen wearing military or civilian apparel storm a home, workplace or public place, or stationed at a checkpoint, arrest a Syrian citizen without presenting any form of ID or identifying themselves in any way or telling the individual what they are being arrested for or charged with, and without presenting any judicial warrant.

The security forces of the regime’s four main intelligence services are often responsible for these extra-judicial arrests, and thus the arrest is illegal.

The detainee is prevented from informing his or her family, appointing a lawyer, or contacting anyone in the outside world.

The arrest of a Syrian citizen is usually accompanied by the use of physical and verbal abuse in a deliberate effort to instill terror and fear in the detainee and others present.

When a family or a lawyer asks about a detainee, the security branches/authorities deny his/her arrest.

More than 85% of all arrests are subsequently classified as enforced disappearances.

This sense of helplessness, suffering, and terror are transmitted to each detainee’s family and friends who live in a cycle of anxiety, fear, and confusion due to their ignorance of the fate of their loved one and their inability to take any official and legal action that could help them reveal their missing family member’s fate as long as the disappeared person is still confined to the security branch, where families have no power to intervene or take any action and are subjected to threats and persecution and probable arrest themselves if they repeatedly make inquiries about the missing family member.

Through use of the strategy of enforced disappearance, Syrian regime forces have targeted everyone associated with the popular uprising against the dynastic dictatorship of the ruling family, particularly against activists in the popular uprising, media workers, human rights activists, academics, and political opponents, as well as against individual or multiple members of any of these figures’ families, such as a parent, spouse or sibling, or a number of the detainee’s children, with the entire families of many detainees being subjected to enforced disappearance. The data analysis resulting from the SNHR database shows that this phenomenon has been most prevalent in the areas that were best known for support for the uprising; this suggests that strategic use of this method is based on a consistent and deliberate policy of persecution of anyone supporting freedom.

The SNHR team has documented the continuing detention of at least 18,642 individuals, including 184 children and 207 women, who were arbitrarily detained by Syrian regime forces since August 2016 and who are still being held up until August 2020. At least 16,921 individuals detained during this period including 156 children and 186 women, have been classified as forcibly disappeared persons. The Syrian regime is responsible for 84.82% of the total number of enforced disappearance cases.

This continuing detention of tens of thousands of forcibly disappeared persons also affects the lives of tens of thousands of other people who are connected to them in one way or another, with the disclosure of these detainees’ fate being important in deciding thousands of transactions and other issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and many more.

The crime of enforced disappearance carried out by the Syrian regime in this widespread and systematic manner constitutes a crime against humanity.

## A. Deceptive and ineffective amnesty decrees:

Over the past nine years, the Syrian regime has issued nearly 17 amnesty decrees, many of which were similar to one another and focused on securing the release of perpetrators of crimes, felonies, and offenses, while including only a minimal number of detainees referred to exceptional courts such as the Counter-Terrorism Court and the military field courts, and excluding the most significant proportion of detainees who were not subjected to any trial during the years of their detention, who have been classified as forcibly disappeared.

The arbitrary arrests carried out by Syrian Regime forces in the areas under their control haven’t ceased, in many cases targeting people who were granted a settlement certificate and a promise from the regime that they would not be harassed after settling their status; despite these empty promises, hardly a day passes without the SNHR’s team recording a case or incident of arbitrary arrest, some of them collective, as part of raid campaigns on areas and neighborhoods. The SNHR’s Detainees department documented at least 163 arrests since the issuance of Amnesty Decree No. 6 on March 22, 2020, up until August 2020 by Syrian Regime forces

## B. Registering the forcibly disappeared persons as deceased in the civil registry departments

Since the beginning of 2018, many of the families of forcibly disappeared persons held in the Syrian regime's detention centers have been shocked to find the names of relatives who had been forcibly disappeared registered as having died, with their deaths recorded in the civil registry departments without the families being previously notified; instead, the family members learnt about their loved ones’ demise by coincidence whilst conducting unrelated transactions in the civil registry departments such as obtaining an individual civil status registration or a family statement. This is contrary to the provisions of the Syrian Civil Status Law concerning the reporting of death procedures in prisons, which states that “Deaths occurring at prisons, detentions, and hospitals shall be recorded pursuant to a certificate submitted by the directors of said institutions, or their representatives, to the relevant civil registrar. These institutions shall maintain special registries of such incidents.”

Such incidents have taken place repeatedly until the death data of the disappeared have been submitted in the form of lists to the civil registry departments, probably by military bodies such as the military judiciary, the military police, and the security branches. These lists include the first and last name of the disappeared person, his/her entry in the register, the date of his/her death, and the governorate in which he or she died, without referring to the causes of death or place of detention.

Of the nearly 85,000 documented cases of enforced disappearance carried out by the Syrian regime from the beginning of 2018 up until August 2020, we were able to document 991 cases where the Syrian regime revealed the fate of the disappeared, all of whom had died in detention. As noted above, the death notices provided did not mention the cause of death or announce the death when occurred, with the families not being given their loved ones’ bodies. In all these cases, the regime had previously denied the existence of any incidents of enforced disappearance in its detention centers. Among the cases we documented, nine of the forcibly disappeared individuals were children at the time of their arrest and two were women (adult females). The SNHR believes that all of these disappeared persons died due to torture, with the only cases exempted from torture being those killed more immediately according to death sentences issued by the Military Field Court ‘al Midan’, which account for as few as five percent of the total, according to what we have been able to document.

The revelations of some of the forcibly disappeared individuals’ fates in the past period of just under two years and ongoing to date, were done in a similarly deliberately cruel and calculating manner. The implications of the synchronization between the state institutions in a manner that serves this criminal policy is clear as seen in the initial arrests targeting individuals supporting the popular uprising, which was followed by their forcible disappearance and then by issuing death certificates without any information about the place and cause of their deaths. This also suggests that large numbers of the employees, senior officials, and other workers at state bodies were aware of this particular Syrian regime policy, as well as of the true cause of death and the brutal acts of torture perpetrated. It is clear that some of these officials possess knowledge of the location of the dead bodies and the mass graves where these were disposed of, particularly given the appallingly large number of forcibly-disappeared persons and the number of cases of death by torture which we recorded which is estimated at nearly 14,000 deaths of Syrian citizens.

The Syrian regime no longer provides any physical evidence to any of the families of the disappeared when officials notify them of their loved ones’ deaths in regime detention centers, or when the regime discloses the fate of those forcibly disappeared through the Civil Registry departments as more recently, with the regime failing in all cases to provide any physical evidence providing that the grieving families’ disappeared relatives are dead. Other than a peremptory telephone call notifying family members or a certificate obtained from the Civil Registry departments, the regime has failed to definitively disclose the fate of the disappeared.

Based on all these factors, the SNHR confirms that the regime is still practicing the crime of enforced disappearance, with these disappeared individuals not being physically accounted for, whether alive or dead. In accordance with international law in this regard, we will, therefore, continue to consider all of these individuals as forcibly disappeared, with the main party held responsible for their disappearance being the Syrian regime.

## C. The disappearance of detainees subject to the courts from the central prisons

Enforced disappearances were not limited to the detainees who were imprisoned in the detention centers of the four main security branches or in the military and secret prisons, but also to those detainees held in the central prisons in the Syrian governorates who are subject to ‘trials’ held at the military courts, the Military Field Courts and the Counter-Terrorism Court, who are allowed to have lawyers and whose families have been able to visit them several times. Even in these cases, however, regime forces may suddenly transfer detainees from their places of detention in central prisons to undisclosed locations, without informing the detainee, his/her lawyer or his/her family about the reason for the transfer or the destination. We have noticed an increase in the number of detainees who have been disappeared from central prisons since the beginning of 2018 to this day. There are fears that regime forces have implemented secret rulings issued against them by the Military Field Courts, or that security decisions will be issued ordering them to be returned to the security branch responsible for arresting them, suspending their trial and keeping them under enforced disappearance there.

# III. Torture:

Torture in the Syrian regime’s detention centers is practiced as a tool of vengeance against detainees opposing the Syrian regime and against others similarly arrested for various reasons, including a similarity between their names and those of wanted individuals, and during campaigns of mass arrest during the storming of cities and towns.

Torture invariably begins from the first moment of detention, when the detainee is subjected to being dragged, beaten, and humiliated, with this abuse escalating throughout the interrogation period through use of more severe methods of torture and continuing throughout the detention period as a form of punishment. This abuse also coincides with intentional negligence towards detainees’ healthcare, deliberate starvation, and grotesquely unsanitary conditions of detention which lack the most basic hygiene or any ventilation, as well as additional degrading treatment such as human stacking of detainees in narrow, cramped, airless cells unsuited to accommodating the large and increasing numbers of detainees crammed into them. The combination of these factors, primarily torture and medical negligence, has led to a rising death toll, causing almost daily deaths among detainees.

In many cases, these torture acts have assumed a sectarian and region-based character, whereby the detainee is tortured simply because he or she belongs to an area whose population is known for opposing the Syrian regime, or merely for belonging to a certain sect. In a previous detailed report, SNHR documented the most notable torture methods used by Syrian regime forces in the regime’s detention centers and military hospitals, [detailing 72 methods](http://sn4hr.org/?p=54362) of physical, psychological and sexual torture, which we described in a way that, as much as possible, lets readers know the reality of these abuses, with this harrowing report inspired by the accounts which hundreds of surviving detainees provided to us. In our archive, we have catalogued dozens of photos and videos showing Syrian regime personnel carrying out torture acts of a sadistic and sectarian nature, most of which were filmed during the storming of cities and towns and in military hospitals; these photos and videos caused fear and intimidation among Syrian society and kept citizens in constant fear of the consequences of arrest.

As well as inflicting these horrendous methods of torture on detainees, the Syrian regime also deliberately subjects the imprisoned detainees to unimaginably squalid, unsanitary and massively overcrowded conditions in its detention centers which lack even the bare minimum of hygiene or sanitation to protect against illness and disease. These conditions are especially horrific in the headquarters of the four main security branches and military prisons, where large numbers of detainees are packed into cells of various sizes, with an average cell area measuring 4 x 6 square meters containing approximately 50 detainees; this means that each detainee barely has an area of ​​70 cm2 for sitting and sleeping, with detainees usually taking turns to attempt to sit or lie down to sleep when their numbers exceed the holding capacity of the cell, as they routinely do. These cells also lack ventilation and the most basic standards of sanitation and cleanliness, with the conditions being even more squalid in the solitary confinement cells located on the detention centers’ lower floors which lack even light. Throughout the duration of their detention in the security branches, detainees are also prevented from going outside to get any exercise, or exposure to fresh air or sunlight.

In addition to these congested, unsanitary conditions, detainees are able to shower or wash only very rarely throughout the period of their detention, which often lasts for many years, with all these factors contributing to and exacerbating the spread of diseases, epidemics and infectious conditions, especially respiratory and skin diseases, which are further aggravated due to the lack of fresh air and the lack of exposure to sunlight and light. The narrowness of the cells and the cramped, overcrowded conditions also lead to suffocation and shortness of breath amongst many detainees due to inhaling the putrid smells of bodily waste, sweat, pus, and blood from wounds. The conditions of detention in security branches and military prisons are somewhat similar to the civilian central prisons in terms of overcrowding, human stacking, and lack of cleanness and ventilation.

Syrian regime forces deliberately withhold sufficient quantities of pillows and blankets from detainees in detention centers, with those which are issued usually being filthy, threadbare, soiled and encrusted with blood, pus or other bodily waste and fluids, and lousy with parasites. In addition, detainees are denied adequate clothing and often left only in their underwear since their clothing is worn, soiled or torn during torture or forcibly removed during inspections; all these practices expose detainees to severe cold in winter, when temperatures fall below freezing.

All these practices make each of the days, months, and years that detainees spend in detention into a never-ending hell, with these brutal conditions being a very deliberately imposed and widespread strategy on the part of the Syrian regime inflicted with the aim of degrading and further torturing detainees. Subjecting detainees to conditions that foster disease and infection and leaving them to suffer without medical help or treatment is another deliberate and conscious part of this strategy, forcing already physically and emotionally traumatized detainees to endure an additional layer of torment and debasement often leading to death. With the recent global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Syrian regime’s admission that it has already documented cases of infection in early March 2020, the already grave situation facing prisoners in regime jails is now critical, particularly in light of the detention conditions that are, as explained above, favorable for the spread of infectious diseases such as the COVID-19 coronavirus; this now threatens the lives of approximately 130,000 people who are still documented as being detained or forcibly disappeared by Syrian regime forces, according to the SNHR database, which we repeatedly cited in our reports.

Syrian regime forces practice torture in detention centers as a tool to charge detainees and extract confessions from them according to these charges. All detainees, including women, children, the elderly, the sick, and those with special needs have been tortured, with no group excluded from these abuses. In a description that almost applies to all detainees, all those who have gone through the detention experience have been routinely tortured since the first moment of their detention, and throughout their movement between detention centers.

The crime of torture carried out by the Syrian regime in this widespread and systematic manner constitutes a crime against humanity.

## A. Sexual violence

Sexual violence has been practiced on a widespread and systematic manner in detention centers, affecting both males and females, in many cases reaching rape, during inspections and interrogations as a means of torture and pressure to obtain information from the female detainees or to shame them in the community. Sexual violence has been routinely practiced by Syrian regime forces during house raids, mainly against females in front of their family members, or during incursions into areas outside its control, as a form of revenge and in order to spread fear and terror in Syrian society, as well as to force the population to flee their areas, with many of those acts were committed against a sectarian background.

Syrian regime forces have forced at least 11 female detainees, including girls under the age of 18, to appear on state television to make clearly coerced confessions of having had sex with members of factions of the Armed Opposition, with all these women and girls forcibly disappeared following their appearance and ‘confessions’. The SNHR estimates that at least 231 incidents of sexual violence have been committed by Syrian Regime forces, including approximately 203 incidents in detention centers and at least 43 cases of sexual violence against girls under the age of 18 between August 2016 and August 2020.

Syrian regime forces have also used sexual violence as a strategic weapon of war with the aim of destroying the social fabric. Sexual violence has led to serious and severe physical and psychological trauma for the victims, as well as to their stigmatization and ostracism in their social environment.

## B. Illegal courts

We cannot describe either the ‘Counter-Terrorism’ or the ‘Military Field’ Courts as genuine courts. Rather, they are security branches, which violate all the fundamental legal foundations and standards for consideration as courts. They are wholly illegitimate as courts for several reasons, the foremost of which are:

The detainees arrested in connection with their participation in the popular uprising for democracy in Syria, including political and human rights activists, media workers, and relief activists, and similar prisoners of conscience, have been accused by the security branches of several charges based on testimonies taken from detainees by the regime under coercion, intimidation, and torture. The most prominent of these charges are: provoking sectarian strife, threatening the system of governance, weakening national sentiment, collusion with external agents and the enemy, supporting and financing terrorism, and weakening the nation’s morale, all of which are broad and wide-ranging charges, which are documented within regime security authorities’ reports; these detainees may be transferred to another security branch if they are wanted by more than one security branch. The detainees are forced to place their fingerprint as a ‘signature’ on these coerced report under threats, torture and general intimidation; it should be noted here that the security branches rarely allow detainees to read and sign these false confessions, but rather order them to use a fingerprint in place of a signature, with the detainees in most cases doing so while blindfolded with a piece of cloth; these security reports are then referred to the Public Prosecution service, after which the majority of these cases are referred to either the Counter-Terrorism Court or the Military Field Court (The stages mentioned here may take months and possibly years, during which the detainees are subjected to the worst forms of torture, which often prove lethal).

Regarding the Counter-Terrorism Court, in short, this was established in accordance with Presidential Decree No. 22 of 2012 to serve as a substitute for the exceptional Supreme State Security Court, and examines detainees’ cases according to the Counter-Terrorism Law No. 19 of 2012, an article of legislation similar to the legislation on ‘counter-revolutionary goals’ issued in 1964, which violates the most basic principles and rules of law and human rights, under which a person can be arrested simply because he or she is suspected of not supporting the Syrian regime, with the court ruling on most cases of arrest carried out by Syrian regime forces. The Counter-Terrorism Court consists of three judges appointed by the President of the Republic, according to the proposal submitted by the Supreme Judicial Council, which is also chaired by the President of the Republic, who try civilians, military personnel and juveniles, and issue sentences in absentia. In addition, these sentences may not be appealed except in the case of those who surrender themselves voluntarily. Although the body’s official name is the Counter-Terrorism Court, it tries all types of crimes and can, therefore, be called an exceptional court; it is, in fact, part of the regime’s security apparatus.

As for the Military Field Court, again briefly, this was established by Decree No. 109 of August 17, 1968, with its jurisdiction originally specified as being only for crimes committed in wartime; its remit was expanded in 1980, however, to allow it to operate in both war and peace times and to try civilians, military personnel and juveniles. This court is also formed by the executive authority through the Minister of Defense, and consists of a president and two members who are not required to be law graduates. The rulings issued by this court are not open to appeal, being endorsed by the Minister of Defense. Regarding the death sentences issued by this court, these are ratified by the President of the Republic, with both the Minister of Defense and the President of the Republic able to manipulate the rulings issued according to their personal whims. The Military Field Court is wholly managed by the executive authority that dominates the judicial authority, and therefore the most fundamental conditions of fair trial are not met in this court, which is also closer to a military-security branch than to a court of law.

These courts are the ones through which the vast majority of detainees are tried.

## C. Laws that protect perpetrators of torture

The Syrian regime also legalized the crime of torture, despite the fact that the current Syrian constitution, issued in 2012 by Decree No. 94, prohibits arbitrary arrest and torture according to Article 53, and the General Penal Code in accordance with Article 391 which imposes a penalty of from three months to three years in prison for anyone who beats a person with a degree of severity during the investigation of crimes, and prohibits torture during investigation in accordance with Article 391; however, there are legal texts that explicitly oppose previous constitutional articles and Article 391, giving almost complete immunity to the security services and legalizing impunity, with the most prominent of these being the following:

1. Legislative Decree No. 14 of January 25, 1969, stating that: “It is impermissible to pursue any workers in the State Security Administrations for crimes they have committed during the execution of the specified duties they were authorized to carry out, except by virtue of an order to pursue issued by the director.”
2. Article / 74 / of the Internal Security Law of the State Security Department and the rules of service for its employees issued by Legislative Decree No. 549 of May 25, 1969, states that: “No legal action may be taken against any General Intelligence Department employees, those assigned or detailed to the department, or those contracted with it for crimes incurred on the job or in the course of performing the job before referral to a department disciplinary board and before an order is obtained from the director.”
3. Legislative Decree No. 69 of 2008, by which an amendment to the Military Penal Code gave immunity to police and political security personnel, who were previously amongst those who could be tried before the ordinary judiciary, and limited the ability to take action against them or against the army and the armed forces. Paragraph (a) of Article 1 of this decree stipulated: “Crimes committed by each of the officers, warrant officers and members of the Internal Security forces, members of the Political Security Division, and members of Customs Brigade, due to performing the tasks entrusted to them.” Paragraph (b) of the same article states, “Prosecution orders for officers, warrant officers, members of the Internal Security forces, members of the Political Security Division, and members of Customs Brigade are issued in a decision by the General Command of the Army and the armed forces, in accordance with the provisions of Article / 53 / of Penal Code and the Military Trial Procedure and its amendments.” This prosecution is issued in wartime, according to the Penal Code and the Military Trial Procedure by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and the Armed Forces, who is, at the same time, the President of the Republic. Consequently, such prosecution was banned - if it had ever taken place - for officials at any level of leadership and limited to the senior leadership.
4. Decree No. (55) issued on April 21, 2011, related to counter-terrorism, of which Article 1 states: “Added to Article 17 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, the following paragraph: responsible for law enforcement or authorized tasks investigate the crimes stipulated in Articles 260 up to 339 articles 221 and 388 and 392 and 393 of the Penal Code and collection of evidence and surveillance of the suspects, which should not exceed the reservation for them for seven days subject to renewal from the Attorney-General and in accordance with the data of each file on the unit should not exceed this period of sixty days.”

These three decrees and Article 74, which are supposed to be legal texts but in reality constitute a violation of the law, are decrees and texts that legitimize crimes, violate even the 2012 constitution, and violate fundamental tenets of human rights. For this reason, Syria under the current Syrian regime suffers from two problems; the first in terms of the legal texts themselves, and the second in terms of applying the law which is far graver; without a doubt, these legal texts, which express a commitment to ensuring impunity, along with the Syrian regime’s failure to carry out any investigation or accountability for any member of the regime’s security forces, no matter how low-ranking, against the background of acts of torture, have all contributed to increasing the rate of torture. Indeed, the regime’s security services, in coordination with some doctors in military hospitals, are so sure of their impunity that they have invented new and horrific methods of torture that are even more brutal and savage than their usual methods. We have noted the use of new methods of torture in the past two years that were not used in previous years, which have caused deaths due to torture to continue up to this day. The laws established by the Syrian regime do not justify committing or concealing crimes, because they are not laws but rather pseudo-legal provisions that violate the law.

# IV. Media and freedom of expression:

The Syrian regime has prevented the establishment of a free press that is independent of the hegemony of the ruling authority and its security services, allowing only four official state-run newspapers (al Watan, Tishreen, al Ba’ath, al Thawra) to be published; all four are simply mouthpieces for the Syrian regime, dedicated to promoting, defending and justifying the regime’s actions. The fact that these newspapers do not carry any criticism of the crimes perpetrated or tragedies caused by the Syrian regime demonstrates that they are simply devices and tools created solely to serve the regime. We at the SNHR can confirm that there is not one independent media outlet in the areas controlled by the Syrian regime.

In addition, the Syrian regime has completely banned entry to all independent media outlets since the start of the popular uprising in March 2011, with this ban being still in effect to date. There are a very few exceptions to this ban on foreign media, which are subject to the approval of the Ministry of Interior and to a process of extortion and negotiations with journalists, who are constantly monitored throughout their time in the country. We note that some pro-Syrian regime media outlets also operate in Syria, such as Iranian, Russian and Lebanese media, but these are largely indistinguishable from the regime’s own media in their coverage and affiliation.

The Syrian regime has also blocked hundreds of websites which oppose or criticize it and communicate the truth about what is happening, including our - SNHR’s - website.

The Syrian regime has not only banned and blocked honest and independent media, but also prevents any Syrian citizen from expressing any independent opinions in the state-controlled media; whilst these media nominally belong to and represent all citizens, in reality they are subject to absolute control by the regime’s security services, and are routinely employed to spread hate speech and justify destruction, displacement and criminality carried out by the Syrian regime army, describing all opponents as terrorists. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Syrian regime’s media have played an extremely poor and wholly negative role in terms of raising awareness of the dangers of the disease in a scientific manner and notifying the public of the procedures that should be followed, failing to invite or facilitate any appearances by independent doctors and technical experts for this purpose.

# V. Freedom to hold political opinions and participate in free elections:

Hafez al Assad legitimized dictatorship and tyranny through a provision included in Article 8 of the 1973 Constitution, which literally states that the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party is the leader of the state and society. The Assad family’s absolute control of the reins of power in Syria is further cemented by the conflation of the Presidency of the Republic with the post of Secretary-General of the Ba’ath Party in Syria, both of which are dynastic, passing from Hafez al Assad to his son Bashar al Assad. This article, which contradicts the most basic principles of human rights and democracy, remained in force until the creation of a ‘new’ constitution in February 2012, which altered the previous one in minor detail only, with no perceptible difference in its application on the ground, and according to which the Ba’ath Party retained absolute control, with the Secretary-General’s position remaining exclusively in the hands of the Assad family, being available to no other member of the party, with the Ba’ath Party controlling nearly two-thirds of the seats in all parliamentary elections that have taken place since the Syrian revolution started, in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections.

Textual changes in the constitution and laws, no matter how simple, are not applied on the ground. In Syria, there is one party that nominates one person from an exclusively specific family, a situation that has been unchanged for decades, with the Syrian constitution that was drafted under the influence of the security services legitimizing the crime and granting absolute powers to the president of the republic, who is the head of the executive authority, the army, and the Ba’ath party, as well as enabling the president to head the Supreme Judicial Council, and furthermore to enjoy wide-ranging powers in controlling the People’s Assembly and enacting laws, thus consolidating dictatorship and tyranny and ending any politically partisan pluralism.

All the parties that were formed after the promulgation of the February 2012 constitution are bogus and worthless entities closely monitored by the security services. None of them have condemned or criticized the ruling party routinely and regularly despite all the violations and crimes committed by the Syrian regime. The People’s Assembly, which is dominated by the Ba’ath Party, has presented no criticism of the executive authority despite all the suffering it has inflicted on the Syrian people and the state; this includes the displacement of nearly 13 million Syrian citizens, the use of chemical weapons and the deployment of barrel bombs, in addition to the related deterioration of the Syrian economy, with more than 85% of Syrians now living below the poverty line, while torture and enforced disappearance conducted by the security services have reached the level of crimes against humanity, according to a large number of UN reports. Despite all this, according to the pre-decided results of the sham elections that took place last month, the Ba’ath Party won again, and its Secretary General remains exclusively Bashar al Assad.

# VI. Forced displacement of civilians and pillaging of their property:

The Syrian regime has indiscriminately and intensively bombed large areas of the Syrian state, with the indiscriminate bombing and targeting of vital facilities and civilian residential neighborhoods causing widespread destruction, killing or injuring thousands of Syrian citizens. At the SNHR, we have noted a widespread state of fear and terror of Syrian Regime forces; after any incident of bombardment and destruction operations, when these forces come close to controlling a certain area, we witness mass displacement of the population of this area, at a rate that may exceed 98% of its population; this clearly shows that these forces have become a fundamental threat to the Syrian citizens, and we have recorded arrests, enforced disappearances, and illegal recruitment of some of the families who decided to stay in the areas that the Syrian regime controlled in recent years, such as the old neighborhoods of Homs, Damascus Suburbs, southern Syria and others. This has become a predictable pattern as a general rule, that is to say, the vast majority of the population is first displaced. At the same time, those who decide to stay are subjected to arrests or illegal conscription (because they are serving the Syrian regime and recruits are required to commit violations that may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes).

We refute the Syrian regime’s implausible claims to be ridding Syria of terrorists simply by reporting these facts that we have documented and substantiated through exhaustively detailed reports, including satellite images and testimonies. Syrian citizens’ well-justified fear of the regime’s persecution is the reason why hardly any of the residents of the areas the Syrian regime enters remain there, despite being fully aware of the terrible conditions that they will face after leaving their homes, and in light of a sharp decline in the quantities and delivery of humanitarian aid. Regardless of all the daunting challenges facing them, they flee because they are also fully aware of the terrible fate awaiting them if Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias arrest them, which is far worse than displacement; for this reason also, they do not voluntarily return after the Syrian regime controls these areas.

Air strikes have caused nearly 70% of the total destruction in Syria, with the air forces which have bombed these areas being those of the Syrian and Russian regimes; the Syrian regime and its allies have also used other types of weapons, including cluster munitions, against residential neighborhoods, which pose a decades-long threat to the population, in particular farmers and children.

Years of bombardment and siege have forced the Armed Opposition factions to submit to the forced displacement agreements concluded by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, which have reached 15 agreements in total since August 2016, and have caused the displacement of nearly 220,000 people. It should be noted that the guarantors of these agreements, which followed the de-escalation agreements, have not abided by them, leading to the displacement of the people of those besieged areas in convoys, most of which went to Idlib governorate, which has received the brunt of the displacement.

The Syrian regime has not provided any care for the displaced before or after displacing them, but rather contributed to the theft and looting of the UN aid sent to them, as we documented in an extensive report detailing the Syrian regime’s mechanisms for controlling and managing humanitarian aid.

The Syrian state, over which the Syrian regime presides, has paid absolutely no attention to the disastrous conditions of the displaced people, although the Syrian regime and its Russian ally are the main cause of their displacement. In light of the vast inadequacy of the humanitarian response and the high population density, especially in the regular and informal camps and shelter centers that are wholly insufficient for housing, and given the spread of COVID-19, the internally displaced persons (IDPs) are one of the groups in Syrian society most vulnerable to infection with the COVID-19 coronavirus, due to their lack of access to suitable houses and tents, and the lack of the most basic sanitation facilities such as toilets, functioning sewage networks and clean water. This water shortage means that the water supply necessary to maintain even basic cleanliness for each individual is far less than the normal amount and far smaller than that provided to the other regions in Syria. The homeless IDPs also struggle to obtain adequate tents, and are sometimes forced by lack of any other option to share tents with strangers, which has a particularly negative effect on women due to their special needs.

The Syrian state also did not facilitate the conditions for the return of the displaced people, but rather established practices that contribute to the continuity of their forced displacement, such as the widespread looting of the homes of forcibly displaced persons. It is inconceivable that such widespread looting could take place in isolation or without attracting the attention of the leaders of the Syrian army and Russian forces. Indeed, it seems that the monies made from this looting and pillaging of properties are essentially classified as unofficially forming part of the monthly income of the Syrian, Iranian and Russian regime forces; this willful selective blindness by the regime and its allies is why these crimes can be carried out in in such a blatant manner, with their troops and militias literally stripping homes of everything, not only furniture and electrical goods but even windows and doors, sanitary fixtures and electrical wire. The vast majority of the Syrian regime’s army, from the most senior officers downwards, are all very well aware of their forces’ looting operations, with the public sales of the stolen property taking place openly at ‘tafeesh’ markets established for this purpose in areas controlled by the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies, with large quantities of stolen furniture, electrical equipment, agricultural implements, and livestock for sale in these markets.

Added to the looting is the risk for IDPs or refugees returning to their original areas of being arrested, forcibly disappeared, tortured, or illegally conscripted.