

# Syrian Network for Human Rights

Truth and Justice Comes First

**SNHR**

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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



## Overview

Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) is an independent non-profit non-governmental Syrian human rights organization. Established in June 2011 in the wake of the systemically increasing human rights violations against the Syrian people and as a response to the need for various human rights groups that can contribute to exposing these practices and bring justice to the victims.

## Faith

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

## Credibility and Expansion

Since the establishment of SNHR in June 2011, all of its members, who are spread all over Syria, have worked on creating trust and cooperation with their local for the sake of documenting the increasing violations of human rights through collecting as much information and details on the daily incidents victims as possible in addition to documenting testimonies from survivors, relatives of the victims, those who are close to them and eyewitnesses who were present at the time of the incident. Over years of daily cumulative work, a wide web of relationships connecting thousands of sources has been formed. SNHR was able, through the continuous documentation, to rely on many of them as an additional reference to investigate information.



## The Organizational Structure

SNHR, in its administrative structure, consists of several sections, each has a director and a number of members according to the load of work assigned. The members are distributed within the section into groups that are concerned with the follow-up to a specific file related to the function of that section. The main departments are: (1) The Department of Victims' Documentation, (2) The Department of Detainees and Enforced-disappearance Documentation, (3) The Department of Reports and Studies, (4) The Department of Women and children, (5) The Department of Social Media (6) The Department of Advocacy in addition to supportive administrative departments which are: (translation, design, information technology, human resources, financial, and public relations).

## Human Resources

The work of SNHR has improved and its organizational structure has expanded in parallel with the unfortunate ever-increasing violations in Syria since 2011, which began with extrajudicial killings and arrests and then enforced-disappearance, indiscriminate shelling, and other... The team of SNHR, in the meantime (May 2016), consists of twenty-five full-time members, and approximately seventy volunteers who are local activists and human rights defenders. SNHR members are spread mainly across Syria and nearby countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan in addition to some other countries depending on the nature of the assigned tasks.

## Capacity building

SNHR works continuously on building and improving the capacities of its members as defenders of human rights. That is achieved through enrolling in training workshops hosted by expert professionals with the support and cooperation of international organizations working in the same domains; as well as through the providing practical experiences for its members through their contact with local and international experts who support the work of the Network and also with others who provide the members with practical knowledge in the course of their work (such as international law experts, military experts, doctors, and psychologists.)



## Finance

SNHR funds its work and activities through unconditional grants and donations from individuals and institutions... And also through carrying out human rights projects, studies, and researches that focus fundamentally on documenting human rights violations and advocating victims. SNHR is committed to a policy of fiscal transparency with donors through providing them with financial reports and supporting documents.

## Partnerships

SNHR is a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, the Euro-Mediterranean Network of Human Rights, and a founding member of the Transitional Justice Coordination Work Group.

## SNHR Work Methodology

### Clarity and Commitment

SNHR ensures to brief survivors, witnesses, relatives of the victims, and those who are close to them, on its methodology and the purpose of their testimonies as well as having their right to conceal their identities and their right to keep all the provided information away from public use if they believe that might involve a risk. SNHR owns a complete archive of the names of the witnesses, their addresses, and their testimonies as well as all the photos and the videos included in the reports and researches that are published; in addition to following high-level safety measures to maintain the security of this information.

### Definitions and Classifications

SNHR is committed through its work to the definitions and classifications included in the International Law of Human Rights human and International Humanitarian Law, as well as the definitions and classifications used by international bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, which says, for example, (in the absence of a conclusive evidence on the identity of the victim and if there is a doubt in his classification, civilian or warrior, we classify him as a civilian).

As a result of the existence of several definitions as to what constitutes a certain incident as a massacre according to the number of the victims who were killed all at once, as well as if the arrested is considered as a forcibly-disappeared according to the period of time that passed without any documented information about them; SNHR adopted, through its



work, the following definitions:

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

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

## Classification of the Committed Violations Parties

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

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



- The fifth party: International Coalition Forces led by the United States of America: it is a coalition of a group of countries led by the United States of America with the goal of fighting Islamic State Organization – ISIS-- . It commenced its strike in September 2014
- The sixth party: Russian Forces: official armed forces affiliated to the Russian Federation, which declared its entering to Syria in September 2015.
- The seventh party: This category includes victims killed in bombing we haven't identify the groups behind them, unknown sources of bullets, landmines of unknown sources, drowning, and Jordanian, Lebanese, and Turkish forces.

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

## Documentation and Classification of Victims

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

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

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



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

## Documentation of Detainees

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

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

In addition to the challenges faced by SNHR team for documenting the detainees, large segments of the Syrian society are fully convinced of the uselessness of cooperation with



human rights bodies in the process as a result of the failure of any of them as well as the international community and the United Nations and all of its organs to press on the Syrian authorities to release even one case (including prisoners whose sentences have ended), even prisoners of conscience. Most of the releases were part of exchange deals with the armed opposition, or through paying bribes or ransoms for influential officials.

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

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

SNHR allows anyone to view details about the detainee through using the detainees search engine of the detainees on the official web site of the Network, it also offers a special model that can be filled by the name and information of the detainee so the department of detainees can follow up and ensures their validity and then be included in the database.

## Documenting Vital Facilities

SNHR works on a daily basis on documenting the targeting of vital facilities. These facilities are classified into places of worship such as mosques and churches; medical facilities such as medical centers, ambulances; educational facilities such as schools and universities; cultural facilities such as archeological areas and museums; communal facilities such as gardens, markets, and playgrounds; International Humanitarian Insignia such as centers and vehicles of red crescent and red cross; infrastructures such as power stations and energy sources as well as civil defense centers and factories; Diplomatic representatives and refugee camps.





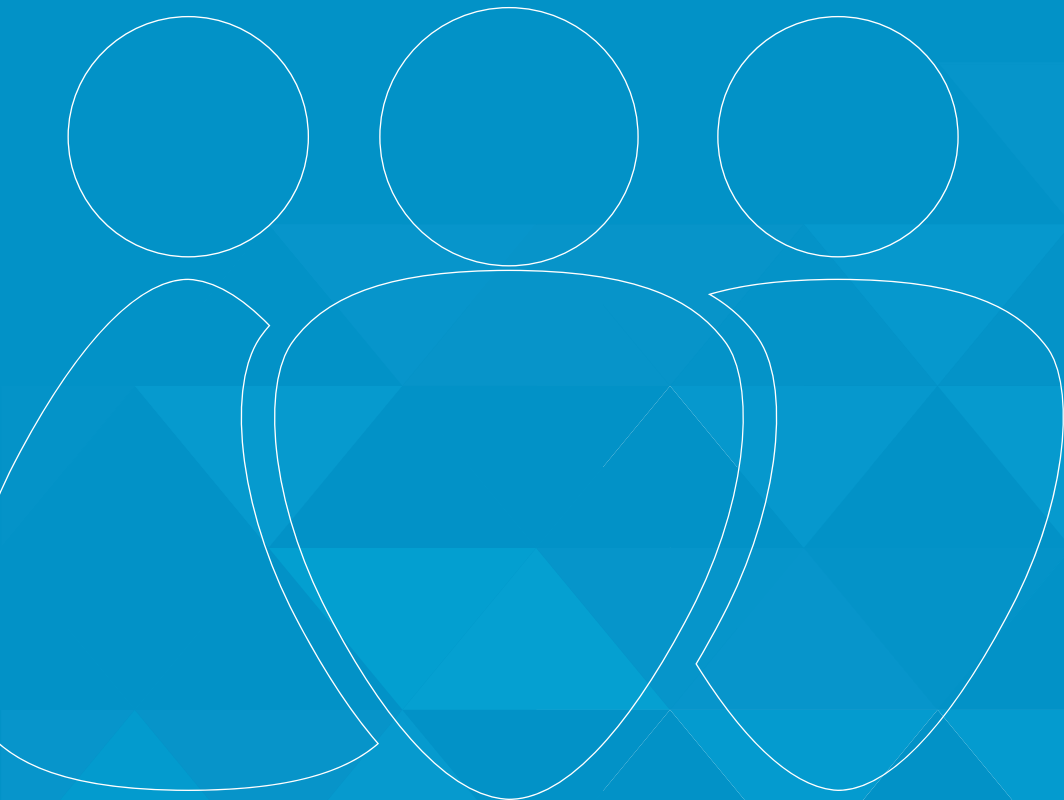
## Challenges

The documentation processes of human rights violations in Syria is one of the most difficult and complicated processes in the world in light of the extraordinary and exceptional circumstances during which the documentation process takes place. At the beginning, there was only one side committing all the violations which is the Syrian government.

However, with time, the number of sides that perpetrate human rights violations in Syria have increased. Sometimes it is hard to determine the party who committed the violation so it is mentioned under unidentified groups. In this context all incidents are subjected to follow-ups over the course of investigation and in case we discovered additional information or more precise information, or errors, we update the Network database.

All the statistics and reports issued by SNHR, other human rights organizations, the International Independent Commission of Inquiry for Syria, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, only covers the minimum number of casualties, detainees, injuries, and destruction; this is what the SNHR managed to document in light of the ban, obstruction, pursuit, and security threats and given the limited funding as well. The process of documenting human rights violations and crimes in Syria will still go on for decades to come.





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