

4.8. Journalists, other media professionals and human rights activists

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, this document has been reviewed and updated. Please consult '[Interim Country Guidance: Syria \(2025\)](#)'

COMMON ANALYSIS

Last update: February 2023

*Minor updates: April 2024

This profile refers to journalists, other media professionals and bloggers. It also refers to human rights activists, i.e. persons who individually or with others act to promote or protect human rights. For guidance on political opposition activists, see [4.1.3. Political activists, opposition party members and protesters](#).

COI summary

[Main COI reference: [Targeting 2022](#), 7, pp. 73-79]

Journalists and media workers in Syria were exposed to major risks and threats during the reference period, including arrests and detention, abductions, attacks as well as killings. Freedom of press was reported to be restricted and journalists faced censorship, torture and death while in custody. Journalists and media workers were targeted by various parties involved in the conflict in Syria: the GoS, Turkish backed forces, forces affiliated with the Kurdish-led AANES, as well as groups such as HTS and ISIL. The situation for journalists remains extremely dangerous throughout Syria and, the few areas that the GoS has not yet retaken reportedly pose a particularly high risk for them.

Human rights defenders in Syria have been also facing an increased risk of targeting after 2011, including reports of arbitrary arrests and detention, abductions, enforced disappearance, torture, prosecution, death threats, restriction of movement, defamation, as well as other forms of intimidation and harassment [[Targeting 2020](#), 8, p. 69]. There were also reports of sexual violence while in detention in the case of women human rights defenders or activists [[Targeting 2022](#), 13.3.2, p. 116].

Different actors may be responsible for the targeting of journalists and of human rights activists in Syria.

Targeting by government forces and affiliated armed groups

[[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, pp. 15-16; [Targeting 2022](#), 7.2, pp. 75-76]

The Syrian Arab Republic is considered one of the most restrictive places for media and journalism. Since the 2011 civil war, the GoS has restricted press freedom even further [[Targeting 2022](#), 7.2, pp. 75]. In GoS-held areas, the authorities were reportedly controlling all forms of media- and internet-based expression, and independent media outlets did not exist [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, p. 15]. The detention, arrest, harassment (e.g. intimidation, dismissal, banning individuals from the country) and killings of journalists and other writers by forces of the GoS for allegedly speaking critically of the state were reported. This was also the case for journalists associated with pro-GoS networks. The GoS forces routinely detained, intimidated, and tortured YouTubers and other citizen journalists. In March 2022, Syria's president signed into law a bill imposing new restrictions on the media further limiting freedom of expression. In April 2022, Syria's President ratified Cybercrime Law No 20 of 2022 which classified certain acts as cybercrime, including 'publishing online content that the government finds objectionable'. The law imposes harsher punishments for publishing dissident content on the internet (up to 15 years in prison) [[Targeting 2022](#), 7.2, pp. 75-76]. According to the SNHR, the GoS arrested a variety of individuals based on the Cybercrime Law, including pro-government media workers and citizen journalists. These included persons who on social media called for the implementation of the Anti-Torture Act in GoS-controlled areas or voiced criticism of living conditions and corruption in GoS-held areas. The authorities also arrested one or several individuals for allegedly communicating news to external media. In the wake of the 6 February 2023 earthquake, sources reported that authorities arrested individuals who had criticised the GoS's aid distribution practices [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, pp. 15-16].

There were reports indicating that family members of journalists working for opposition media in Europe were arrested, detained for days, and allegedly tortured. [[Targeting 2022](#), 7.2, p. 76].

GoS continued to target human rights defenders and the authorities have kept extensive lists of persons wanted for arrest or questioning. These lists reportedly included the names of individuals suspected of involvement in perceived opposition activities, such as working for NGOs and human rights activists. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.1.3, p. 21]

See also [4.1. Persons perceived to be opposing the government](#).

Targeting by the SDF

[[Targeting 2022](#), 7.5, pp. 78-79]

Although north-eastern Syria, controlled by the US-backed SDF, is considered to be marginally more open to media than other parts of Syria, SDF have continued to obstruct freedom of expression, to target civilians, including journalists, who were considered members of an opposing party or perceived to be critical of the de facto authorities, and to harass the media, including arrests of their personnel.

The SDF also continued to arbitrarily arrest persons who had links to political parties opposing the PYD or the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration or criticised their policies. These detainees included political activists, humanitarian workers and civil society activists. [[Targeting 2022](#), 5.1, p. 58]

See also [4.5. Persons perceived to be opposing the SDF/YPG](#).

Targeting by the SNA

[[Targeting 2022](#), 7.4, p. 78]

There were continuing reports of the SNA detaining civilians for criticising its factions and a source indicated that investigations into arbitrary detention of journalists were underway. Released detainees cited torture and ill-treatment in SNA detention centres in 2021.

Activists critical of Turkish-backed armed groups have also been victims of abductions by them [[Targeting 2022](#), 10.2]. In October 2022, a social media activist and his pregnant wife were killed by SNA affiliates after having organised demonstrations against actions by the SNA [[COI Update 2022](#), p. 8].

Targeting by HTS

[[Targeting 2022](#), 7.3, pp. 77-78]

Reports on arrests of journalists and media activists for criticising HTS have continued. Media activists were arrested without judicial involvement and without clearly communicated charges, and at times were subjected to detention under harsh conditions, torture, and ill-treatment. In July 2020, the HTS-linked Syrian Salvation Government imposed a regulation which prescribed that journalists were not allowed to work in areas under its control without obtaining its permission. In order to obtain this card, journalists were required to provide a range of information to the Syrian Salvation Government. Journalists who did not carry a card risked restriction of movement as well as arrest.

In 2021, HTS continued to arbitrarily detain activists and humanitarian workers in Idlib. HTS targeted women media workers and activists for exercising freedom of expression, such as speaking out against the group's rule. Women activists were detained by the group without respect for judicial guarantees. [[Targeting 2022](#), 13.4.2, p. 118]

Targeting by ISIL

[[Targeting 2020](#), 7.6, p. 68]

Based on past reports, ISIL seized thousands of individuals, including journalists, whose fate remained unknown. Citizen journalists had also been pursued, arrested, threatened with torture and death, terrorised and forced to promote ISIL ideology and propaganda.

Furthermore, ISIL often focused on killing or abducting well-known personalities and activists with the aim of instilling as much fear as possible in the population, but also to deprive society of highly educated people. [[Targeting 2022](#), 8.2, pp. 83-84]

Conclusions and guidance

Do the acts qualify as persecution under Article 9 QD?

Acts reported to be committed against individuals under this profile are of such severe nature that they amount to persecution (e.g. killing, arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, kidnapping, torture, enforced disappearance).



What is the level of risk of persecution (well-founded fear)?

In the case of journalists and human rights activists who are seen as critical by the actor in control of the particular area, well-founded fear of persecution would in general be substantiated.

In the case of other journalists and human rights activists, the individual assessment of whether there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for the applicant to face persecution should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as: the topic they report or work on, regional aspects (reach of the actors they report on), visibility, gender, etc.



Are the reasons for persecution falling within Article 10 QD (nexus)?

Available information indicates that persecution of this profile is highly likely to be for reasons of (imputed) political opinion. In the case of persecution by extremist groups such as the HTS, it may also be for reasons of religion.