

8.1.3. Current conflicts (2011 – ongoing)

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 added: April 2024

An overview of the most important actors who may have been involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity is given below.

The Government of Syria and associated armed groups

The implication of the regime and the associated armed groups in acts which fall under the exclusion provision of [Article 12\(2\)\(a\) QD](#) and [Article 17\(1\)\(a\) QD](#) has been noted repeatedly by the UN and other actors. More than 100 000 people have been detained, abducted or gone missing so far since the beginning of Syria's civil war in 2011, largely at the hands of the GoS's security forces, the police, the Army, pro-government militias and the different branches of the intelligence service [[Security 2022](#), 1.4.1, pp. 25-27; [Targeting 2020](#), 1.1, pp. 14-18; [Security 2019](#), 4.3, pp. 33-34]. There are multiple reports of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances, in particular by elite divisions such as the Fourth Division, the Special Forces (including the former Tiger Forces) and others, as well as pro-government militias [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.1, p. 12; [Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 26, [Targeting 2022](#), 1.1.2, p. 20; [Actors](#), 2.4, pp. 37-39]. Those who were arrested were subjected to systematic torture in one of the intelligence services' many detention centres [[Security 2019](#), 4.3, p.33]. Most of the victims were men between the ages of 18 and 60, but torture of women and children was also reported [[Actors](#), 2.4, p. 38]. They were detained for days or months, often without being brought before a judge and without being told what they were accused of. In most cases, the detainees' families were not informed of their whereabouts. Detainees were held in crowded cells and without sufficient food. Many are assumed to have died while in detention as a result of torture, starvation or lack of adequate medical assistance [[Security 2019](#), 4.3, p. 33]. Tens of thousands of people remain disappeared, most of them since 2011, including peaceful activists, humanitarian workers, lawyers, journalists, peaceful critics and government opponents, as well as individuals detained in place of relatives wanted by the authorities [[Actors](#), 2.4, p. 37].

Throughout the conflict, government forces and associated armed groups have used a wide range of tactics to force opposition held areas into surrendering including sieges, blocking of humanitarian aid, denial of access to food and other basic services, and targeted attacks on medical facilities, schools and local markets. GoS attacks on opposition-held areas have been largely disproportionate, including attacks against protected objects and residential areas. The GoS not only used cluster bombs, which have an indiscriminate effect, but also weapons that have been banned internationally, such as some chemical and incendiary weapons. The Assad regime has been reported to deliberately and repeatedly target civilians in Syria with both conventional and chemical weapons. Reports range from 32 to about 330 chemical attacks attributed to the Syrian

government [[Security 2022](#), 1.6.1 (d), p. 54; [Targeting 2022](#), 8.1, pp. 80-82 ; [Security 2020](#), 1.6.1.4, p. 35-36, Annex II, pp. 244, 245; [Actors](#), 2.4, pp. 38-39]. Sexual violence, including rape, of women, girls and occasionally men, committed by government forces and associated militias during ground operations, raids and in detention, was also reported [[Actors](#), 2.4, p. 38]. Recent sources indicated that, GoS forces continued to employ ground-based and aerial attacks on populated areas resulting in civilian casualties. They were further responsible for arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings and deaths in detention centres due to torture [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 26].

Child recruitment by GoS armed forces, including NDF and other pro-government militias was also reported [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.4, p. 40; [Targeting 2020](#), 12.1, pp. 92-93].

Anti-government armed groups

Exclusion considerations could be relevant with regard to (former) members of all anti-government armed groups.

In 2017, for example, Syria was ranked fifth in the world with regard to deaths resulting from terrorist attacks, after Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria and Somalia. ISIL, a UN- and EU-designated terrorist organisation, was responsible for 63 % of the registered deaths resulting from terrorist attacks in Syria in 2017. [[Actors](#), 6.1, p. 59; [Security 2019](#), 4.2, p.32]

Following the establishment of its so called ‘caliphate’ in Syria and Iraq, ISIL has killed hundreds of civilians, including women and children, and carried out public executions, beheadings and crucifixions. Furthermore, ISIL carried out assassinations, suicide attacks, and abductions. Religious minorities in Syria, such as Shias, Ismailis, Alawites and Christians, as well as Sunni Muslims who did not adhere to ISIL’s religious laws, were specifically targeted [[Security 2022](#), 1.4.6, pp. 37-40; [Targeting 2020](#), 5.3.2, pp. 56-57; [Security 2020](#), Annex II, pp. 244-247; [Actors](#), 6.4, pp. 61-63]. ISIL used civilians as human shield in its defence of Raqqa and other towns, and employed internationally banned landmines to hold off the advance of attacking forces [[Security 2020](#), Annex II, p. 246]. . Recent sources noted that ISIL continued its ‘guerrilla warfare tactics’ launching hit and run attacks against GoS and SDF forces, but also against civilians [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.6, pp. 33-34].

HTS, also a UN- and EU-designated terrorist organisation, was formed in 2017 as a coalition of Islamist Sunni anti-government armed groups, through the merger of Jabhat al-Nusrah (also a UN-designated terrorist organisation since 2013) with other smaller factions [[Actors](#), 4.1.1, p. 49]. Attacks by HTS and affiliated armed groups on GoS positions were described as often indiscriminate in nature. These groups also terrorised, killed, and maimed dozens of civilians in the countryside of Aleppo, Hama, and elsewhere [[Security 2022](#), 7.3, pp. 77-78; [Security 2020](#), 1.6.1.2, p. 33]. The group has conducted formal military campaigns, assassinations, hostage takings, and ‘lone wolf’ operations, including suicide bombings. In areas where HTS is operating, civilians are unlawfully detained, kidnapped and tortured for expressing political dissent. It was reported that civilians, including humanitarian workers and media activists were targeted and received death threats for being critical of HTS, as well as extorted and used for ransom [[Actors](#), 4.1.4, p. 52]. In recent times, the group attempted to publicly distance itself from al-Qaeda and portray it as a legitimate civilian authority. Despite its legitimisation efforts, HTS continued to commit serious human rights violations [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.4, p. 31].

Groups operating under the SNA (the former NLF) were involved in kidnappings, abductions, torture, extortion and assassinations of civilians. It was reported that Turkish forces and the affiliated SNA were responsible for indiscriminate attacks on residential areas, summary killings and unlawful attacks that killed and injured civilians, among others, during the offensive in northeast Syria. The SNA-branded group Ahrar al-Sharqiya has been most frequently named as the perpetrator of summary killings and human rights abuses during the October 2019 offensive. According to recent sources, SNA forces continued to be responsible for extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, including rape, and pillage, ‘all of which may amount

to separate war crimes’ [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.2, p. 28; [COI Update 2022](#), 3., pp. 8-9; [Security 2022](#), 1.4.2, pp. 29-30; [Actors](#), 5.2, pp. 58-59].

There were also reports of child recruitment by anti-government armed groups, such as Ahrar al Sham, groups affiliated with the FSA, ISIL, Army of Islam, HTS, and Nur al-Din al-Zanki [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.4, p. 41; [Targeting 2020](#), 12.1, pp. 92-94].

Kurdish political actors (PYD) and security forces (SDF, YPG, Asayish)

The PYD and Asayish engaged in arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and torture of political opponents such as the KNC, arrests of journalists, members of human rights organisations, individuals who refused to cooperate with Kurdish groups or persons perceived to be affiliated with ISIL or armed opposition groups [[Actors](#), 3.3, p.48]. During anti-ISIL operations in Hasaka and Raqqqa governorates, the YPG forces were reported to be engaged in razing of villages, confiscation of property and forced displacement of people in retaliation for perceived affiliation or sympathies to ISIL or other armed groups [[Targeting 2020](#), 3.2, pp. 41-42]. Thousands of women, men and children were reported to be unlawfully interned or detained in areas under the control of SDF, some of them held in deplorable conditions in makeshift camps unfit to meet their basic needs. The YPG/YPJ were also reported to recruit children [[Actors](#), 3.3, p. 48]. In the period April 2021 to July 2022, the SDF engaged in extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention of civilians [[Security 2022](#), 1.4.3., p. 32]. Recent sources noted that, the SDF engaged in extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearance as well as torture in detention centres [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.3., p. 30]. They also continued to recruit children, whose number increased in 2022 [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.4, p. 41].

See other relevant circumstances (Exclusion):

- [8.1.1. The Syrian intervention in the Lebanese civil war and presence in Lebanon \(1976-2005\)](#)
- [8.1.2. The Muslim Brotherhood Uprising in Syria \(1979-1982\) which comprised the Hama Massacre \(February 1982\)](#)
- [8.1.3. Current conflicts \(2011-ongoing\)](#)
- [8.1.4. Criminality](#)
- [8.1.5. Violence against women and children](#)