

ONGOING MASS ATROCITIES AND CURRENT RISKS TO CIVILIANS IN SYRIA

POLICY UPDATE

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This policy update is a brief overview of key areas of concern. For more information, please see:

<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/syria>

Cover: Syrian refugees seek safety in February 2014. *Lucian Perkins for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.*



INTRODUCTION

Syrians took to the streets in 2011 to call for political reforms that would ensure basic rights and freedoms. President Bashar al-Assad’s government responded brutally, using anti-terror rhetoric as cover for targeting civilians in a violent campaign that has continued for more than a decade. According to the UN, the conflict has killed an estimated 300,000 civilians¹ and has forced more than 13 million people,² over half of Syria’s population, to flee their homes.

A devastating earthquake struck southern Turkey and northwest Syria on February 6, 2023, killing an estimated 50,000 people total,³ including approximately 6,000 in Syria.⁴ The disaster struck those—both internally displaced people in Syria and Syrian refugees in Turkey—who had previously fled mass atrocities and who were already living in vulnerable conditions. The catastrophic loss of life from the earthquake compounds the trauma on communities that had already suffered immensely.

Twelve years into the conflict, international attention may have faded, yet civilians in Syria remain at risk of mass atrocities. Governments should redouble efforts to protect vulnerable civilian populations and hold perpetrators accountable for mass atrocities, and should push back against efforts to normalize relations with the Syrian government.

MASS ATROCITY CRIMES

The Syrian government—with the assistance of Russia, Iran, and Iranian affiliated militia—has committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against Syrian civilians, including forced displacement; arbitrary detention; extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; sexual violence; torture; aerial bombardments in civilian areas, including the use of cluster and barrel bombs; attacks on hospitals, schools and markets; starvation through besiegement; chemical attacks; and the blocking of humanitarian convoys, medical supplies, and food from reaching those in need.⁵

By targeting civilian infrastructure, the Syrian government intentionally exacerbates the harm inflicted upon civilians, making sure that those injured in attacks cannot seek health care, that children cannot pursue their education, and that ordinary people in Syria can no longer pursue their livelihoods. At the height of the conflict, the Syrian government besieged cities⁶, cutting civilians off from life-saving assistance and deliberately plunging civilians into starvation, all while bombing the area. Many armed groups in Syria are reported to have targeted civilians, including forces opposing the Syrian government, extremist groups including the so-called Islamic State, and Turkish-backed militias—but the Syrian government and its allies have been responsible for the vast majority of attacks on civilians.

Mass arrests, detention, forced disappearance, and summary execution in the country's notorious prison system has been a central strategy employed by the Assad regime. These crimes have featured prominently since the beginning of the crackdown on popular protests in 2011, when the first victims were teenagers who were arrested and tortured for anti-Assad graffiti.⁷ In the years since, approximately 100,000 people have been disappeared by the Syrian government.⁸ Several survivors of the government's detention facilities have publicly shared shocking details of physical and psychological torture,⁹ and a military defector known as "Caesar" smuggled tens of thousands of images of the regime's brutality, to the outside world.¹⁰ The government's tactic of arrest, disappearance, and torture has been deployed by Syria's leaders for decades, and the detention system likely will stay intact after the war. The government uses detention—and the threat of it—to create a climate of fear among the Syrian population, in particular civil society leaders and those who oppose Assad, and has wielded this fear as a way to control a terrorized population and deter dissent. Fear of arrest and detention is a key reason why people have fled, and why they feel it will still be unsafe to return home,¹¹ even after the end of hostilities, if Assad were to remain in power.

As governments around the world develop strategies to approach reconciliation and reconstruction in Syria, criminal accountability for these crimes must be a paramount priority. Justice is a key demand of Syrian victims and survivors, and strong accountability efforts would signal to other authoritarian governments that they too would face serious consequences if they were to commit mass atrocities.

FUTURE RISKS TO CIVILIANS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

The underlying causes of the conflict—political mismanagement, corruption, and rampant human rights violations—have not been resolved. The Syrian government continues to employ strategies that deliberately inflict harm on civilian populations as a means of eliminating dissent and regaining lost territory. The ongoing unaddressed grievances, coupled with the ongoing atrocities and devastating trauma and loss from a dozen years of violent conflict, may trigger future mass protests and subsequent crackdowns. United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pederson has described the conflict in Syria as reaching a "strategic stalemate."¹² The involvement of multiple armed actors and proxy groups over the past twelve years has resulted in a fragmented state where the Syrian government, Syrian armed opposition groups, extremist

groups, and Turkey and Turkish-backed groups control different parts of the country.¹³ Twelve years into the conflict, the level of civilian casualties has diminished, but Syrian civilians still face a serious risk of mass atrocities.

1. One major concern is northwest Syria, notably Idlib province, one of the last remaining areas of opposition control and home to approximately three million civilians including nearly 1.9 million internally displaced persons¹⁴—many of whom came to the area after fleeing attacks in other parts of the country. They have faced a long-term humanitarian crisis, as the Syrian government has delayed assistance from reaching the area.¹⁵ Before the February 6, 2023 earthquake, approximately 90 percent of the population in northwest Syria relied on humanitarian assistance for basic needs.¹⁶ Humanitarian needs among the civilian population—now reeling from the destruction of the earthquake—remain dire. There have been minimal and delayed efforts by the Syrian government to allow greater access,¹⁷ and while greater openness for aid is beneficial, these openings should not be opportunities for the Syrian government to exercise political leverage for its own benefit.

From April 2019 to March 2020, the Syrian government, aided by Russia, increased aerial bombardment of civilian areas and infrastructure, including hospitals. In less than a year, these attacks killed at least 1600 civilians and forcibly displaced approximately 1.4 million people.¹⁸ An uneasy peace emerged after a ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey in early 2020, but even the status quo is unsustainable; a November 2022 attack by Russia claimed civilian lives¹⁹ and in January 2023 the Syrian government reportedly increased artillery attacks in Idlib province.²⁰

2. Of the over 110,000 people forcibly disappeared in Syria since the beginning of the conflict,²¹ untold numbers remain in Syria’s detention centers today. Thousands of those detained have been executed in secret. Despite this evidence and the testimony of survivors released from detention, the Syrian government has only accepted responsibility for several hundred deaths in custody.

The Syrian government, with the support of the Russian and Iranian governments, has retaken areas of the country formerly held by opposition forces. In government-controlled areas, people perceived as “disloyal” to the government, including returning refugees, face the risk of detention and torture.²² The ongoing threat of detention and disappearance facing civilians in these areas is a sign that, even if the conflict were to come to an end, civilians will remain at risk.

3. The population of Rukban camp, an encampment in southern Syria along the Jordanian border very close to an area controlled by the U.S. military, has dwindled from 75,000 to approximately 10,000 people. The Syrian government and Russian forces have squeezed the people who remain in Rukban by cutting off humanitarian assistance and blocking smuggling routes for people to escape to safety.²³ Vast numbers of people left the camp because of chronic shortages of food and other necessities, and returned to government-held areas where they now face risks of detention, torture, and forced conscription. Those living in Rukban today are facing severe aid shortages and have no good option to find safety. The United States has called on Syria and Russia to provide aid.²⁴



Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan. February 15, 2014. *Lucian Perkins for US Holocaust Memorial Museum.*

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

As the conflict enters its twelfth year, the international community seems to have pushed Syria lower on the list of policy priorities. Countries including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and others in the region, as well as some European countries, have begun normalizing relations with Syria.²⁵

There has been some measured progress to secure accountability for atrocity crimes. The United Nations Human Rights Council established a Commission of Inquiry in August 2011 to investigate human rights violations in Syria,²⁶ and the United Nations General Assembly established the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria in December 2016.²⁷ In addition to these and other formal fact-finding mandates, a range of civil society groups within Syria and externally have documented evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and have shared this information with the world. Promising efforts are moving forward to hold Syrian perpetrators of mass atrocities accountable in other countries; a case in Koblenz, Germany against a Syrian intelligence official resulted in the first guilty verdict for crimes against humanity perpetrated in Syria.²⁸ There is an effort explored by the United Nations Secretary-General, and supported by some family members of those disappeared and detained, to clarify the fate of missing people in Syria,²⁹ but to date progress in this area is stalled. Despite the wealth of evidence collected and these initial steps toward justice, perpetrators of crimes against humanity and war crimes continue to rule with impunity in Syria.

A WAY FORWARD FOR POLICYMAKERS

Efforts to halt mass atrocities against civilians in Syria have not been successful, which may lead policymakers to a state of fatigue or frustration. The ongoing nature of the crimes and the emerging spark of success regarding accountability should encourage policymakers to continue pressing for effective responses. Approaches that include ending the conflict, supporting accountability, assisting civilians at risk, and ensuring the non-acceptance of mass atrocities by the international community are all critical steps to protect Syrian civilians today.

Support accountability efforts.

- Focus information gathering resources on gaining insight into areas where the Syrian government has regained control. Monitor the risks to civilians in these areas and publicly call attention to risks they may face.
- Support civil society organizations within Syria and internationally who are documenting evidence of mass atrocities, including enforced disappearance and detention.
- Support prosecutions of perpetrators in third countries through the use of extraterritorial jurisdiction and consider additional options to facilitate prosecutions of high-level perpetrators and consider additional options to facilitate prosecutions of high-level perpetrators.
- Fully fund the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism to investigate mass atrocities in Syria and hold senior level perpetrators accountable.
- Working with survivors of detention and family members of those detained and disappeared, support the creation of an international institution focused on clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing people in Syria.
- Support efforts to protect former detainees and family members who are testifying in prosecutions of Syrian officials.

Counter efforts to normalize relations with the Syrian government.

- Ensure any normalization of relations with the Syrian government is contingent on effective and genuine steps taken to halt atrocities, enact a political transition in the country, and support accountability for mass atrocities.

Support those in need.

- Support civil society organizations leading earthquake rescue, recovery, and relief efforts in areas of Syria not controlled by the Syrian government. Seek expanded opportunities for cross-border aid delivery. Press for tracking of aid sent via Damascus to ensure it is used as intended.
- Press Syria and Russia to allow humanitarian aid delivery to displaced people in Rukban camp.
- Support humanitarian assistance efforts for Syrian refugees, including mental health care and trauma-sensitive counseling. Support resettlement of refugees who will not be able to safely return to Syria. Ensure Syrians are not forced to return to Syria, where they may face the risk of mass atrocities.

¹ “UN Human Rights Office Estimates More than 306,000 Civilians Were Killed over 10 Years in Syria Conflict,” OHCHR, June 28, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/un-human-rights-office-estimates-more-306000-civilians-were-killed-over-10>. Note that accurate casualty counts are difficult to ascertain, as there is insufficient access to information across Syria.

² “Eleven years on, mounting challenges push many displaced Syrians to the brink,” UNHCR, March 15, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2022/3/623055174/eleven-years-mounting-challenges-push-displaced-syrians-brink.html>.

³ “Earthquake death toll surpasses 50,000 in Turkey and Syria,” *Reuters*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/earthquake-death-toll-surpasses-50000-turkey-syria-2023-02-24/>.

⁴ “Syrian Arab Republic: Earthquakes - Syria Situational Updates,” OCHA, March 1, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-earthquakes-syria-situational-updates-1-march-2023>.

⁵ “Is The Worst Yet To Come? Ongoing Mass Atrocity Risks in Syria,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, March 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/syria/syria>. The Syrian government has used barrel bombs (large canisters of explosives dropped from helicopters and airplanes), cluster munitions (weapons that spread explosives over a wide area), and chemical weapons, all of which inflict extensive harm on civilians).

⁶ “Syria Sieges Still Matter,” Pax for Peace, March 6, 2019, <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/overview/syria-sieges-still-matter>.

⁷ Jamie Tarabay, “For many Syrians, the story of the war began with graffiti in Dara’a,” *CNN*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/15/middleeast/daraa-syria-seven-years-on-intl>.

⁸ “Record of enforced disappearance,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, <https://snhr.org/blog/2021/08/04/record-of-enforced-disappearances1/>.

⁹ “Syria: Please Don’t Forget Us,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/museum-exhibitions/syria-please-dont-forget-us>.

¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Uncovering the Horror in Syria,” YouTube, February 10, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ro495BOI86s&list=PLWQC3P4psZP6XHtE8w97iJi5yLM_2X681&index=4.

¹¹ “Syria: Former refugees tortured, raped, disappeared after returning home,” Amnesty International, September 7, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/syria-former-refugees-tortured-raped-disappeared-after-returning-home/>.

¹² Geir O. Pederson, “United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Briefing to the United Nations Security Council,” October 25, 2022, <https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2022-10->

25_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered_52.pdf.

¹³ Carla E. Humud, “Syria and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, February 24, 2023,

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11930#:~:text=Five%20countries%20operate%20in%20or,%2C%20aka%20ISIS%2FISIL>).

¹⁴ “Syrian Arab Republic: Population of Concern Overview Map,” UNHCR, December 31, 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/98708>.

¹⁵ “Northwest Syria: Aid Delays Deadly for Quake Survivors,” Human Rights Watch, February 15, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/15/northwest-syria-aid-delays-deadly-quake-survivors>.

¹⁶ “North-West Syria: Situation Report,” OCHA, February 25, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-syria-situation-report-25-february-2023-enar>.

¹⁷ “Syria-Türkiye: Three border crossings now operational for earthquake aid delivery,” *UN News*, February 20, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133697>.

¹⁸ “Targeting Life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure,” Human Rights Watch, October 15, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>.

¹⁹ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “At least 9 dead after Russian jets hit Syria’s rebel-held Idlib, rescuers say,” *Reuters*, November 7, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-jets-hit-syrias-rebel-held-idlib-least-nine-dead-rescuers-2022-11-06/>.

²⁰ “Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in January 2023,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, February 4, 2023, <https://snhr.org/blog/2023/02/04/most-notable-human-rights-violations-in-syria-in-january-2023/>.

²¹ “Record of enforced disappearance,” Syrian Network for Human Rights, <https://snhr.org/blog/2021/08/04/record-of-enforced-disappearances1/>.

²² Paulo Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Statement at 50th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, June 29, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/06/independent-international-commission-inquiry-syrian-arab-republic>; “Syria: Former refugees tortured, raped, disappeared after returning home,” Amnesty International, September 7, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/syria-former-refugees-tortured-raped-disappeared-after-returning-home/>.

²³ Hanna Davis, “Syrians struggle to survive in ‘no-man’s land’ desert camp,” *Al Jazeera*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/19/syrians-struggle-survive-no-mans-land-desert-camp>.

²⁴ Robert Wood, “Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situation in Syria,” February 28, 2023, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situation-in-syria-6/>.

²⁵ Steven Heydemann, “Assad’s normalization and the politics of erasure in Syria,” Brookings Institution, January 13, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/13/assads-normalization-and-the-politics-of-erasure-in-syria/>.

chaos/2022/01/13/assads-normalization-and-the-politics-of-erasure-in-syria/; Sandrine Amiel, “Which EU states are rebuilding diplomatic relations with Assad’s Syria?” *Euronews*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/06/17/which-eu-states-are-rebuilding-diplomatic-relations-with-assad-s-syria>.

²⁶ “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/independent-international-commission>.

²⁷ “The IIIM,” International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, <https://iiim.un.org/>.

²⁸ Ben Hubbard and Katrin Bennhold, “Syria War Crimes Verdict: Former Syrian Colonel Guilty in War Crimes Trial in Germany,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/syria-war-crimes-germany-verdict>.

²⁹ United Nations General Assembly, “Missing people in the Syrian Arab Republic - Report of the Secretary-General,” A/76/890, August 2, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports/a76890-missing-people-syrian-arab-republic-report-secretary-general>; Yasmien Almashan, “Lost in Syria: time for an international body to find the disappeared,” *Peace Insight*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/time-for-an-international-body-to-find-syrias-disappeared/?location=syria&theme=transitional-justice-reconciliation>.

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