

# \* The Syrian Network for Human Rights Documentation of Violations Was a Long and Tiresome Journey over the Past Decade

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## Preface

Civilian casualties have fallen since the early days of the popular uprising in March/ 2011, when the security services of the Syrian regime responded to the peaceful demonstrations with direct live gunfire aimed at killing and wounding. The need to document civilian casualties, arbitrary arrests, and enforced disappearances was my main initial reason for establishing the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) at the beginning of June/ 2011. The documentation of extrajudicial killings was and has remained the most prominent task of the Syrian Network for Human Rights ever since its establishment. This is because murder is the greatest type of abuse, and what applies to extrajudicial killings apply – in one way or another- to other violations, such as; arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearance, torture, indiscriminate bombardment, destruction, forced displacement, and many other violations which we've documented over the past decade, some of which amount to crimes against humanity.

In this paper, I will talk about five main aspects:

**First:** The initial stages of the documentation process and building a network of relationships with families, activists, and eyewitnesses.

**Second:** Building electronic programs that help in the documentation and archiving process and its development.

**Third:** The entry of multiple parties to the conflict, and the development of SNHR's methodology.

**Fourth:** The most notable challenges facing the documentation process.

**Fifth:** The evidence presented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights with regard to the issue of extrajudicial killing.

## **First: The initial stages of the documentation process and building a network of relationships with families, activists, and eyewitnesses:**

On March 18, 2011, the Syrian regime began killing unarmed Syrian civilians among the demonstrators and activists demanding freedom from decades of tyranny, oppression, and injustice by the security services, and demanding the fundamental right to live with dignity. This was a shock to me and to many other Syrians; we thought that this couldn't continue and that as soon as pictures of the dead were seen around the world, the international community in the twenty-first century would not allow a repetition of the Assad regime's heinous slaughter in Hama in 1982. Unfortunately, that assumption was wrong, and over the following days and weeks the extrajudicial killings continued and even expanded. During that period, I noted a lack of any periodic reports of the daily death toll, providing a list of the victims' names and places of death.

On noting this, I individually contacted the existing relevant human rights organizations, but most of them did not respond and had other priorities, with some of them expecting that the Syrian regime would soon fall.

As the killings continued (along with detentions, torture, and enforced disappearances), amid an absence of any cumulative effort to document and archive them, this constituted the primary incentive for me to establish the Syrian Network for Human Rights, at the beginning of June 2011.

At that stage, my objective in setting up the SNHR was to accurately document the killings and to circulate this information to various media outlets and some international bodies, in an effort to communicate verified factual data documented with the greatest accuracy and professionalism, which would enable the international community, in particular the civilized democratic countries and the United Nations, to build on them, and to intervene to protect civilians, stop the killings, and deter the Syrian regime from continuing to commit extrajudicial killings. This was our pivotal goal at the time.

The process of building the team, which initially consisted mostly of volunteer activists, was based on direct relationships and communication, and from the very first days I tried to take into account the geographical distribution process, especially in the 'hot' locations; that is, the areas that witnessed the largest number of demonstrations, and thus the probable highest number of victims since most of the victims (killed or arrested) were protesters, and to a second degree citizens killed during house raids by regime security forces which were launched either to arrest the demonstrators or with the aim of killing them directly. The majority of the activists in the team were demonstrators or media workers who photographed the

demonstrations with their phones and cameras, and finally there were some of the coordinators of the demonstrations. Initially, whenever a citizen was killed, his or her name would be transferred to one of the Skype groups established for documentation. At the beginning of the popular uprising, dozens of Skype rooms were created for this purpose; we had a group for documenting murder cases, and another group for documenting arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, with others established depending on requirements. There might be more than one activist from the same region, and thus there would be an exchange of news, reports and other information to verify each case and cross-reference it with external sources; all the published photos, videos, and news about each killing incident would be collected together, enabling us to cross-reference as much information as possible.

After the verification process was completed by the activists through confirming the photo or video footage in which the killed person appears, identifying the individual by name, and trying to communicate with his or her family, friends, or the hospital they had been taken to, there might remain (and still are) discrepancies in some of the data we had recorded between one case and another; while continuing work to verify the details in these cases, we would prepare lists of names and information on the victims whose details we had registered and confirmed, and then

correspond with media and international organizations, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and later the International Commission of Inquiry, submitting lists of victims and related information, including the daily death toll, and the locations where the victims were killed, along with the victims' names, and with photos and videos of them if available. At the end of each day, these lists would be subject to an additional verification process, prior to the publication of the daily report on the death toll of civilians, creating a Word document file bearing that day's date.

The publication of each day's casualties does not mean at all that the documentation process is final. Often, we subsequently receive additional information on previously unrecorded earlier casualties which, for one reason or another, wasn't sent at the time (these reasons include power cuts, internet problems and security risks). Sometimes we'll receive notification that individuals believed to have been killed have actually been hospitalized or activists will report that they have managed to establish contact with a person believed to have died, confirming that he or she is actually alive. As the documentation process is a continuous and accumulative one, we may also obtain additional photos of victims or incidents, or personal information on victims, such as details of their work, political or religious affiliations, etc. All this information, once verified, is used to ensure SNHR's records are up to

date. Given the nature of this work, we carry out a rigorous and comprehensive review process at the end of each month, cross-checking all the cases documented daily to help ensure accuracy and to avoid errors such as repetition, with the same victim's name sometimes appearing on one day, then being documented again a few days later.

Initially, these tasks were carried out completely manually, with daily response files being compiled, meaning that at the end of each month we would have either 30- or 31-Word documents (or 28 and 29 for February), which we would then incorporate into an Excel sheet, helping us in subsequent searches for information about a specific death toll for a particular date and location.

As time progressed, the popular uprising in Syria expanded and spread to new areas, meaning that security forces would be deployed to those areas with more casualties being recorded; with each development, we were keen to build relationships with activists in these areas. With the network of activists evolving organically as the occurrence of violations grew, it was increasingly difficult for volunteers alone to carry out the rapidly growing number of various tasks, including monitoring events and trying to reach eyewitnesses, survivors, and victims' relatives, so it became necessary for SNHR to move towards institutional work and to devote ourselves to this on a full-time basis; accordingly, we

appointed key field researchers for each of the main governorates, with each field researcher worked to expand the network of relationships and resources in their area, with some researchers' networks of contacts reaching a few thousand.

The ongoing process of publishing news reports detailing victims and daily incidents, issuing periodic reports, working with various media and dealing with referrals to the Syrian Network from international organizations, including the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, and continuing our other work in various areas earned us an unparalleled reputation for credibility and reliability among the members of the Syrian community, and we received constant news reports via Skype, e-mail, and social media from additional sources, as well as from the families of victims, and eyewitnesses, meaning we moved to the next step in our work, as we used to seek to obtain the news, but then we started to receive news as well, the diverse range of unconnected information sources which we cited further added to our reputation for integrity and helped to enhance the credibility of our reports on events.

As the days, weeks, and months passed, the SNHR's network of contacts expanded and extended to include the various Syrian governorates, with this vast range of contacts and coverage being our main source of strength. Without the cooperation of families and survivors, we would

not have been able to document and to continue documenting the still-ongoing extrajudicial killings. As time passed, the SNHR team's work has become more organized, and the aforementioned tasks can be summarized as follows:

1. Following up reports on daily events which resulted in casualties, focusing particularly on those which are considered extrajudicial killings.
2. Attempting to reach the location of the incidents in question and communicating with primary sources, including victims' families and eyewitnesses, as well as taking or obtaining photos/ videos about the victim and the location of the incident.

In some cases, researchers coordinating with the SNHR were able to visit the sites of incidents immediately or soon after they took place, but this has been rare due to the severe danger and extremely high security risks involved and to our limited human and material resources. For these reasons, access to evidence and thus the degree of its classification varies; in such cases, we rely primarily on the testimonies of survivors who directly experienced the incidents, secondarily on the accounts of those who witnessed or photographed the violations, and thirdly on talking with medical personnel who treated the injured, examined the bodies of the victims, and determined the cause of death. In addition, we also analyze materials available from open sources such as the Inter-

net, social media and other media.

3. Daily archiving of verified victims' data.
4. Storing and archiving photographs and video footage related to each incident on special servers.
5. All incidents are subject to review processes and a continuous investigation process; in the event that additional or more accurate information is provided or errors are discovered in any case, the information on the database is updated accordingly.
6. The data added to the SNHR database is maintained securely, and we store several backup copies in different places.

These stages become more difficult and complex in the event of massacres or the deaths of large numbers of victims in multiple geographically close or concurrent bombing incidents. Other factors which add to the difficulty of the documentation process include the simultaneous use of several types of weapons, the use of the 'double-tap' airstrike tactic, and the demolition and destruction of buildings and other 'crime scenes', which lead to major changes in the structure of the location.

## **Second: Creating electronic programs that help in the documentation and archiving process and its development:**

The rapid increase in the daily and monthly death tolls reached thousands per month in some years, with the killing of civilians being a deliberate and systematic part of a large-scale attack by the Syrian regime on those seeking freedom; at first, the regime forces and affiliated militias mainly systematically used tanks and artillery before the regime deployed warplanes and used barrel bombs, Scud missiles, and chemical weapons, amounting to crimes against humanity.

The increasingly high rate of killing as time went on meant that it became difficult to rely on the Excel program for documentation, especially since the possibilities of sorting and categorizing in this format are limited, with the manual entry process taking a lot of time, as well as involving a higher possibility of errors while copying data.

Based on these factors, we considered moving towards a documentation process using programming languages, creating a program that utilizes the My SQL language, which can automatically read the Word files and enter them directly, with this program also categorizing victims according to governorate, gender and other variable factors. In order for this to happen, however, the data must be entered in the Word files according to a specific programming formula, meaning that there

is no substitute for manual work in Word files, although the program did away with the need for the manual entry process for the Excel files, and also allows us, after the input process, to perform analysis and a vast range of types of categorization, including sorting attacks according to the type of weapon used, or to the specific city, area or period, enabling us, for instance, to sort the death toll according to the governorate where killings occurred, or the governorate to which the victim belongs, which are often different. This in turn enables us to show the extent of the loss and violence that the people of each governorate have suffered compared to other governorates, which helps in carrying out needs assessments and in ascertaining the worst-affected areas at a given moment which have the highest priority for efforts to restore social harmony and other processes of the transitional justice process; this program also exports the material required to an Excel sheet.

The process of creating such a program was not easy, taking many months of painstaking work and continuous development by the director of our IT department, as well as being constantly expanded and updated with the addition of improvements to the process or due to the entry of new parties in the conflict, the use of a new type of weapon or similar de-

velopments, meaning that each process of methodological development must be accompanied by a program modification process.

A final point regarding this issue; the database is subject to an audit process after entering the data, to ensure that it's entered correctly, and we recently carried out a comprehensive review process for the database, especially during the first months and years, due to the nature of volunteer work during that period, and to

the deaths of a large number of the victims per day, with some days seeing 350 deaths; this shows the importance of subjecting the database to a comprehensive review and constantly seeking new evidence, additional information or other ways to improve it.

### **Third: The entry of multiple parties to the conflict, and the development of SNHR's methodology:**

At the beginning of the popular uprising, the Syrian regime was the only perpetrator of human rights violations in Syria, with the regime still remaining by far the largest perpetrator of the vast majority of violations.

As time passed, however, with the development of events, other groups which committed a broad range of violations also entered the Syrian conflict. Therefore, the Syrian Network for Human Rights began categorizing the different parties responsible for violations in Syria according to their distinctive characteristics and differences from each other, or to their actions in the interest of a specific party. We defined each of these parties and their activities according to the perpetrator's objective,

background, dominant characteristics and methods used in their activity, through which we have endeavored to determine the parties responsible for these violations, and the many similar groups and factions which developed from each of them, with these parties being:

**The first party:** Syrian regime forces: This includes the regime army, security forces, affiliated forces, local militias, and foreign militias, who are mostly Iranian or Iranian-backed, and have a fundamentalist Shiite political/ideological orientation. Syrian regime forces began committing violations on the first day of the popular uprising for democracy in 2011 and have continued ever since up to the current day.

**The second party:** Democratic Union Party forces: This is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliated forces. These forces were never previously distinguishable from Syrian regime forces until 2012 when we began to distinguish differences between the two parties. At the beginning of 2014, the party formed what was called the 'Self-Management' division, whose primary unit is the Democratic Union Party (PYD) forces, which is divided between the 'People's Protection Units' and 'Al Asayesh Forces'. From the end of 2015, these forces united to form the 'Syrian Democratic Forces', which also incorporates a largely symbolic presence of other components of Syrian society.

**The third party:** Syrian Opposition forces: This includes all Armed Opposition factions, the 'Free Syrian Army', and 'Non-Extremist Islamist Factions', who launched their operations sporadically in August 2011 before expanding gradually up until March 2012, when the International Committee of the Red Cross declared the conflict in Syria to be a non-international armed conflict.

In December 2019, the Syrian Interim Government announced the expansion of an inclusive armed force under the name of the 'Syrian National Army', incorporating the vast majority of the Armed Opposition factions, with the Free Syrian Army gradually joining the

Syrian National Army, which has thus become the body essentially representing Armed Opposition factions.

**The fourth party:** 'Al Nusra Front': This is a branch of the 'Al-Qaeda' organization in Syria, whose establishment was announced in January 2012. The group continued to use this name until July 2016 when it announced its separation from Al-Qaeda, renaming itself Hay'at Tahrir al Sham.

**The fifth party:** The 'Islamic State' organization (ISIS or Daesh), whose establishment was announced in April 2013, the 'Jund al Aqsa' group, and the 'Hurras al Din' (Guardians of Religion) group, which was announced on February 27, 2018.

**The sixth party:** US-led Coalition forces: This is a coalition of a group of countries led by the USA, who share the goal of fighting the 'Islamic State' organization – ISIS. This coalition commenced its operations in September 2014.

**The seventh party:** Russian forces: The Russian Federation's official armed forces, which formally declared their entrance into Syria in September 2015.

**The eighth party:** Turkish forces: These forces entered the Syrian conflict in mid-2016 with Operation Euphrates Shield, and back the Syrian National Army.



**Several main criteria are added to the classification process, which must be referred to:**

**One:** We at the Syrian Network for Human Rights are keen to attribute incidents to those responsible, but two cases are excluded from the process of assigning responsibility that we undertake:

- Anti-personnel landmines.
- Remote explosions, including suicide or forced suicide attacks.

The reason behind this exclusion is the great difficulty in conclusively assigning responsibility for killings caused by mines or their remnants because, in the vast majority of cases, we were not able to determine which party planted the mines, since all parties to the conflict use this type of weapon, and also because there are minefields in areas under the control of many parties.

The same applies in the case of remote explosions, including suicide or forced suicide attacks, which include person-borne IEDs or vehicle-borne IEDs, with the detonation process in such attacks mainly carried out either by radio or via a timer, meaning that the process of proving the responsibility of a party for a remote detonation incident is very complex and requires a great deal of effort and advanced logistical capabilities, as well as the ability to visit the site of the incident, with many of these factors being unavailable to us. As for the anonymous victims whose names we haven't yet been able to de-

termine or on whom we have so far been unable to find any identifying information or any picture or video footage, these cases are stored in a private archive until any information indicating their identity has been found which would enable their cases to be transferred to the victims' archive, with their names and other details registered accordingly.

**Two:** The work of the Syrian Network for Human Rights is focused on documenting civilians who are victims of extrajudicial killing operations. As for the process of documenting armed individuals and fighters from the forces of the various aforementioned parties to the conflict, it is impossible in many cases to accurately ascertain these figures; we cannot communicate, for example with the Syrian regime forces or their families or with the forces of ISIS, the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, or Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. We believe that the statistics issued by some media outlets citing death tolls for members of these parties are not credible due to being inaccurate or methodologically unsound, with the means used to determine these death tolls being far from even the most basic criteria for objective assessment. In addition to this, while the documentation of victims from the armed opposition factions may seem to be the most straightforward among the armed parties, given that the vast majority of these forces were civilians who took up arms or who later joined the Syrian National Army, even these statistics are dubious

and, as with other forces, efforts are made to minimize the number of casualties admitted to. Given the difficulty and dangers of accessing the battle fronts, and the refusal of the various parties' military forces to publish details of their own losses and strict restrictions on reports of losses, it is therefore impossible to accurately assess these figures.

**Three:** The Syrian Network for Human Rights has been exceptionally concerned with reporting the killings of children and women since 2011, with hardly any of our reports statistics failing to include information on one or both of these groups, due to the vulnerability of these groups in society; the proportion of casualties among both groups gives an indication of the proportion of civilians being deliberately targeted. We have also subsequently added other categories for groups which have played a prominent role in the popular uprising, and subsequently in the armed conflict, such as media, medical and humanitarian relief workers, as well as civil defense personnel.

**Four:** Various types of weapons have been used in the killing of Syrian civilians, and here I'll provide five main points on the types of weapons seen:

- The most notable point: The majority of the victims (between 65% - 70%) were killed by airstrikes using missiles and barrel bombs. Only the Syrian regime, the Russian Federation and the

US-led Coalition have air forces in Syria, although the coalition's airstrikes have been limited to confined areas.

- We can determine, to a great extent, who is responsible for artillery shelling, depending on how the shell falls, its angle, type, and other details.
- We have determined the party that carried out the killings when using bladed weapons, based on the testimonies of survivors and eyewitnesses, who witnessed the raid operations and were able to identify the perpetrators by their clothes or accents, the place from which they came, and other criteria.
- The same applies to the killing operations carried out by dropping barrel bombs, with this shameful and barbaric weapon only possessed by the Syrian regime's army.
- We have also counted the types of cluster munitions that were used in Syria and identified the party that uses each type, which is either Russia or the Syrian regime, and so on with the various types of weapons.

**Five:** The death toll of the victims documented on the SNHR database includes extrajudicial killings by the controlling forces in each area, which are violations of both international human rights law and international humanitarian law, but does not include natural deaths or deaths due to personal conflicts between members of society.

#### **Fourth: The most notable challenges facing the documentation process:**

The process of documenting human rights violations in Syria is among the most difficult and complex operations in the world, in light of the exceptional circumstances and conditions during which the documentation operations are carried out, with the security factor being the most prominent of these challenges, since an activist or researcher may lose his or her life while documenting a violation or trying to obtain information, may be arrested and tortured or be forcibly disappeared; three members of the Syrian Network for Human Rights' team have been subjected to enforced disappearance to date.

There are also additional problematic factors such as: lengthy power cuts which can continue for many hours, or the deliberate cutting of communications services and the Internet, while the multiplicity of parties responsible for committing violations means that it's sometimes difficult to determine which party perpetrated a violation, for example; we faced many difficulties in identifying the party responsible for tens of killings/ bombings, especially those perpetrated by the Syrian regime and the Russian regime at the same time, making it difficult to determine which of the two parties was responsible, and in these cases we used the term "Syrian/Russian Alliance", and sometimes it's difficult to identify the party responsible and the incident is recorded with similar

cases where we were unable to identify the perpetrators. In the past two years a new factor has entered the equation, with many in the Syrian community losing confidence in the documentation processes, and questioning the ability of these processes to help in exposing and prosecuting criminals, after nearly nine years of impunity for criminals who openly boast about their crimes, a cruel trait which we notice in particular among followers of the Syrian regime.

There are also difficulties facing the work team itself, especially those who are responsible for carrying out daily documentation of heinous crimes and who are forced to view harrowing images of killing, destruction, and displacement, as well as talking with survivors and witnesses. Team members conducting interviews have often returned the following day to complete taking witnesses' testimony only to find that the witness they were interviewing was killed as a result of a new airstrike on the area.

All these factors mean that the crimes documented on the SNHR's database represent only the bare minimum of the violations committed.

### **Fifth: The evidence presented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights with regard to the issue of extrajudicial killing:**

For nearly ten years, we have issued a daily death toll of victims, as well as daily news reports on incidents of killing. We also issue a monthly report detailing the death toll of victims, whose deaths were documented in Syria during the previous month, amongst civilians, including those who died due to torture, in addition to issuing a biannual report and annual report, as well as dozens of other special reports documenting the total death toll or the death toll at the hands of one of the parties to the conflict in particular, in addition to a monthly report and special and periodic reports documenting the massacres committed on Syrian soil.

Here, I should indicate that we have also turned this database into a map and interactive charts on our website, which categorizes the victims by governorate, gender, age group, the party responsible, and other criteria. There are also charts detailing the death toll of victims killed at the hands of all parties to the conflict, as well as others giving information on specific groups, such as specifically detailing the death toll among women and children victims, with all of these being updated regularly.

SNHR also periodically submits a special form to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings and the

Special Rapporteur on torture, when we were able to document all of the available data, having obtained the consent of each victim's family members before submitting them.

Finally, I would like to point out that the United Nations has relied on the Syrian Network for Human Rights as one of the most prominent sources cited in all its statistics analyzing the victims of the conflict. The SNHR also signed a memorandum of understanding with Humanitarian Outcomes on contributing to its Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB) project. The MoU stipulates the building of a joint coordination and cooperation mechanism aimed at documenting and archiving violations and violence affecting aid workers. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has also partnered with many United Nations bodies and various countries' governments to provide them with statistics from our databases, with all this information going towards justice and helping ensure the prosecution and accountability of criminals. In addition to this, the Syrian Network for Human Rights is accredited by a wide number of Arab and international news agencies, and many international human rights organizations.

In conclusion, we hope and pray that all kinds of egregious violations against our

people will end, starting with extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate bombardment, torture, and enforced disappearance, and that we will no longer need to record victims; this will not happen, however, so long as the ruling dictatorial regime and its security and military apparatuses continue to wield power, and so long as the other parties to the conflict also continue to extend it and to perpetrate crimes. Ultimately, as SNHR has repeatedly emphasized, the only solution remains for the international community to acknowledge the terrible extent of the human loss that has afflicted Syrian society and traumatized people across the region, and to take decisive steps towards practically implementing the existing Security Council resolutions and finally achieving a political transition that leads to a democratic system which respects and defends the rights of the Syrian citizen and abides by the principles of international human rights law.

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the Syrian Network for Human Rights