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## Syria's Dire Human Rights Situation: Civilians are the Victims

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**Summary.** This article looks at the Syrian crisis from different angles of human rights. It looks at the threats posed by the regime forces, as well as, the threats posed by the opposition armed groups to human rights and civilians. Syria is in danger of collapsing as a unified state and its institutions are about to break down. More than 8 million civilians have been affected by the events; Syrians are now scattered in refugee camps. Tens of thousands are detained without any trial or charges, and around 11,000 are reportedly killed under torture. The crisis started in response to years of oppression and corruption in all of the state apparatus. More than 17 security services have been operating in the country. They all work independently from each other and, in most cases, there is a bitter rivalry among them which is reflected by the abuse of citizen rights. The crisis is deteriorating and there is a danger of affecting neighbouring countries. Unless the international community acts swiftly, the situation in Syria will progress from bad to worse.

**Key words:** Free Syrian Army, Alawite, Ismailis, Al-Ghouta, Razan Zaitouna, The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), Ahrar Asham, Annusra Front, ISIS, Al-Zaatari, Shabiha

### Introduction

The human rights situation in Syria is dire and it is deteriorating as the armed conflict intensifies. Arbitrary arrests and detention, extra-judicial executions, rape, other forms of sexual violence, abduction, enforced disappearances, and the use of torture by Syrian authorities and pro-governmental militias (referred to as *shabiha*) have been widely documented. Committed in the context of widespread

and indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas and the apparent targeting of civilians, these violations can be characterized as crimes against humanity. With the intensification of fighting and the development of the crisis into an internal armed conflict, violations perpetrated by all parties in the conflict have also been characterized as war crimes.

This article sheds light on different aspects of human rights in Syria. It discusses the abuses committed by both sides of the conflict, as well as, the situation of refugees who have fled the fighting to neighbouring countries.

## **1. Background**

The modern state of Syria was established in 1946 after gaining independence from France. Since then, Syria has survived periods of political instability. In 1967 Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel after its defeat, along with Egypt and Jordan, in the Six Day War. From 1958 to 1961, Syria was united briefly with Egypt during the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser. An army coup restored Syrian independence, which was followed by the nationalist Ba'ath Party seizing power in 1963, transforming Syria into a one-party state governed by broadly defined emergency powers. During the 1960s, power shifted from the Ba'ath Party's civilian ideologues to Syrian army officers. This culminated with the rise to power of General Hafez al-Assad in a military coup in 1970. Syria has never been ruled by a democratically elected government. The president has been nominated by the Ba'ath Party and approved by a referendum for consecutive seven-year terms. The referendums have been orchestrated by the regime, as are elections for the 250-person People's Council, whose members serve four-year terms, yet possess little independent legislative power. All power has resided in the hands of the president. The government has dealt harshly with domestic opposition. Thousands of peaceful activists have been arrested, tortured, and detained for long periods without trial or formal charges. Tens of thousands were said to have been killed during the suppression of the 1982 uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian city of Hamah. Hafez al-Assad's autocratic and one-party rule enabled widespread corruption that rarely drew reprisals. Bribery became necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. (Syria was ranked 144 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.) After his 1970 coup, al-Assad moved to control professional groups under the Ba'ath Party umbrella. Unions were required to belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent organization that the government used to control their activity. Professional syndicates and unions conducted questionable elections in which all candidates were members of the Ba'ath Party and were approved by the

regime's secret services to ensure their loyalty to the al-Assad regime. In the Syrian constitution of 1973, al-Assad solidified the Ba'ath Party control over the state and civil society. Belonging to the party became a means to receive the privileges of the state. Al-Assad also controlled the judicial system and created exceptional courts that operated under the emergency law.

Following Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, control of the government was assumed by his son, Bashar al-Assad. Under his leadership, Syria experienced a brief period of relaxation as hundreds of political prisoners were released. However, serious political freedom and reform of the state-controlled economy never occurred. What became known in Syria as the Damascus Spring took place in early 2001 when Syrians began to openly discuss their country's need for political change. In February of 2001, the regime arrested outspoken activists and sentenced them to lengthy prison terms. Others faced surveillance and intimidation by the secret police. Activists in Syria continued to press for major reforms and campaigned for the release of political prisoners, the abolishment of the long-standing emergency powers, and the legalisation of opposition parties. Despite promises of change, the Assad regime did not implement reforms or make changes. Instead, the grip of the security agencies tightened and corruption increased as members of Assad's inner circle took control of the Syrian economy. Except the Ba'ath Party, all other political parties remained illegal. Freedom of expression was heavily restricted. The penal code and the 2001 Publications Law criminalized the distribution of material considered harmful to national unity, defaming of the state, or threatening with "goals of the revolution". A 2011 media law contained broad restrictions and journalists were detained despite a provision barring arrests or imprisonment for press offences. Apart from a few stations with non-news formats, all broadcast media was state-owned.

Most Syrians accessed the Internet through servers controlled by the state, which blocked more than 200 sites associated with the opposition, Kurdish politics, Islamic organizations, human rights, and certain foreign news services, particularly those in Lebanon. Social networking and video-sharing websites were unblocked in 2011, but reportedly have been used to track and punish opposition activists and their supporters. Freedom of association has been severely restricted. Non-governmental organizations must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist or human rights groups. Leaders of unlicensed human rights groups have been jailed for publicizing state abuses. Despite grave risks, opposition networks continue to operate across Syria. The outbreak of the armed Syrian revolution in March 2011 came as a surprise to many non-Syrians because the al-Assad family had controlled Syria for 40 years through a strong military and security apparatus. The protests of the Damascus Spring took on a more formal nature when the opposition organised political and military wings, and prepared for a long battle with al-Assad's government. By 2012, after a year

of violent struggle, an apparent stand-off escalated into civil war, prompting defections from within the governing elite and signalling a weakened government.

The Syrian revolution was initially led by local coordinating committees formed in many towns and cities. The committees organized protests and documented human rights violations by the regime. Initially peaceful protests were met with increasingly harsh responses and protesters were killed. In 2011-12, security forces used tanks, gunfire and mass arrests to crush the anti-government street protests that followed the Damascus Spring. In the early stages of the militarization of the revolution, the Free Syrian Army (FSA)<sup>1</sup> and other armed groups led the armed confrontations with government forces.

By the beginning of 2014, most of Syria was embroiled in the conflict. New and disturbing aspects of the revolution emerged when battles broke out during 2013 between the FSA and armed Islamist groups sponsored by non-Syrian actors who had become involved in the civil war. An estimated 200,000 people have been killed since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011. More than seven million Syrians are refugees or have been internally displaced.

## **2. Syria Demographic Structure**

Syria has 23 million people made up of a mosaic of different demographics. The population is divided into Sunni Arabs (65%), Alawites (12%), Christians (10%), Kurds (9%), Druze (3%), Bedouin, Ismailis<sup>2</sup>, Turcomans, Circassians, and Assyrians. All these sects and ethnic groups lived together for hundreds of years with some complicated relationships through their history. The Sunni sect represents the majority of the population and it ranges from very religious to very secular. From the Sunni Muslim sect, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a political movement, used violence to achieve its objectives in the 1970s and '80s.

The Sunni Arabs, the meat of the resistance, have been embittered about their relegation to second fiddle in civil society since the early 20th century. Though they had deprived Alawites of the most basic civil rights before World War I, the Alawites would turn the tables beginning in the 1920s through their complicity with the French counterinsurgency in the region<sup>3</sup>.

The head of state is an Alawite and there is a kind of dissatisfaction among the Sunni Muslims that a man from a minority is ruling the country while the majority (the Sunnis) are “relegated” into second place.

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<sup>1</sup> An armed opposition structure operating in Syria since the start of the events. It is composed of defected Syrian Armed Forces personnel and volunteers. It was established in July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Two Islamic sects belong to the Shia's branch of Islam.

<sup>3</sup> [www.iop.harvard.edu/gangs-syria](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/gangs-syria) [30.04.2014].

The vast majority of the peaceful protests that took place in Syria from March 15, 2011 were by Sunni Muslims. This made Assad play a terrible game in propelling the struggle for freedom and rights into sectarian fighting, which ended in a real civil war and demands for an Islamic state.

### **3. Fabrication of Conflict**

The Syrian Arab Republic is the most complex Arab nation with respect to ethnicity and religion. Since March 2011, the Syrian regime has fabricated the conflict in order to create chaos inside Syria and across the border. The reason was to put pressure on the West to prevent them from taking any action, which may have ended the tragedy. The regime had already used the Islamists during the US occupation of Iraq in order to create chaos there and prevent any progress in the country under the Americans, and also to stop the Bush administration from thinking of invading Syria. Now, the regime has done it again and used the Islamists in Syria in order to play the terrorism card. At the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, al-Assad released dozens of Islamists, who he recruited before, to be sent to Iraq where they were arrested, including Zahran Alloush who is currently leading an armed Islamist militia in Al-Ghouta<sup>4</sup> near Damascus. Alloush's militia has committed grave human rights violations and it is currently detaining the most prominent human rights lawyer, Razan Zaitouna<sup>5</sup>, and five other lawyers and activists.

The regime also released Mustafa Sitt Mariam, a terrorism suspect who was handed over by the USA from Afghanistan in 2003 and had disappeared until the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Mariam is currently leading an extremist Islamist armed group in Aleppo city.

The regime also wanted to send a message to the Syrian people that if al-Assad was toppled, the Islamists would take over and oppress the other minorities in the country. The regime has succeeded to some extent in changing the Syrian people's views about what is happening in the country, especially after the grave human rights violations committed by the Islamists. The West has also become more hesitant to intervene or even support the Free Syrian Army.

In addition, from the beginning of the events in 2011, the Syrian regime arrested the majority of the peaceful activists. Most of them were either killed or are still missing. Ghiath Matar was one of prominent activists in the Daraya area of Damascus. He distributed red flowers to the army in order not to shoot at people.

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<sup>4</sup> An area far several miles from Damascus where the Syrian regime attacked it with chemical weapons on 21 August 2013 where hundreds of civilians were killed.

<sup>5</sup> A prominent human rights lawyer who tirelessly defended political prisoners since 2001. She was kidnapped by a pro-opposition Islamist armed group in December 2013.



He was arrested on the 6 September 2011 and killed under torture on the 10 September 2011<sup>6</sup>. Lawyer Khalil Matouk has been under arrest since 2 October 2012. His whereabouts are still unknown<sup>7</sup>. Another influential activist, Abdul Aziz Al Khair, was arrested in September 2012 and is still detained in Syria and incommunicado<sup>8</sup>.

These actions have led to a disastrous situation for civil life in Syria, radically weakened the fragile civil society movement, and left the door open for the armed groups and the war lords who are also hindering the work of humanitarian and civil society movements in the so-called liberated areas. These war lords are controlling the economy in these areas and they are committing serious human rights abuses.

#### **4. Civilians are the Victims**

According to the United Nations, more than 250 000 civilians have been killed in Syria's three-year-old civil war, mainly by the regime forces. The opposition groups also have targeted civilians mainly in the regime-controlled areas through random shelling and car bombs. In April 2014<sup>9</sup>, the regime intensified its bombing of the besieged areas of Homs city, where more than 2000 fighters and more than 100 000 civilians had been trapped for more than eight months. Dozens of civilians were killed and no medical aid was allowed in. At the same time, a car bombing and mortar shelling on 29 April 2014 in the Zahra neighbourhood in central Homs killed and wounded dozens of people. According to Human Rights Watch, the Syrian Air Force is carrying out both deliberate air strikes against civilians and indiscriminate attacks. Human Rights Watch says it visited 52 sites in north-western Syria, documenting 59 such unlawful attacks. It points out that both types of attacks – estimated to have killed thousands – are serious violations of international law. The regime targeted hospitals, bakeries, and schools<sup>10</sup>. On 30 April 2014, the regime war planes dropped bombs on a school in Ain Jalout, Aleppo, which killed 25 children and wounded dozens. The school was not anywhere near any fighting area and no explanation from the Syrian authorities was forthcoming. The regime used air bombing mainly to terrorise civilians and stop them from hosting opposition fighters or, in other places such as Homs city, the regime planned severe attacks in order to evacuate the area.

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<sup>6</sup> en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghiath\_Matar [30.04.2014].

<sup>7</sup> www.gc4hr.org/news/view/247 [30.04.2014].

<sup>8</sup> www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/016/2012/en [30.04.2014].

<sup>9</sup> www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47687#.U6lW9rE5uSo [30.04.2014].

<sup>10</sup> www.hrw.org/reports/2013/04/11/death-skies [30.04.2014].

Tens of thousands of civilians and peaceful activists have been detained in the regime's detention centres. The regime has systematically killed and tortured about 11 000 people, according to a report based on the evidence of a defector and produced by three former international prosecutors. The news, which appeared in a report commissioned by a leading firm of London solicitors acting for Qatar, is being made available to the UN, governments, and human rights groups. This confirms what Amnesty International has reported on torture and ill-treatment. "Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including children, were widespread and committed with impunity by government forces and associated militias seeking to extract information or »confessions« and to terrorize or punish suspected government opponents"<sup>11</sup>. The Violation Documentation Centre in Syria also documented 11 000 deaths in custody under torture in 2013<sup>12</sup>.

## 5. Targeting Journalists

According to Amnesty International, "Syria has become the most dangerous country in the world for journalists since the eruption of popular protests in 2011 and the development since then of a bitter internal armed conflict"<sup>13</sup>. This is corroborated by Reporters without Borders: "more than 110 news providers have been killed in the course of their work in Syria since March 2011 and more than 60 are currently detained, held hostage, or missing"<sup>14</sup>.

Reports of organizations concerned with media freedoms and human rights bear witness to the large number of journalists and citizen journalists who have died during the revolution. Reporters without Borders, in its report published on 3 May 2013 at the World Press Freedom Day, stated that the number of foreign journalists killed is 23, while the number of Syrian citizen journalists who had been killed during the clashes is 58, and there are seven journalists unaccounted for so far.

On 16 February 2012, Air Force intelligence forces raided the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM<sup>15</sup>) and arrested 16 people, including seven women. In September 2012, seven members of the SCM staff were charged and convicted of publishing banned documents with the intent to change the basic principles of the constitution. Five of the men arrested – including Mazen Darwish, the group's president – remain incommunicado in detention.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.amnesty.org/en/region/syria/report-2013#section-142-10](http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/syria/report-2013#section-142-10) [30.04.2014].

<sup>12</sup> [www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1396786562#.U6mB7LE5uSo](http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1396786562#.U6mB7LE5uSo) [30.04.2014].

<sup>13</sup> [www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/shooting-the-messenger-journalists-targeted-by-all-sides-in-syria](http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/shooting-the-messenger-journalists-targeted-by-all-sides-in-syria) [30.04.2014].

<sup>14</sup> [en.rsf.org/syrie-journalism-in-syria-impossible-job-06-11-2013,45424.html](http://en.rsf.org/syrie-journalism-in-syria-impossible-job-06-11-2013,45424.html) [30.04.2014].

<sup>15</sup> The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, it is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that monitors threats to freedom of expression in Syria.

Amnesty International in its report issued on the same date and occasion, the World Press Freedom Day in 2013, gave the number of journalists who have died in the conflict as between 44 and 100 reporters and citizen journalists<sup>16</sup>.

Radical Islamist groups especially in the north of Syria, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria<sup>17</sup> (ISIS), Ahrar Asham<sup>18</sup> and Annusra Front<sup>19</sup>, are among the armed groups in Syria who are reportedly targeting local and foreign journalists. Instead of holding them for ransom, however, they use them as trump cards in their power struggles with more moderate rebel groups. Edouard Elias and Didier François, two French TV journalists, were abducted on 6 June 2013. Two other French journalists, Nicolas Hénin and Pierre Torres, have been held hostage for four and a half months. They were all abducted by Islamist armed groups.

In May, two journalists from Britain's "The Times" newspaper covering the Syrian civil war, were kidnapped by a "rebel gang" and one of them was shot before members of an anti-extremist rebel group intervened and secured their release. Reporter Anthony Loyd was shot twice in the leg while being held captive and photographer Jack Hill suffered a severe beating after trying to escape. The two journalists, who had spent several days covering the restive city of Aleppo for "The Times", were released after reportedly local commanders of a local armed group intervened.

Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik, two journalists who worked for the "Sunday Times" and photography agency "Wostok", were killed in February 2012 in the besieged city of Homs, triggering suspicions that a makeshift media centre was deliberately targeted by regime forces. Many other journalists were injured in the attack.

## 6. Refugees

One of the saddening consequences of the Syrian crisis is the tragedy of Syrian refugees. The flow of the Syrian refugees across the Turkish, Jordanian, Lebanese and Iraqi Kurdistan borders started in April 2011. They sought safety

<sup>16</sup> [www.amnesty.org/en/news/journalists-targeted-going-conflict-syria-2013-05-02](http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/journalists-targeted-going-conflict-syria-2013-05-02); [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_journalists\\_killed\\_during\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Civil\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_journalists_killed_during_the_Syrian_Civil_War) [30.04.2014].

<sup>17</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was formed in early 2004, it is an unrecognised state and active Jihadist militant group in Iraq and Syria. The group, in its original form, was composed of and supported by a variety of Sunni insurgent groups. A caliphate was proclaimed on 29 June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

<sup>18</sup> Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant. is a coalition of Islamist and Salafist and units which formed into a brigade during the Syrian civil war in order to fight against the Assad. Ahrar ash-Sham is led by Hassan Aboud. As of July 2013, it has 10,000 to 20,000 fighters.

<sup>19</sup> It is a branch of Al-Qaeda operating in Syria and Lebanon. The group announced its creation on 23 January 2012 during the Syrian civil war.



in these countries. In Turkey, where they have more rights than in any other neighbouring country, they are described as “guests”, not refugees. There are around four million refugees outside Syria and more than four million internally displaced people, who have mostly moved to the coastal areas of Tartous and Lattakia where there has been little fighting so far.

More than one million refugees live in Turkey, about 250 000 in 21 camps established by the government, and the rest inside Turkish cities and towns close to the border with Syria. Six thousand births were recorded between April 2011 and November 2013 in the refugee camps. All these new-born babies have no papers or identity cards. They will be stateless. Many of the refugees in Turkey do not have identification papers because of their sudden migration from Syria, a problem which prohibits their access to available services including healthcare.

To solve this problem the Turkish government started registering the refugees who live outside the camps, and opened three health centres in Gaziantep, Kilis and Osmaniye, but it is not enough to cope with the number of refugees outside these areas who are still unable to register for an identification card.

A large number of refugees have crossed to Jordan, mainly illegally through unofficial crossing gates. They are mainly put in refugee camps such as Al-Zaatari. Syrians face enormous difficulties in Jordan. Many of the refugees, especially journalists and writers, have been constantly interrogated by the Jordanian secret services. Others are confined in refugee camps without permission to leave the camp at any time. The majority of the children have no access to education or proper health care. Interviews conducted with several journalists told stories of how the Jordanian secret services constantly interrogated them, threatened them, and banned them from writing while they were in Jordan. Many also told of how they were asked to leave the country and that they would have no right to return for five years because they had entered the country “illegally”<sup>20</sup>.

In April 2014, “at least one person has been reported killed and dozens hurt in a riot at Jordan’s Zaatari camp, home to some 106 000 refugees from Syria’s war”<sup>21</sup>. This was not the first time the Jordanian police used tear gas against the refugees who were protesting against the camp conditions.

The UNHCR has continually warned about the plight of refugees especially children who have been living in the camps. “The world must act to save a generation of traumatized, isolated, and suffering children from catastrophe”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> I conducted interviews with 12 journalists who fled Syria to Jordan between April 2011 - February 2014.

<sup>21</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26908587](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26908587) [30.04.2014].

<sup>22</sup> [www.unhcr.org/5297409e6.html](http://www.unhcr.org/5297409e6.html) [30.04.2014].

## 7. Children: The “Unspeakable” Horrors

According to the United Nation report released in February 2014:

Syrian children have been subjected to “unspeakable” suffering in the nearly three years of civil war, with the Government and allied militia responsible for countless killings, maiming and torture, and the opposition for recruiting youngsters for combat and using terror tactics in civilian areas<sup>23</sup>.

From the early days of the revolution and before it turned to an armed conflict, Assad’s troops and secret services targeted children. In March and April 2011, more than ten children were killed under torture in the detention centres belonging to the regime. *Hamza* Ali Al-Khateeb, was arrested on 29 April 2011 during a peaceful demonstration in a suburb of Dara’a city. He was detained incommunicado until his body was delivered to his family on 25 May 2011. His body was severely bruised with burn marks and his genitals were cut off. This is only a tenth of cases where children were a clear target where apparently the regime aimed to terrorise those who are going out to protest in demand for a change.

Syrian human rights organisations documented an average of ten children killed every day during June 2014. Most of the children were either killed in the detention centres or as casualties resulting from bombing cities and towns indiscriminately with explosive barrels.

On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of traumatised children had to flee the conflict zones either to neighbouring countries or are internally displaced. Many of these children lost one of their parents. The refugee camps do not offer any education or normal childhood freedoms. Child labour is a huge problem across the refugee communities mostly in Jordan and Lebanon. Children as young as seven are taking on the role of breadwinner for their fractured families.

Several Islamic armed groups have been recruiting child soldiers for fighting in the conflict and also to serve as suicide bombers. According to Human Rights Watch, “Non-state armed groups in Syrian have used children as young as 15 to fight in battles, sometimes recruiting them under the guise of offering education”<sup>24</sup>.

## 8. Women

Women like children have been strongly affected by the war in Syria. News of abuses and violence against women has been widely spread inside and outside

<sup>23</sup> [www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47077&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.U7r8AECXrHj](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47077&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.U7r8AECXrHj) [24.06.2014].

<sup>24</sup> [www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/22/syria-armed-groups-send-children-battle](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/22/syria-armed-groups-send-children-battle) [24.06.2014].

Syria. Rape is a significant and devastating feature of the Syrian civil war. Many women and girls were sexually attacked and abused in front of their families by either the regime's forces or its supporters with unquestionable impunity. There are horrific stories of young girls who were kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed.

The Syrian regime has abducted women as young as 12 to force their fathers or brothers to hand themselves over to the police. Society ill-treats women who have experienced abuse and rape as people think that they bring stigma to the family. Tremendous social pressure is put on these women, who are forced into marriage in order to "save the family honour". As a result, women are victims of both society and the fighting parties.

The situation of the women refugees in the camps has not improved. According to the IRC:

The situation for refugee women and girls is grim. Syrian refugees surveyed by the IRC cited rape as a primary reason their families fled the conflict, yet there is an alarming lack of medical and counselling services to help them recover in the countries to which they have fled. They face unsafe conditions in camps and elevated levels of domestic violence, while reports of early and/or forced marriage of women and girls are increasing<sup>25</sup>.

## Conclusion

Security forces have subjected tens of thousands of people to arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, enforced disappearances, ill-treatment and torture using an extensive network of detention facilities throughout Syria. Many detainees are young men in their 20s or 30s, but children, women, and elderly people are also included.

The spread and intensification of fighting have led to a dire humanitarian situation with hundreds of thousands displaced internally or seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

Human rights in Syria are deteriorating day by day. The conflict has become increasingly bloody since events turned violent in 2012 after the Syrian government crackdown on the peaceful protests. This led to intensified armed conflict. The regime forces and its supporters (*shabiha*<sup>26</sup>) continue to torture detainees and commit extrajudicial killings throughout the country. Opposition forces have also carried out serious abuses such as kidnapping, torture, and extrajudicial executions.

<sup>25</sup> See International Rescue Committee (IRC), *Syria: A Regional Crisis*, January 2013, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Groups of armed militia in support of the government of Syria, led by the Al-Assad family. Shabiha were established in the 1980s by Namir al-Assad, President Hafez al-Assad's cousin, and Rifaat al-Assad, the former president's brother. They have committed terrible crimes during and before the revolution and terrorised civilians in order to subject them to the regime's orders.

Those arrested include peaceful protesters and activists involved in organizing, filming and reporting on protests, as well as, journalists, humanitarian assistance providers, and doctors. In some instances activists reported that security forces detained their family members, including children, to pressure them to turn themselves in.

A large number of political activists remain incommunicado in detention. Some have been held for over two years, while others have faced trial for exercising their rights.

Syrian government forces have used sexual violence to torture men, women, and boys detained during the current conflict. There are reports and eye witness accounts stating that soldiers and pro-government armed militias have sexually abused women and girls as young as 12 during home raids and military attacks on residential areas.

Armed opposition groups have committed serious human rights abuses including kidnapping, arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and torture, and carried out extrajudicial executions of security force members, government supporters, and people identified as *shabiha*.

Finally, until the international community moves towards imposing a political solution mainly on the Syrian government and also on the armed groups, the human rights situation will continue to deteriorate and civilians will pay the highest price despite the fact that they have not been a party in the crisis.

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## Przerażający stan praw człowieka w Syrii. Cywile stają się ofiarami

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł ten jest próbą spojrzenia na kryzys w Syrii z różnych punktów widzenia praw człowieka. Zagrożenie dla praw człowieka i cywili płyną zarówno ze strony reżimu, jak i uzbrojonych grup opozycji. Syria stoi na skraju upadku. Zagrożone jest nie tylko samo państwo, ale także jego instytucje. Wydarzenia w Syrii dotknęły ponad 8 milionów cywili. W chwili obecnej Syryjczycy są porzucani w wielu obozach dla uchodźców. Dziesiątki tysięcy jest przetrzymywanych bezprawnie. Szacuje się, że około 11 tysięcy zmarło w wyniku tortur. Pojawienie się kryzysu było spowodowane latami opresji i korupcji obecnych na wszystkich szczeblach aparatu władzy. W kraju działało, niezależnie od siebie, ponad 17 służb bezpieczeństwa. Dodatkowo w wielu wypadkach dochodzi do zacieklej rywalizacji między nimi, co prowadzi do łamania praw obywateli. Kryzys się pogłębia i istnieje duże niebezpieczeństwo, że dotknie swym zasięgiem również kraje sąsiadujące. Jeśli nie nastąpi szybka i zdecydowana reakcja społeczności międzynarodowej, to sprawy w Syrii przybiorą tylko gorszy rozwój.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Wolna Armia Syrii, alawici, ismailici, Al-Ghouta, Razan Zaitouna, Syryjskie Centrum ds. Mediów i Wolności Wypowiedzi (The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression – SCM), Ahrar Asham, Front Obrony Ludności Lewantu (Annusra Front), ISIS, Al-Zaatari, Shabiha