

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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SYRIA: TO GUARANTEE ATROCITIES DON'T REPEAT, UPHOLD VICTIMS' RIGHTS

On 8 December, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied armed opposition groups captured Damascus and President Bashar al-Assad fled the country.¹ On 29 January 2025, the Syria Military Operations Command appointed former head of HTS, Ahmad al-Sharaa, to serve as head of state during the transitional period.² The Syria Military Operations Command suspended the constitution and exceptional laws that had been passed during the conflict and dismantled security branches.³ President Ahmad al-Sharaa committed to drafting a new constitution, establishing a legislative authority to reform laws, holding elections, and building the economy.⁴

A new transitional government was announced on 29 March 2025.⁵ It is crucial for the new authorities to work towards rebuilding trust between the people in Syria and the state, including by ensuring Syria's institutions uphold human rights without discrimination and cease abuse. Reform is particularly crucial for Syria's security forces and criminal justice system, which have caused immense suffering for decades. It is essential the new authorities uphold people's rights to truth, justice and reparation.

Nearly 15 years after the conflict in Syria began, civilians continue to wait for justice, truth and reparation for the harm done to them. Crimes by the former Syrian authorities, armed opposition groups and other warring parties had a devastating impact on people in Syria. People continue to grapple with the deaths of their loved ones, life-changing injuries, and an estimated 100,000 disappeared. Women and girls were severely affected, including being subjected to various forms of sexual and gender-based violence during displacement. Women also make up most of the families of the disappeared.

The brutality of the conflict and the immense suffering it caused tore Syria's social fabric apart. Millions sought refuge outside the country. Millions more were internally displaced, with most living in tents and unable to access essentials, such as food, clean water, health, and education.⁶

The conflict, exacerbated by harsh international sanctions and the widespread destruction of homes and vital infrastructure, decimated the economy. Most people in Syria now rely on humanitarian aid for survival.

Between 2011 and 2024, Amnesty International documented a range of gross human rights violations and crimes under international law committed by the Syrian government led by then-President Bashar al-Assad. Amnesty International also documented serious abuses committed by government allies, armed groups opposing the government, and the Kurdish-led de facto authorities and their allies.

Amnesty International found that the Syrian authorities committed war crimes through its air and ground attacks on civilians, which killed thousands and destroyed civilian infrastructure, including residential building, hospitals, schools, and water stations. Amnesty International also concluded that the Syrian authorities committed crimes against humanity by forcibly displacing tens of thousands of civilians after subjecting them to sieges and bombardment and by subjecting

1 Al Jazeera, "Opposition fighters declare Syria's Damascus 'liberated', al-Assad ousted", 8 December 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/8/opposition-fighters-take-syrian-capital>

2 CNN, "Former al Qaeda member names as Syria's president for transitional period", 29 January 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/29/middleeast/ahmad-al-sharaa-named-syria-transitional-president-intl-latam/index.html>

3 Enab Baladi, "Syria: what comes after the declaration of victory", 6 February 2025, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2025/02/syria-what-comes-after-declaration-of-victory/>

4 AL Jazeera, "President al-Sharaa and no more Baath party: What else has Syria announced", 29 January 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/29/president-al-sharaa-and-no-more-baath-party-what-else-has-syria-announced>

5 Reuters, "Syria's president al-Sharaa forms new transitional government", 30 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-president-al-sharaa-forms-new-transitional-government-2025-03-29/>

6 Amnesty International, 'Unbearable Living Conditions: Inadequate access to economic and social rights in displacement camps in north-west Syria' (Index: MDE 24/5770/2022), 5 July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/5770/2022/en/>

detainees to torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population.⁷

Amnesty International also documented armed opposition groups, including HTS and Turkish-backed armed groups, committing serious violations of international humanitarian law, including obstructing access to humanitarian aid and conducting arbitrary arrests and kidnappings, unlawful ground attacks and summary killings.⁸ Russia, Türkiye and the United States have also carried out unlawful attacks, killing many civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure.⁹

Since the fall of the former government, Israel and Türkiye have continued to carry out attacks in Syria, particularly in Syria's south-west and north-east, respectively.

On 6 March 2025, armed groups affiliated with the former government launched multiple coordinated attacks on security and military sites in the coastal governorates of Latakia and Tartous. In response, the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior, backed by supporting militias, launched a counteroffensive, leading to a significant escalation of violence. By 8 March, the authorities announced they had regained control of all affected areas. In the days that followed, militias affiliated with the current government deliberately killed Alawite civilians in towns and cities along the coast.¹⁰ On 5 April 2025, the Syrian authorities responded to Amnesty International's findings by reaffirming their commitment to upholding justice and willingness to cooperate with human rights organizations and grant them access to the country.¹¹

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE TRANSITIONAL AUTHORITIES IN SYRIA

UPHOLD VICTIMS' RIGHTS TO TRUTH, JUSTICE AND REPARATION

The authorities should ensure that all those suspected of criminal responsibility for crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture and enforced disappearance are brought to justice in fair trials before ordinary civilian courts, in accordance with international law. Victims have a right to truth, justice and reparation. In Syria, a mix of judicial and non-judicial approaches will likely be necessary to secure these rights, given the scale of abuse. Both national and international actors will be critical to securing justice. It is essential that all truth, justice, and reparation efforts prioritize the involvement of survivors, victims' families, and Syrian civil society organizations, including those representing victims' groups.

The new government should devise and present a plan to uphold the rights to truth, justice and reparation for survivors and families of victims of gross violations of international human rights law and serious violations of international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict, as well as to guarantee that past violations are never repeated. The government's plan should be based on a meaningful and effective nation-wide consultation that includes survivors and victim's families, Syrian civil society, Syrian humanitarian organizations, experts, human rights defenders, women, refugees and internally displaced people, and people with disabilities, among others. The consultation should be inclusive of all ethnic, racial, religious and demographic groups in Syria, and the government should guarantee meaningful participation for all, particularly those who have experienced historic discrimination, oppression and exclusion, including women and marginalized communities.

ENSURE TRUTH AND REPARATION

7 Amnesty International, "Syria: Security Council must address crimes against humanity in Idlib", 17 May 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/05/syria-security-council-must-address-crimes-against-humanity-in-idlib-2/>; Amnesty International, "Death everywhere: War crimes and human rights abuses in Aleppo" (Index: MDE 24/1370/2015), 4 May 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/1370/2015/en/>; Amnesty International, "Nowhere is safe for us: Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in north-west Syria" (Index: MDE 24/2089/2020), 10 May 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2089/2020/en/>; Amnesty International, "We Leave or We Die": Forced displacement under Syria's 'reconciliation' agreements" (Index: MDE 24/7309/2017), 13 November 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/7309/2017/en/>; Amnesty International, "Human slaughterhouse: Mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya Prison" (Index: MDE 24/5415/2017), 7 February 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/5415/2017/en/>

8 Amnesty International, "Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and allied armed groups", 18 October 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies-2/>; Amnesty International, "Torture was my punishment": Abductions, torture and summary killings under armed group rule in Aleppo and Idlib" (Index: MDE 24/4227/2016), 4 July 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/4227/2016/en/>

9 Amnesty International, "Civilian objects were not damaged: Russia's statements on its attacks in Syria unmasked" (Index: MDE 24/3113/2015), 23 December 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/3113/2015/en/>; Amnesty International, "Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and allied armed groups", 18 October 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies-2/>; Amnesty International, "War of annihilation": Devastating toll on civilians, Raqqa – Syria" (Index: MDE 24/8367/2018), 5 June 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/8367/2018/en/>

10 Amnesty International, "Syria: Coastal massacres of Alawite civilians must be investigated as war crimes", 3 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/syria-coastal-massacres-of-alawite-civilians-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/>

11 SANA, "Press statement by government of the Syrian Arab Republic on Amnesty International report", 5 April 2025, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=351319>

- Establish an independent mechanism or mechanisms to establish the truth regarding human rights violations and crimes under international law committed in Syria since 2011, identify root causes and the impact on society, and issue recommendations to guarantee non-recurrence. Such mechanisms should have powers of search, seizure and subpoena, access to archives and necessary documents, and resources to carry out their work effectively.
- Create reparation programmes based on input from survivors and families of victims of human rights violations to ensure that they are provided full and effective reparation – including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition – that would address their suffering and help them to rebuild their lives.
- Request reparations from states and other actors, including businesses, that are responsible for gross human rights violations and crimes under international law in Syria and ensure any reparations provided for violations that harmed individuals go directly towards meeting victims’ right to remedy.
- Review national laws and institutions to ensure that effective remedies are available to all victims of human rights violations, including violations of economic, social and cultural rights.

ENSURE JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- Ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and implement it under national law.
- Establish a vetting system to ensure that pending investigation, public officials, especially law enforcement or security officials, where there is admissible evidence that they may have committed serious human rights violations, do not remain, or are not placed, in positions where they could repeat such violations.
- Ensure that criminal proceedings against those suspected of criminal responsibility that are carried out in national courts meet international law and standards and without recourse to the death penalty.
- Cooperate with, and ensure unhindered access for, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights. Cooperate with proceedings in other countries’ courts, including those being carried out on the basis of universal jurisdiction, for grave violations committed in Syria.

ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF THE MISSING AND DISAPPEARED

The families of the over 100,000 disappeared in Syria are seeking answers about the fate of their loved ones, as well as the fulfilment of their rights to justice, truth and reparation.

The Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP) was established by the UN General Assembly in June 2023 after years of lobbying and campaigning by Syrian families of the disappeared and survivors of detention. The mechanism is dedicated to determining the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons in Syria, and to supporting victims, including survivors and families of the missing.

The Syrian authorities should disclose the fate and whereabouts of people missing and disappeared. The failure to do so in an effective way would constitute a breach of its human rights obligations. Uncovering the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared, as well as the circumstances of the disappearance, involves a search process that includes interviewing witnesses, examining the ample evidence that exists in the documents left behind by the previous government, processing documentary and other material evidence, and excavating mass graves and forensic identification. The search for the missing and disappeared will be a lengthy and resource-intensive process that will require the support of the international community, international mechanisms and Syrian civil society.

- Do not further delay the search for the missing and disappeared in Syria. In line with the UN’s Guiding Principles for the Search of Disappeared Persons, respect the right of participation and conduct the search based on a comprehensive strategy, through coordination, and in an independent and impartial manner.
- Cooperate with international mechanisms, including the IIMP, to clarify the fate and whereabouts of the missing and disappeared and grant access to mass graves and detention sites as well as documentary evidence.
- Enhance efforts to secure and preserve evidence of crimes committed by the former government, including critical government and intelligence documents, as well as mass graves. Collaborate and coordinate with relevant UN bodies, Syrian civil society, and international forensic teams to safeguard, preserve, and protect this evidence.

- Ensure that any truth, justice, reparation or memorialization efforts created to address the missing and disappeared uphold the rights of all victims, including abductions by former armed opposition groups and disappearances by the former government. Cooperate with efforts to investigate and redress cases of disappearance and related violations, regardless of who committed the abuse.
- Engage with families of the missing and disappeared, as well as Syrian civil society organizations, to ensure meaningful participation in decisions relating to truth, justice and reparation.
- Ensure that the newly established National High Commission for Missing Persons includes the full and meaningful participation of victims and their representatives in its formation, the drafting of its terms of reference, its operational framework, and oversight mechanisms that guarantee transparency and accountability.
- Ensure support for survivors and victims' families, including by ensuring that former detainees have access to healthcare, psycho-social support and other material support and that families of the disappeared and missing, who are mostly women, have access to civil documentation.
- Ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance without making any reservations and recognize the competence of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances to receive and consider communications from or on behalf of victims and other states parties. In addition, incorporate the Convention and other international treaties into domestic legislation.

UNDERTAKE HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED REFORMS, INCLUDING TO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND SECURITY SECTOR

Syria is in urgent need of broad, human rights-based reform, including to Syria's criminal justice system and security sector. This should include addressing systemic violations committed by law enforcement officers and intelligence services, during court proceedings and within the prison system, guaranteeing the non-recurrence of violations, and ensuring accountability and transparency, including the manner in which laws are enforced and applied. Reform should also involve repealing laws that are not compliant with international law and standards and enacting legislation that safeguards the human rights of all people, including their rights to a fair trial, truth, justice and reparation; freedom from torture and disappearance, equality and non-discrimination, including in the context of the rights to housing and property. Any committee formed to carry out these tasks should be accessible, inclusive, and participatory.

The Syrian authorities have obligations under international human rights law to all people of Syria. This should include taking clear action to strictly uphold the rights of all Syrians and those living inside Syria, including by ensuring that no person or group is targeted on the basis of perceived political affiliation, and protecting religious and ethnic minority groups from arbitrary arrest, detention and other forms of abuse.

The authorities should commit to a rights-based approach to reforming the constitution, including by enshrining rights to freedom of expression, assembly and movement; rights to life, privacy, liberty and fair trial; independence of the judiciary and an end to impunity; protection from torture, disappearance and ill-treatment; fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights.

REFORM THE SECURITY SECTOR

- Incorporate all armed opposition groups under the oversight of the Ministry of Interior or Ministry of Defense. Before integrating armed groups into military or security structures, carry out a human rights vetting process, in line with obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law.
- Ensure that all detention facilities are brought under the authority of the Ministry of Justice and under the supervision of the Department of Public Prosecutions. Monitors should have regular, independent, unannounced and unrestricted access to all places where people are deprived of their liberty.
- Ensure that only members of the judicial police have the authority, once an arrest warrant has been issued, to arrest, detain and, under certain circumstances, interrogate people.
- Ensure that law enforcement and security agencies act in full compliance with international law and standards, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.
- Ensure that intelligence services do not resort to practices such as arbitrary arrests and detentions and enforced disappearances and that any authorities these services are provided are rooted in law.

- Establish criteria and procedures for the recruitment and training of members of security and law enforcement agencies to ensure that they respect and protect human rights and operate according to standards of professional conduct. Establish effective monitoring, complaints and disciplinary and oversight mechanisms to ensure that these agencies and their members are held accountable for failures to comply with human rights standards.
- Establish civilian-led oversight mechanisms to ensure transparent and accountable governance of security forces.

REFORM OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

- Amend national legislation to make crimes under international law, including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions and torture criminal under national law. The definitions must be in accordance with international law. There should be no barriers to prosecutions of these crimes, such as amnesties, immunities, statutory limitations, etc.
- Put in place an official moratorium on executions and work towards abolishing the death penalty.
- Guarantee the independence of the judiciary, enshrining in law judges' security of tenure, with effective safeguards against political interference; ensuring independent procedures for the selection of judicial officials; and ensure that those appointed are individuals of integrity and ability with appropriate qualifications.
- Ensure that judges of the Supreme Court are appointed by an independent body and not by the President to maintain separation of power and judicial independence.

ENSURE FAIR TRIALS

- Ensure that civilians are tried in ordinary courts that meet international standards, and that no civilians are tried in military courts or other specialized courts.
- Align the Penal Code with international law to ensure fair trials, protection against torture and enforced disappearance, guarantee the right to freedom of expression and assembly, hold security forces, law enforcement and the judiciary accountable, and uphold victims' right to full and effective reparation.
- Amend the Criminal Procedure Code to align it with international law. In particular, ensure that the Criminal Procedure Code provides guarantees against prolonged pretrial detention without access to legal counsel and without the possibility to challenge the legality of detention, allows visits of relatives at all times, and prohibits the use of torture and other ill-treatment, including during interrogation.

END ARBITRARY DETENTION

- End arbitrary detention and arrests and incommunicado detention, and prohibit the use of torture and other ill-treatment, including during interrogation.
- Ensure that anyone detained is brought promptly before a judge or other judicial officer, and that mechanisms are in place to enable detainees to effectively challenge the legality of their detention.
- Release all those arbitrarily detained, including in the context of the conflict and those held by former armed opposition groups.
- Ensure that all detainees are held for lawful reasons, with their right to a fair trial upheld, including access to legal counsel, healthcare professionals, and family members, and protected from torture and any form of ill-treatment.

END TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

- Publicly condemn torture and other ill-treatment and make clear to security and law enforcement agencies that such abuses will not be tolerated under any circumstances.
- Conduct prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigations into all allegations of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, including where no formal complaint has been made, and if there is sufficient admissible evidence, prosecute all those suspected of criminal responsibility in fair trials under legislation which provides for penalties commensurate with the gravity of the offence and without recourse to the death penalty.
- Align Law No.16 of 2022, criminalizing torture, with the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Syria ratified in 2004. In particular, amend the definition of torture to

include “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” and ensure that the law offers redress to victims and establishes an adequate complaint and protective mechanism to prevent torture from occurring.¹²

- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture to ensure independent oversight of detention facilities, which is essential for preventing torture and other-ill treatment.

PROTECT FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSEMBLY AND OPINION

- Ensure that Syrian human rights and other civil society organizations can conduct their work without undue interference from the authorities, including by publicly reporting on violations.
- Ensure that no individuals are deprived of their liberty solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of conscience, thought, opinion, expression, association or assembly, including those peacefully expressing support for the former government.
- Amend laws aimed at restricting freedom of expression and assembly in line with international law, especially the Cybercrime Law No.20 of 2022, which criminalizes anyone who publishes an opinion on the internet with the “intention of overturning or changing the state’s system of government or undermining the prestige of the state and the national unity” and establishes specialized courts to try digital crimes and offences.
- Repeal Law No.93 of 1958 and its amendments in Decree No. 55 of 2011, which places restrictions on civil society organizations in Syria, including by requiring government approval for civil society activities, foreign funding, and restricting organizations from carrying out political activities or criticizing the government.

GUARANTEE THE FULL RIGHTS OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

- Guarantee the full range of human rights for all women and girls in the Constitution and ensure meaningful participation of women, women’s rights and feminist organizations in the Constitution’s drafting process.
- Protect, respect and fulfill women and girls’ rights to be free from all forms of gender-based discrimination and violence, including domestic violence and sexual violence, through legislative and policy reforms in line with international law and standards including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Syria ratified in 2003.
- Ensure that all women and girls have equal access to economic, social and cultural rights including education, healthcare, and other essential services, without discrimination on any grounds.
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, which allows individuals or groups to submit complaints for violations of their rights under the Convention.

PROTECT THE RIGHTS TO HOUSING AND PROPERTY

- Repeal laws, including Decree 66 of 2012 and Law No.10 of 2018, that aim to seize property, displace residents and demolish homes to convert them into urban development zones in the absence of human rights safeguards against forced evictions.¹³
- Establish legal frameworks that guarantee people’s right to housing and property, including in the context of internally displaced people and refugees that may be seeking to return to their housing, land and property. Ensure equal access without discrimination for women and marginalized groups.
- Put in place measures to ensure that reconstruction and development plans are in strict compliance with international human rights law and standards and include pathways for meaningful participation and compensation for affected communities without discrimination.

FULFIL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

12 Amnesty International, “Syria: New anti-torture law “whitewashes” decades of human rights violations”, 31 March 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/syria-new-anti-torture-law-whitewashes-decades-of-human-rights-violations/>

13 Amnesty International, “Syria: New property law punishes the displaced and could obstruct investigation of war crimes”, 18 May 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/syria-new-property-law-punishes-the-displaced-and-could-obstruct-investigation-of-war-crimes/>; Human Rights Watch, “Q&A: Syria’s New Property Law”, 29 May 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law#_Is_this_the

- Make every effort to mobilize the maximum available resources to fulfil people’s economic and social rights, including the rights to food, water, health, education and an adequate standard of living. This should include exploring human rights-consistent options for redirecting government resources to fund minimum, essential levels of social and economic rights; raising funds, for example by adopting fair, progressive and rights-based tax reform and using tax revenue to fund minimum, essential levels of social and economic rights; and using other opportunities to attain resources to realize rights, including seeking international assistance and recovering stolen assets.
- Seek international assistance, including climate finance for mitigation and adaptation, to address the human rights harms of the climate crisis. As soon as possible, conduct a participatory and transparent process to identify groups who are being disproportionately harmed by the climate crisis, develop an action plan to address these harms, and ensure that disadvantaged and marginalized groups, including rural communities and subsistence farmers, can meaningfully participate in planning, decision-making and monitoring of these action plans.