



## **Afrin: The Annual Report on Arbitrary Detention, Enforced Disappearance, and Torture During 2024**

*Synergy Association for Victims documented the arrest of 527 persons, including 15 children and 41 women, in Afrin at the hands of the Syrian National Army (SNA) during 2024. Turkish Intelligence Forces were also complicit in carrying out and supervising these violations*

## Introduction:

In September 2024, Sherwan decided to return to his homeland in Afrin Region after years of displacement in Aleppo. Despite being aware of the security and humanitarian challenges in the region, which has been under the control of the Turkish-backed SNA since 2018, he was all hopeful. However, Sherwan did not expect that his return would mark the beginning of a harsh experience that would tragically<sup>1</sup> change his life.

Upon his arrival in Afrin, Sherwan was arrested by members of the SNA and was taken to an undisclosed location. His ordeal began in the absence of any legal procedures or right to defend himself. He was subjected to severe physical and mental torture over the first five days. This included beating with sticks and plastic hoses, continued insults and abusive language, and deprivation of food and water, in inhuman detention conditions. The situation worsened as he faced constant threats and intimidation, such as being awakened in the middle of the night by buckets of cold water poured over him.

Despite all these violations, no formal charges were filed against him. The only question directed to him was whether he had any alleged ties to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Sherwan firmly denied the accusation, emphasizing that he had no involvement with any political or military party.

Sherwan was released after twenty days of detention, during which he endured psychological and physical torture, without providing any explanation or apology for his arrest. He was abandoned on a street in Afrin, in a dire psychological and physical situation, with visible signs of torture on his body. However, the psychological trauma was deeper and more painful. Sherwan later revealed that, for several days, he was unable to speak about his ordeal, as if the severity of the trauma had left him tongue-tied.

Today, Sherwan continues to suffer from deep psychological impacts, notably anxiety and constant fear. His story is not an exception, rather a microcosm of the widespread violations committed against the civilians in Afrin, where arbitrary arrests, torture and enforced disappearance have become daily occurrences in the absence of legal accountability.

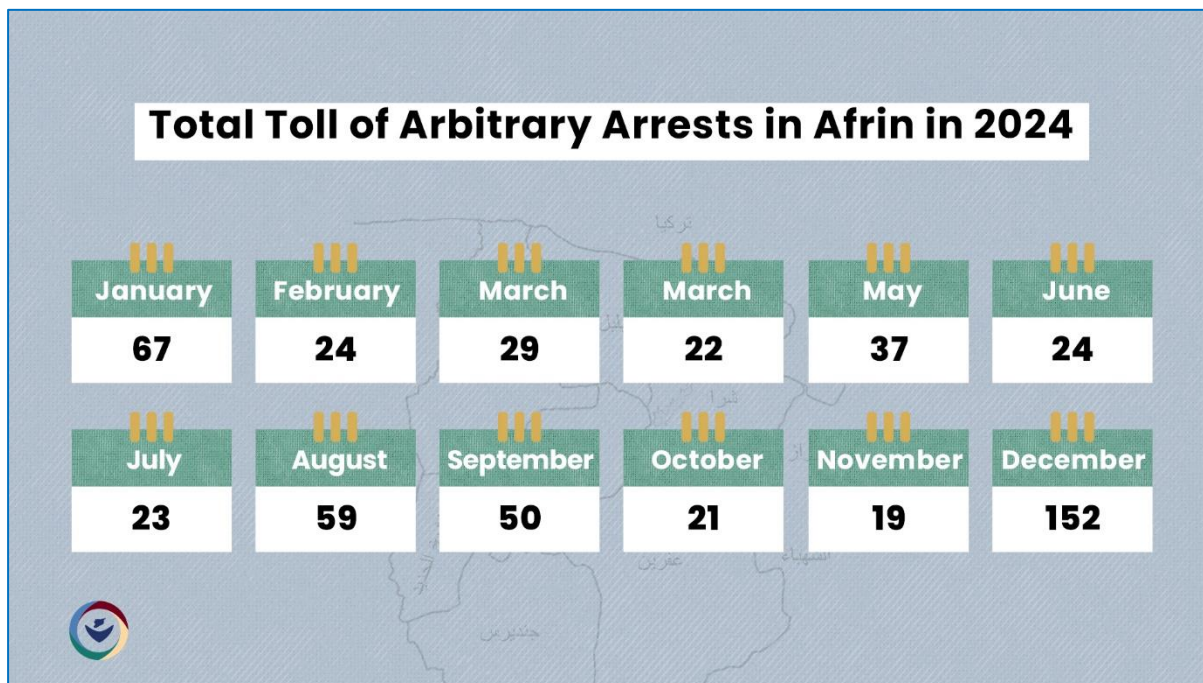
## A Broader Context for Systematic Violations:

Over 2024, Synergy Association documented the arrest of 527 persons, including 15 children and 41 women, in Afrin at the hands of the SNA. Turkish Security and Intelligence Forces were involved in carrying out 49 of these arrests. By the end of 2024, only 115 persons had been released after their families paid exorbitant financial ransoms. The fate of the remaining 412 detainees remains unknown.

---

<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym, the witness's personal information is withheld for his safety.

The arrests climaxed in December 2024, with 152 cases recorded, nearly a third of the total arrests for the year. Despite the fall of the Syrian regime on December 8, 2024, and the release of thousands of prisoners from its prisons, the SNA continued to arrest civilians, particularly Kurds returning to their homes.



In a remarkable development on December 8, 2024, al-Rai Prison, in Aleppo countryside, witnessed a jailbreak in which more than 300 detainees, including pregnant women escaped. The prisoners carried out an internal mutiny and broke the locks of the cell doors. The majority of them are Kurdish people from Afrin who endured horrific violations at SNA hands.

The mutiny was a result of frustration over the [general amnesty decision](#) issued by the [Syrian Interim Government](#) affiliated with the opposition [Syrian National Coalition](#) (SNC), as the amnesty did not include Kurdish detainees who remained in custody without trails or clear charges. In response, hundreds of prisoners went on a hunger strike and carried out the mutiny that resulted in the jailbreak.

Al-Rai Prison has gained infamy for systematic torture and violations. Many detainees were [killed](#) under [torture](#), mirroring practices and methods of torture used in Syrian regime detention centers. Numerous testimonies from the survivors confirmed that this prison represents one of the prominent examples of the absence of law and ongoing humanitarian suffering in the areas controlled by the Turkish-backed factions.

Under the general amnesty decision, dozens of detainees were released from the SNA-run prisons in different areas, including Ma'arata, Rajo, and Azaz prisons. Yet, questions remain about the integrity of the amnesty's implementation, especially as many Kurdish detainees were excluded from the amnesty, and arbitrary detention continue to be practiced against

them, let alone the absence of transparency concerning the adopted criteria for releasing the detainees.

These violations reflect the ongoing state of insecurity and instability in the Turkish-occupied areas in Northern Syria and the absence of justice and accountability. The lack of effective remedy mechanisms for the victims means that the perpetrators and violators remain beyond accountability, thus encouraging the commission of these violations, in light of the judicial system's inability or unwillingness in those areas to address these transgressions fairly and effectively.

The SNA conducted no investigations in its forces' practices, which continue to arrest civilians, ensuing them forcibly disappeared persons and violating their rights, nor did the Turkish government that has effective command and control on these forces to change their arbitrary conduct. On the contrary, it appears, in many cases, that the Turkish government was involved as a partner in committing such violations.

Therefore, the Turkish military commanders are held criminally responsible for violations committed by the SNA factions in instances where the Turkish leaders knew or should have known about such crimes or failed to take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent their commission.

As an occupying power, the Turkish authorities must ensure that their own officials and those under their command in the SNA do not arbitrarily detain or mistreat anyone. The Turkish authorities are also obliged to investigate alleged violations and ensure that those responsible are appropriately punished.

Overall, the reiteration of these incidents reflects the existence of a suppressive environment that does not encourage a voluntary and safe return of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or enforced migrants to their Turkish-occupied territories, resulting in constant displacement and social instability in the region.

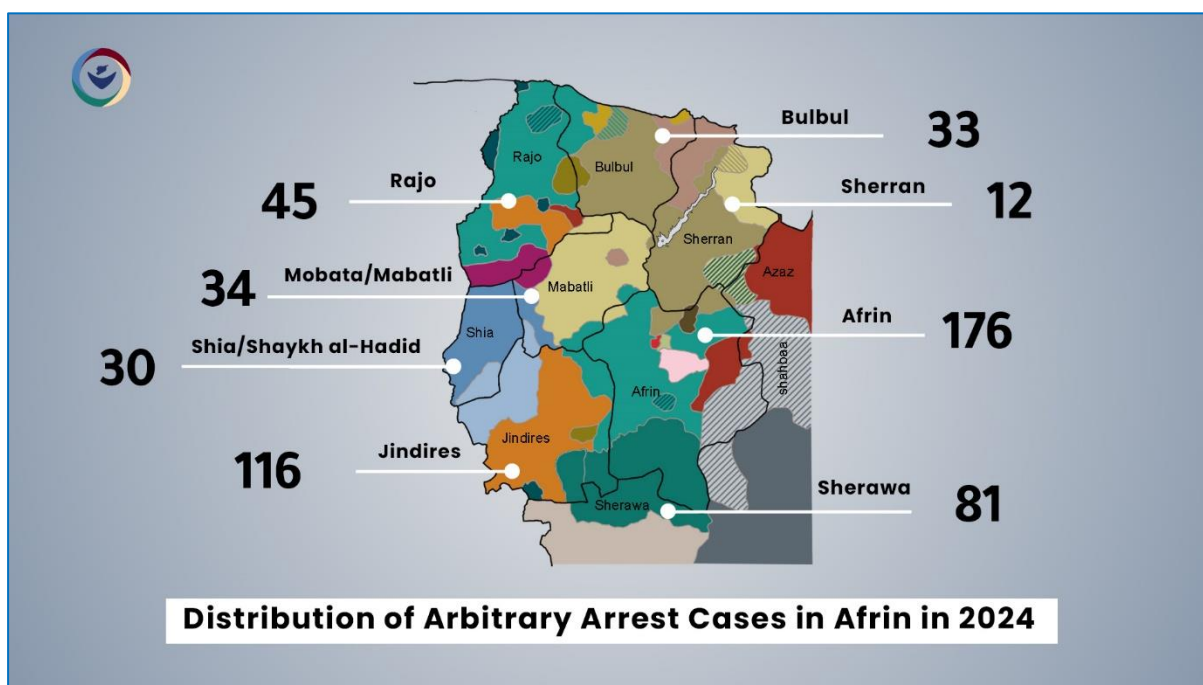
### **The Escalation of Arrests in Afrin Region in 2024:**

During 2024, areas in Afrin saw a significant increase in the scale of arbitrary arrest. Synergy Association documented at least 527 arrest cases, including 15 children and 41 women. This marks a 57% increase in the number of detainees compared to 2023, during which 336 arrests were [documented](#), including 20 women and 15 children.

Survivors recounted being subjected to various types of psychological and physical torture. Many families reported to Synergy Association that they were asked to pay financial ransoms for the release of their loved ones. In one case, a family was asked to pay 100,000 USD for the release of a detainee, whereas ransom amounts in other extortion cases varied between 2,000 and 8,000 USD.

These incidents indicate that arbitrary detention cases in Afrin are used as a method for financial extortion and pressuring the residents into evacuating their properties, particularly the olive groves, which are a primary source of income for thousands of families. Financial ransoms are imposed under threat, and detainees are often held until their families pay the demanded amounts, or a significant portion of them, following negotiations. The families of three Kurdish detainees reported that their loved ones remain in custody, as SNA leaders intentionally conceal their fate and whereabouts due to the families' inability to pay the required ransoms.

The highest number of arbitrary detentions was recorded in Afrin City, with 176 arrests, followed by 116 arrests in Jindires City. Other arrests were reported in various areas, including 81 in Sherawa District, 45 in Rajo, 34 in Mobata/Mabatli, 33 in Bulbul, 30 in Shia/Shaykh al-Hadid, and 12 in Sherran.



The parties responsible for carrying out arbitrary arrests in Afrin in 2024 varied, including the Military Police, the Civil Police, the Joint Forces (led by al-Hamza Division and Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade-al-Amshat), as well as the Sultan Murad Division. Additionally, Turkish Security and Intelligence Forces were involved in 49 arrest cases.

To document these violations, Synergy Association relied on its network of filed researchers, testimonies from detainees' families and eyewitnesses, as well as verification of available information through open sources. Despite these efforts, Synergy estimates that the actual number of arrests may be higher than what was documented and verified, due to field challenges and a lack of transparency.

These statistics highlight the ongoing deterioration of security and humanitarian conditions in Afrin, where the Turkish-backed SNA employs arrests as a tool for suppression and extortion. The persistent lack of accountability further exacerbates the suffering of civilians.

### Detention as a Widespread Systematic Pattern:

In several of its reports, Synergy Association has documented the ongoing phenomena of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in the SNA-held areas. On December 23, 2024, Synergy published a report titled “[Missing Justice](#)”, which detailed the systematic and continued pattern of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture carried out by the Turkish-backed SNA factions in Northern Syria.

Furthermore, Synergy Association submitted a [letter](#) to the Human Rights Council Special procedures on Arbitrary Detention and Torture in Northern Syria, in which it called on the United Nations to prioritize this issue due to the severity of the violations committed and the lack of legal protection for hundreds of thousands of civilians at risk.

The motives behind the majority of detentions in Afrin areas were to extort the victims and their families to get financial ransoms or for intimidation purposes to push them to leave the area. Sultan Suleiman Shah (al-Amshat) arrested people for demanding the return of their properties, including three persons with special needs among them two women.

Synergy Association conducted interviews, in which six persons reported being extorted to pay financial ransoms, forcing their families to pay amounts ranging from \$2,500 and \$7,000 for their release. Abdullah, 32-year-old detainee, stated that he was arbitrarily arrested by al-Hamza Division for eight months and was accused of collaborating with the Autonomous Administration and the SDF. Al-Hamza Division initially demanded 5,000 USD from Abdullah’s family for his release, but they ultimately negotiated the amount down to 2,500 USD.

### The Role of Turkish Intelligence in the Arrests:

Turkish Intelligence plays a central role in overseeing—or at the very least being extensively informed about—the arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance operations carried out by SNA factions, as well as the various forms of torture accompanying these practices.

Within this context, Adam Coogle, deputy director with the Middle East at Human Rights Watch (HRW), [said](#): “**Ongoing abuses including torture and enforced disappearances of those who live under Turkish authority in northern Syria will continue unless Turkey itself takes responsibility and acts to stop them.**” Moreover, the HRW’s [report](#), “**Everything is by the Power of the Weapon**”, confirms that “the Turkish Army and the Turkish Intelligence Agencies are involved in implementing and supervising the violations.”

According to an [Intelligence Briefing](#) by New Lines Institute, published in December 2022, “the Turkish military and intelligence officers heading these centers [Afrin among others]

coordinate the distribution of ongoing military responsibilities, make all decisions, and inform the Syrian commanders [SNA commanders], who then carry out the orders.” Synergy Association has documented at least 22 arrests carried out by Turkish Intelligence Forces since early 2024.

The continuing, recurrence, and escalation of arrests in these territories affirms that these practices are not isolated or random incidents, rather, they are part of a suppressive systematic pattern. These violations refer to a strategy aiming to intimidate the locals, particularly the Kurds, and forcing them to leave their original places of residence, or reluctantly accepting financial extortion in exchange for their freedom. These practices highlight the urgent need for an immediate intervention that puts an end to the violations and holds perpetrators accountable.

### **Inhuman Detention Conditions:**

The Turkish-backed SNA did not adhere to any minimum standards that should be applied to individuals detained by its forces. All of the interviewees reported being held in overcrowded places or solitary confinement cells for prolonged periods without any justifications. Inhumane detention conditions were imposed on all the victims, in which the perpetrators aimed to either increase pressure on the victims to extract confessions, information, and ransoms from the family, or without any specific purpose, just to cause more suffering to the victims.

The majority of the victims underwent the same experience of sleep deprivation, exposure to freezing temperatures, deprivation from any means of warmth, including blankets. Nor did any victim state that they had access to adequate nutrition or clean drinking water. Furthermore, all the victims were subjected to insults, expressions and conducts that touch their honor according to the prevailing social norms

**Detention has multi-faceted impacts on men, women and children including both physical and mental harm. The majority of the survivors described suffering from chronic physical pains resulting from torture they sustained, let alone suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic attacks, constant fear, anxiety, compounded by recurring nightmares that exacerbate their trauma.**

### **Torture and Ill-Treatment:**

In August 2024, 16 members of a single family, among them women and children, were arrested and tortured at the hands of the Military Police forces in Afrin during a mass arrest campaign. The authorities claimed that the family members were linked to an explosion in Azaz City. The torture included brutal methods, such as beating the victims with plastic hoses on the back and feet, and some women were abused by male officers.



Only 11 family members were released after a day and a half of investigation under torture, while six others remained in custody. Two women were transferred to the Military Hospital due to severe injuries sustained from the torture during the interrogation.

Documented patterns of torture and ill-treatment committed by the SNA reflect the methods the former Syrian regime implemented in its different security branches. The interviewees detailed different forms of torture they endured or witnessed while they were in prison. The detainees were beaten with sticks, hosepipes and electricity cables, in addition to slapping, kicking and punching.

Several victims were subjected to Blanco (Shabah) and Farouja (Chicken) methods of torture, and had cigarettes extinguished on their bodies. While others were suspended from the ceiling and beaten by the butts of guns and electrocuted. Other patterns of torture included drowning, breaking fingers, making wounds using sharp objects, and being dragged behind a military vehicle.<sup>2</sup>

Physical torture was accompanied by psychological harm as well. The majority of the victims were subjected to humiliation, while some were compelled to witness other individuals being tortured more severely and were threatened with the same punishment if they did not cooperate and confess the information needed. Many victims were threatened with death, and firearms were pointed towards the heads of some. Several ended up agreeing to sign confessions they never made.

It is worth noting that Turkish officials were present regularly in SNA-run detention facilities. Former detainees stated that Turkish officials were also present during interrogation sessions, in which torture was used, indicating that the Turkish Army and Turkish Intelligence agencies are implicated in carrying out and overseeing these violations.

In a joint report published on June 26, 2024, titled “[In the Absence of Accountability: Torture as a Systematic Policy in Northern Syria](#)”, Synergy documented that torture and ill-treatment amount to be part of a widespread systematic pattern in the SNA-held areas in Northern Syria, under the full view or involvement of the Turkish forces.

---

<sup>2</sup> In the method of torture known as Blanco: The victims are suspended by the wrists to ropes dangling from the ceiling to force them stand on the tip of their toes, so they are exposed to huge pressure or they remained hanged in the air so that the weight of their bodies press on their wrists and lead to the swelling of the wrists causing intense pain. The victims may remain in such situation for hours or sometimes days in combination with severe beatings. While in the method of torture known as Farouja: The victim’s hands and legs are tied together and are suspended on a wooden or a metal bar. Then, they are raised from above the ground to resemble the way of grilling a chicken in combination with beating on all over the body.

## Legal Framework:

### ▪ **Obligations of Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) According to International Law:**

In the context of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) applicable in all areas included in this letter, this law regulates issues sufficiently related to the existing armed conflict. NSAGs exercise control on the civilian population by virtue of an armed conflict in which these groups have engaged in against the state. Accordingly, the IHL is applicable for the protection of those populations from exercising arbitrary authority by parties to the conflict in the absence or disruption of the protection supposed to be granted to them by national laws.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, NSAGs are obligated to apply a set of legal conventional and customary laws in dealing with civilians during armed conflicts, including at least “protection provided to the wounded and sick, protection of hospitals, principle of human treatment, prohibition of collective punishment, pillage, retaliation, and hostage-taking, prohibition of forced displacement and deportation, and the right to due process and judicial guarantees.”<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, despite states have the primary responsibility for the respect, protection, and fulfilment of human rights under international law, there is a growing support for the approach saying that NSAGs in control of territories, and thus populations, assume obligations of IHRL to avoid a protection gap.<sup>5</sup> The UN endorsed this approach.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Human Rights Council noted that “it is increasingly considered that under certain circumstances non-State actors can also be bound by international human rights law.”<sup>7</sup> Also, in their joint statement, human rights experts of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council concluded that “at a minimum, non-state armed actors exercising either government-like functions or de facto control over territory and population must respect and protect the human rights of individuals and groups.”<sup>8</sup>

### ▪ **Torture and Inhuman Treatment:**

The prohibition of torture, cruel, brutal, degrading treatment or punishment is a peremptory norm of international law (*jus cogens*). Prohibition, in this context, is not subjected to any justifications, limitations or pretexts related to the legal status of the party concerned. Prohibition is absolute in times of peace and war and is applicable to all actors without exception.

---

<sup>3</sup> Official Records of the Diplomatic Conference on the Reaffirmation and Development of International Humanitarian Law applicable in Armed Conflicts, Vol. 8, CDDH/I/SR.22, Geneva, 1974–77, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Sivakumaran, *The Law of Non-International Armed Conflict*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), p 530.

<sup>5</sup> Committee Against Torture, 20th Sess., *GRB. v Sweden*, Communication No. 83/ 1997, UN. Doc. CAT/C/20/D/83/1997 (19 June 1998); *Sheekh v Netherlands*, App. No. 1948/04, HUDOC at 45 (11 January 2007); UN Secretary-General, Report of the Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka, 243 (31 March 2011), p 188; Darragh Murray, *Human Rights Obligations of Non-State Armed Groups* (Hart Publishing, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> OHCHR, ‘International Legal Protection of Human Rights in Armed Conflict’, Geneva and New-York (2011), pp 23-27 (Available at: [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/HR\\_in\\_armed\\_conflict.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/HR_in_armed_conflict.pdf)).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24

<sup>8</sup> OHCHR, Joint Statement by independent United Nations human rights experts on human rights responsibilities of armed non-State actors, 25 February 2021 (Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/joint-statement-independent-united-nations-human-rights-experts-human-rights?LangID=E&NewsID=26797>).

Within this context, Common Article 3 to the Geneva Convention applicable during non-international armed conflicts prohibits torture, cruel treatment and outrages upon personal dignity (inhuman treatment), in particular humiliating and degrading treatment; this prohibition is considered a reflection to Customary IHL.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the two terms of torture and inhuman treatment prohibited during armed conflicts do not require the participation or presence of a state official or of any other authority-wielding person in the torture process,<sup>10</sup> as required by the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). Accordingly, leaders and members of armed groups, in their capacity, assume legal liability for committing acts amount to torture or inhuman treatment without the need to argue the liability of the state in such acts. Commission of torture or inhuman treatment during non-international armed conflict entails individual criminal responsibility in case it fulfils elements of the crime of torture or inhuman treatment enshrined in the statutes of international criminal courts.<sup>11</sup> It is worth mentioning that the duty of human treatment is applicable in all circumstances and military necessity, or reciprocity may not be invoked as arguments against fulfilling this obligation by the opposing party to the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) provides that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. Similarly, Article 2 of the CAT obliges state parties to refrain from acts of torture and to take effective legislative, judicial, and administrative measures to prevent acts of torture on their territories. Article 16 of the CAT obliges state parties to prohibit and prevent other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment that does not amount to torture under their jurisdiction. Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Article 2 (2) of the CAT provides that “no exceptional circumstances, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.” Likewise, Article 4 (2) of the ICCPR clarifies that the obligation under Article 7 (prohibition of torture) cannot be derogated from in times of war or any kind of public emergency.

---

<sup>9</sup> Rule 90 of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) regarding Customary International Humanitarian Law.

<sup>10</sup> ICTY, Kunarac Trial Judgment, 2001, para. 496, confirmed in Appeal Judgment, 2002, para. 148. See also Simić Trial Judgment, 2003, para. 82; Brđanin Trial Judgment, 2004, para. 488; Kvočka Appeal Judgment, 2005, para. 284; Limaj Trial Judgment, 2005, para. 240; Mrkšić Trial Judgment, 2007, para. 514; Haradinaj Retrial Judgment, 2012, para. 419; and Stanišić and Župljanin Trial Judgment, 2013, para. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Rome Statue, Article 8, C, (i) and (ii), statute of the international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Article 2 (b), statute of the international tribunal for Rwanda, Article 4.

<sup>12</sup> ICRC 2020 Commentary on Common Article 3, para 596.

### ▪ Arbitrary Deprivation of Liberty:

As a rule of the Customary IHL,<sup>13</sup> arbitrary deprivation of liberty is prohibited. This is applied by analogy to its application to international armed conflict and also under IHRL. Accordingly, deprivation of liberty must be legitimate in the applicable law and comply with the essential procedures, most importantly: the arrested person must be informed of any charges, the person arrested or detained on a criminal charge shall be brought promptly before a judge, anyone who is deprived of liberty by arrest or detention has the right to take proceedings before a court to decide the lawfulness of the detention.<sup>14</sup> With respect to the legitimacy of deprivation of liberty, imperative reasons imposed during international armed conflict for an actor are limited to this deprivation only for utmost necessities if not for criminal causes are cited generally.<sup>15</sup> In addition, regardless of the causes of deprivation of liberty, all parties to the conflict are obligated to treat all persons under their control humanely and without discrimination in accordance with the first paragraph of the Common Article 3.

In the context of the IHRL, Article 9 of the UDHR prohibits acts of arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile. Article 9 of the ICCPR protects the right of individuals to liberty and security. Additionally, in paragraph 4, it provides that anyone who is deprived of his liberty by arrest or detention shall be entitled to take proceedings before a court, in order that that court may decide without delay on the lawfulness of his detention and order his release if the detention is not lawful.

In General Comment No. 35, the Human Rights Committee addressed the applicability of Article 9 of the ICCPR to situations of armed conflict, given that IHL regulates the detention of enemy fighters and civilians differently. The Human Rights Committee clarified that “article 9 [of the ICCPR] applies also in situations of armed conflict” and that IHL and IHRL are complementary spheres of law, not mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, while Article 9 is not included as a non-derogable clause under Article 4(2) of the ICCPR, there is a limit on state’s power to derogate. Any exception to Article 9 (which has not been done in the situation of Syria) must be “strictly required by the exigencies of the actual situation.” Lastly, “If, under the most exceptional circumstances, a present, direct, and imperative threat is invoked to justify the detention of persons considered to present such a threat, the burden of proof lies on states parties to show that the individual poses such a threat and that it cannot be addressed by alternative measures, and that burden increases with the length of the detention. States parties also need to prove that detention does not last longer than absolutely necessary, that the overall length of possible detention is limited and that they fully respect the guarantees provided for by article 9 in all cases.

---

<sup>13</sup> Rule 99 of the ICRC regarding Customary International Humanitarian Law.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance, Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 35, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, articles 42 and 78 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

By the growing consensus on the responsibility of NSAGs to respect and protect human rights in the areas they control, above-mentioned provisions are applicable to the SNA's factions due to the fact that they continue to control the so-called "Peace Spring" and "Olive Branch" areas and perform functions similar to those of the Government.