

4.1.1. Political dissent and opposition in Syria

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, this document has been reviewed and updated. Please consult '[Interim Country Guidance: Syria \(2025\)](#)'

COMMON ANALYSIS

Last update: April 2024

Government forces harshly repressed the anti-government protests that erupted in 2011 and the ensuing military uprising. Throughout the conflict, the GoS has used systematic torture, unlawful detentions and disappearances, starvation and medical deprivation sieges, as well as mass casualty weapons, including chemical weapons, against civilians. Civilians perceived to be either supporting the opposition or insufficiently loyal to GoS were arbitrarily arrested and detained. In particular, individuals perceived to be opposition supporters were most likely to be detained arbitrarily by government forces and their allied militias. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1, p. 17, 1.2.3, p. 26]

GoS is reported to view as political dissent the activities of **wide categories of individuals**, including members of political parties other than the ruling Baath party, peaceful protesters, activists and critics of the government, professionals such as humanitarian workers, doctors, human rights defenders, university students, lawyers, journalists, media workers, bloggers and online activists, as well as draft evaders and defected soldiers. Individuals living in opposition-controlled areas, those in recaptured areas, returnees from abroad, IDPs seeking to return to their original places of residence in GoS-held areas, individuals with family members who were dissidents, activists or armed opposition members and those who have been in contact with family members or friends residing in opposition-controlled areas, have also been targeted. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.1, pp. 12-13; [Targeting 2022](#), 1, p. 17; [Targeting 2020](#), 1, pp. 13?14]

According to recent reports, perceived opponents of the government continued to be targeted by variety of state-backed actors, including security services and pro-GoS militias [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.1, p. 12]. The priority of GoS is to eliminate remaining structures of resistance and discourage future rebellion, leading to arrests of civilians as well as former opposition fighters in reconciled areas taken by GoS. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.1, p. 23]

Syrians have ended up wanted by the government and arbitrarily detained for a wide variety of reasons, including for example for having a similar name with a person that in fact opposes the government, and at times without a clear reason. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.1, p. 22]

The GoS has at its disposal an extensive range of tools for intelligence gathering, surveillance and for punishing anyone perceived to be a dissident or insufficiently loyal to it. Among those tools, the authorities reportedly kept extensive lists of persons wanted for arrest or questioning. These lists included the names of individuals suspected of involvement in perceived opposition activities such as participation in protests, working for NGOs, human rights activists and local council officials in areas controlled by the opposition, and men wanted for military service. Persons on wanted lists were vulnerable to being arrested or forcibly

disappeared ‘at official ports of entry and exit, such as land border crossings and airports, as well as checkpoints and government offices on regime-held territory’. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.1, p. 16] Civilians perceived to be opposed to the government also claimed to have been denied access to medical treatment in Damascus [[Damascus 2022](#), 3.6.1, p. 52].

More than 100 000 people have been detained, abducted or gone missing during Syria’s civil war, largely at the hands of the GoS. GoS forces arrested civilians perceived to be supporting the opposition or deemed insufficiently loyal to the government. Thousands of detainees were being held without trial, some since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011. Intelligence services were reported to commit systematic rights abuses. [[Targeting 2020](#), 1.1.1, p. 18]

On 30 April 2022 the president issued Legislative Decree No 7 which included a general amnesty for terrorist crimes. The amnesty did not cover persons charged under other laws, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. Only a small number of persons have been reportedly released. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.1.1, pp. 19-20; [Security 2022](#), 1.4.1, p. 29]

Sentences against persons accused of anti-GoS activity were generally harsh, while prison conditions for political and national security prisoners, especially alleged opposition members, were ‘much worse than those for ordinary criminals’. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.1, pp. 13-14]

On 28 March 2022 GoS passed a law criminalising torture, while during the first half of 2022, 90 deaths by torture at the hands of GoS and affiliated partners were recorded [[Security 2022](#), 1.4.1, p. 28; [Targeting 2022](#), 1.1.2, p. 21]. Government forces, especially the intelligence branches, are reported to torture perceived opponents. Most of the victims were men between the ages of 18 and 60, but torture of women and children was also reported. Extrajudicial executions by the intelligence branches were also reported [[Targeting 2020](#), 1.1.2, p. 16, 1.1.4, p. 18]. Enforced disappearances and deaths in detention due to torture and medical negligence also continued to be reported in recent sources [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.1, p. 12; [Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 26].

See other topics concerning persons perceived to be opposing the government:

- [4.1.1. Political dissent and opposition in Syria](#)
- [4.1.2. Members of anti-government armed groups](#)
- [4.1.3. Political activists, opposition party members and protesters](#)
- [4.1.4. Civilians originating from areas associated with opposition to the government](#)

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