

Syria: Arrests and Abuse of Kurds During Aleppo Escalation (January 2026)



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سوريون
من أجل
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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



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This Report Details The Detention Of Civilians Without Due Process In Sheikh Maqsoud And Ashrafiyah, Alongside Documented Cases Of Enforced Disappearance During Security Operations

1. Introduction

Between 6 and 12 January 2026, the mainly Kurdish neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah in Aleppo experienced a military and security escalation that directly affected civilians. This escalation led to practices such as arbitrary deprivation of liberty and degrading treatment. This report records cases of apprehension and detention targeting civilians as they attempted to evacuate the neighborhoods or after the government established field control. These incidents occurred amidst heightened security measures and a complete lack of due process protections. The report further details these practices, which included: arbitrary arrests at checkpoints and humanitarian crossing points, forced separation of men and women, temporary detention in undisclosed locations (incommunicado detention), confiscation of personal belongings, and instances of physical and verbal abuse.

The report also shows, based on documented testimonies, that the corridors designated for civilian exit were not solely for humanitarian purposes, as declared. Instead, they were used as tools for screening and security checks. Civilians, especially men, were subjected to scrutiny based on arbitrary suspicion and presumed ties, without procedural safeguards that ensure the right to liberty and personal security.

For this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) conducted in-depth interviews with nine witnesses and victims. It also relied on testimonies and interviews collected in collaboration with the Kurdish Lawyers Union, which helped document the events covered in this report. All participants gave informed consent after being informed about the voluntary nature of their participation and how their information would be used, including in this report. Participants chose to hide their identities and any identifying details out of fear of possible retaliation against themselves or their families. Therefore, this report uses pseudonyms when referencing individuals whose testimonies are included.

2. Background

After a period of relative calm following the [ceasefire announced](#) in late December 2025, Aleppo experienced a renewed outbreak of hostilities starting on 6 January 2026. Military tensions increased across the city after the Syrian army declared all positions of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) within the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah to be “legitimate military targets,” following the SDF’s significant escalation toward Aleppo’s neighborhoods and its commission of numerous massacres against civilians, [according to](#) the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). In contrast, the SDF denied in a [statement](#) that any of its forces were present in Aleppo, stating that it had publicly and officially handed over security responsibilities in the two neighborhoods to the Internal Security Forces (Asayish).

Clashes started near the al-Layramoun roundabout before quickly spreading to the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah, two of the most densely populated areas in the city ([home to over 250,000 residents](#)), including many who were previously displaced ([about 40% of the population](#)).

On 7 January 2026, the transitional Syrian government [announced](#) the launch of a military operation in Aleppo, shifting from sporadic clashes to an officially declared

campaign. This was accompanied by a widespread deployment of government forces within residential areas and increased security measures. These events coincided with mutual shelling, disruptions to essential services, and stricter restrictions on civilian movement.

By 8 January 2026, government forces had [ordered](#) civilians to evacuate the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud, Ashrafiyah, and Bani Zeid, setting a clear deadline for compliance. They also announced [two designated humanitarian corridors](#) (Al-Awarid and al-Zuhoor Street) and [established](#) 64 shelters across Aleppo governorate. After the deadline passed, government forces began shelling operations, while both sides exchanged accusations of serious violations against civilians¹.

The escalation led to an [estimated](#) displacement of about 148,000 people, according to the United Nations (UN). Additionally, casualties were reported, with the [Director of Media at the Aleppo Health Directorate](#) stating on 12 January that the death toll had reached 24 and 129 were wounded. Local sources, however, reported that fatalities exceeded 45, with more than 120 injured.

Regarding essential civilian infrastructure in the two neighborhoods, the [UN](#) reported that the military escalation caused damage to at least three schools and several primary healthcare centers; Zahi Azrak Hospital, the main government hospital for internal medicine cases; Ibn Rushd Hospital, the primary dialysis center; and Othman Hospital all [stopped](#) operations due to the damage. Al-Salam Hospital was also affected, and Khaled Al-Fajr Hospital was [targeted](#) and went out of service. Additionally, operations at the al-Babiri water pumping station in the eastern countryside of Aleppo were [halted](#), disrupting water supplies to Aleppo and nearby rural areas. The station later resumed operations after the ceasefire, helping restore water supplies to nearly three million people in Aleppo city and surrounding regions.

According to [UN](#) estimates, Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah contain 25,802 residential buildings, 21% of which were already damaged before 6 January 2025 (based on previous assessments linked to the February 2023 earthquake), with further damage occurring after the recent escalation.

Despite a [relative decrease](#) in hostilities starting on 11 January 2026, and the signing of a ceasefire and full integration [agreement](#) between the transitional Syrian government and the SDF on 18 January 2026, the security and humanitarian consequences of the escalation persisted. This occurred as some residents gradually returned to neighborhoods that lacked basic services and continued to face instability and fear.

In this context, reports documented civilians being detained during displacement and while trying to leave neighborhoods, as well as cases of individuals going missing after their last contact with loved ones. These events added significant security and human rights dimensions to the broader humanitarian impact of the escalation².

¹ On 8 January 2026, Syrian human rights organizations, including STJ, [called](#) for an immediate halt to military operations and related violations, emphasizing the need to protect civilians and to return to negotiations to prevent further security decline in residential areas of Aleppo.

² On 14 January 2026, STJ released a [statement](#) expressing concerns about the fate of hundreds of people who lost contact during the escalation, especially while fleeing or in the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah

3. Humiliation and Arrests at Checkpoints and Humanitarian Corridors

Testimonies collected for this report show that civilians attempting to leave the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah faced arrest and detention, especially at checkpoints and crossing points, mainly around the al-Awarid checkpoint. Multiple accounts describe armed personnel, some not in uniform, others wearing Internal Security Forces uniforms, and some from Arab tribes in traditional “jalabiyas”, conducting identity checks and recording names. According to documentation by STJ, several tribes worked alongside the Internal Security Forces, most notably the [Mawali](#) tribe, a major tribe in northern Syria, with a strong presence in the governorates of Homs, Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo.

Zeina, a resident of Ashrafiyah who was displaced to Qamishli during the escalation, described what she witnessed at one of the checkpoints in the Ashrafiyah neighborhood. She recalled that men were subjected to humiliation and arrest, saying,

“At the checkpoint near al-Jazeera car wash, at the junction between Ashrafiyah and west of Sheikh Maqsoud, near the al-Awarid ascent, we saw how the personnel humiliated those who tried to pass. Many men were forced to the ground, prevented from leaving, and beaten on their faces, before being transported on buses to unknown locations”.

She added,

“The al-Awarid checkpoint was controlled by forces wearing military uniforms, others in Internal Security Forces uniforms, armed individuals in jalabiyas, and foreign fighters with long beards and hair who did not speak Arabic”.

Zeina continued her account of what happened later at the al-Awarid checkpoint, describing the separation of men and women and the presence of a minor among those detained,

“At the checkpoint, while they were checking IDs and recording names, they separated the men from the women and told us that the women could leave while the men would be detained. Despite our attempts to convince them that they were civilians, they took all the men; I even saw a child among them.”

neighborhoods. The statement repeatedly identified the al-Awarid checkpoint as the last known contact point for many of them. Based on initial information, most of the detainees or missing persons were from Afrin and nearby areas. Reported cases include wounded individuals, as well as workers in humanitarian, medical, and media sectors (including members of the Kurdish Red Crescent), along with children born in 2010 and 2012. The statement also referenced testimonies indicating that some detainees faced insults, beatings, and ill-treatment during their initial detention at checkpoints.

Documented testimonies show that the detention of some civilians at checkpoints was not just a temporary restriction of movement but, in many cases, involved degrading treatment, including beatings and verbal abuse. One testimony highlights the severe impact of such treatment on a civilian leaving Sheikh Maqsoud.

Samar (50) recalled that her husband was subjected to humiliation during a search at one of the checkpoints, which left him in a severe psychological state. This happened after they were forcibly displaced from the neighborhood under very fearful and tense conditions.

Samar said,

“During the search, my husband was humiliated by the personnel at the crossing, and his forced departure from his home and neighborhood was a major psychological shock for him... I noticed a clear change in his facial expressions and mental state after we passed the checkpoint.”

She added that her husband suddenly collapsed shortly afterward and was taken to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead upon arrival. According to the hospital’s death report, the cause of death was “a heart attack resulting from severe nervous stress”.

In the context of the treatment faced by civilians passing through the designated exit corridors from Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, one testimony describes how an elderly civilian experienced humiliation and disregard for the humanitarian situation, despite the clear security risks in the area. Hani (66), a resident of Sheikh Maqsoud, shared the details of his forced evacuation with his family amid increased shelling and gunfire near their home, along with the humiliating treatment he encountered at the crossing.

Hani testified,

“Shelling intensified, and gunfire became very close to our home. Staying there was no longer safe. We were forced to leave in a hurry and without preparation, and we had no means of transportation. I am an elderly man and have difficulty walking, so I had to lean on my eldest daughter. I left with my wife and my four daughters toward al-Zuhoor Street, where the crossing is located. Upon arrival, we were prevented from leaving on the pretext that it was close to 5 p.m. and that the crossing would be closed. We tried to explain our humanitarian situation and asked to be allowed to pass. I explained to the personnel my health condition, my advanced age, and the danger of returning home under shelling. However, this was not taken into consideration, and we were only allowed to pass after repeated attempts and insistence”.

Similarly, the search and detention procedures at checkpoints involved practices such as confiscating personal belongings. Due to the lack of clarification on the procedures used or the legal basis for detention, one testimony provides detailed insight into these

practices. In his account, Muhammad (a resident of Sheikh Maqsoud who was displaced to Hama) described being detained at a checkpoint operated by the General Security near the old Afrin Garage, explaining,

“Checkpoint personnel checked our IDs and arrested two people among us. Then a soldier called me over, began interrogating and searching me. Despite my insisting that I was a civilian and carried nothing, one of them said, ‘Bring him,’ and they put me in a white jeep”.

Muhammad recounts what happened immediately after during the initial detention,

“After they put me in the jeep, they took my phone, wallet, ID card, and about \$450. Then they beat me with the butt of a rifle on various parts of my body, while continuously insulting and accusing me, saying, ‘You are an SDF pig,’ and asking me about weapons depots. Throughout, I kept telling them that I was a civilian and knew nothing”.

Muhammad also stated that he was threatened and beaten during his transfer between several detention points, saying,

“One of them told me they would take me to another place and said, word for word, ‘We will kill you.’ When I told him I was a civilian no matter what, he said he would make me wish for death and never find it”.

In a related context, the testimonies describe initial detention conditions characterized by collective humiliation. Muhammad recalls being held with dozens of other detainees at a gathering point inside the neighborhood, saying,

“People were sitting on the ground, being insulted with words like ‘SDF pigs,’ and there were about sixty of us... A bearded man stood in front of us and looked at us, saying, ‘There are good deeds in you,’ meaning that he would gain merit by killing us... They told us that anyone who wanted to go to the bathroom should raise their hand, but those who went with them returned beaten with rifle butts”.

The testimonies also show that detention in these cases lacked clear legal procedures, as detainees were not informed of the reasons for their arrest, the authority detaining them, or the length of their detention, before some were later moved to other detention sites where they were interrogated. In this context, one testimony describes a mass detention of civilians after separating them from their families, without informing them of the reasons for or duration of the arrest.

Tariq (54) recalled that he was detained after attempting to leave Sheikh Maqsoud with his family, following the entry of government forces into the neighborhood, their

deployment in the streets, and calls for civilians to exit their homes. He explained that, as he tried to leave with his wife and children, men were separated from women, and he lost contact with his family for a period of time. He was then transferred, along with many other men, to a temporary detention site. Describing the moment of his arrest and what followed, Tariq said,

“After they separated the men from the women, I lost my wife and children. They took us in front of the al-Zira’a Building between Sheikh Maqsoud and Bustan al-Basha, and we stayed there for about an hour and a half. Then buses arrived and transported us to the building of the raid Branch of the former Military Security near al-Baseel Roundabout.”

Tariq stated that he was not informed of the reason for his arrest, nor was he charged with any offense during his detention. He explained that it was limited to interrogation and recording his personal information before he was released after several days,

“They interrogated us for two days. They asked about our names, work, and family. On the third day, the interrogator told us that nothing had been proven against us, and then they released us”.

Tariq also confirmed that, during his detention, he was not beaten or mistreated, according to his account. He later found his wife and children after his release, thanks to efforts made by relatives and friends.

It is worth noting that the arrests were not limited to checkpoints. Testimonies also report repeated night-time arrests and home raids. Mazen, a pastor of a Kurdish Protestant church and a resident of western Sheikh Maqsoud, reported that the neighborhood has seen increasing arrests, often carried out late at night or before dawn. This has increased residents’ fears and feelings of insecurity. Mazen recounted,

“There is a state of insecurity in the neighborhood, with widespread theft, violations, and arrests that often occur between midnight and dawn. One of the most worrying things is the sound of patrols storming homes at dawn, accompanied by noise, in what seems like an attempt to intimidate and scare people. One person was seen filming this from his balcony; then his home was raided and he was immediately arrested”.

The source added that detainees are often transferred to a General Security center in the Ashrafieh neighborhood, located behind Salah al-Din Mosque. It is a large police station that used to belong to the former regime.

4. Loss of Contact Amid Escalating Events and Evacuation Attempts

Several testimonies collected for this report indicate that communication with individuals was lost after their last contact with their families during the escalation of hostilities in the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods, or while they remained inside the neighborhoods amid ongoing security restrictions. These accounts show that families of the individuals involved, up to the time of the interviews, had been unable to obtain any confirmed information about their whereabouts or condition.

Amin, a resident of Afrin, recounted that he lost contact with his brother in Sheikh Maqsoud after a final phone call during the height of the events in the neighborhood, explaining,

“In my last call with him, there was intense gunfire all around him. He told me he would end the call and contact me later, but since that day, contact with him has been completely cut off”.

Amin added that he tried to find his brother through contacts inside the neighborhood but was unable to obtain any confirmed information about his whereabouts.

The report also documents the case of a family from Sheikh Maqsoud still trying to determine the fate of a husband and his daughter, with whom contact was lost after they were injured and arrested at a checkpoint while trying to leave the neighborhood. Available information indicates that his wife searched several police stations and hospitals for them but has not been able to find any information about their whereabouts or fate to date.

In another account, Marwa, a resident of Ashrafiyah now displaced to rural Afrin, reported losing contact with her son after he remained inside Sheikh Maqsoud, saying,

“He was in contact with me until Thursday evening (8 January 2026), and he assured me that he was in good health and not injured, but I lost contact with him after that, and I have not received any information about him since then”.

These testimonies detail cases of lost contact with the individuals involved, without, at the time of the interviews, sufficient information to determine whether these people have been detained, arrested, injured, or if they are still inside the neighborhood or elsewhere.

It should be noted that the Instagram account “[Afrin Now](#)” reported, on 23 January 2026, that large numbers of bodies believed to belong to residents of the Ashrafiyah and Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhoods were at the Forensic Medicine Center in Aleppo. The report indicated the total could reach approximately 272 bodies. According to the site’s sources, over 100 bodies had been confirmed, including civilians killed during military operations carried out by the Syrian transitional government forces and fighters from the Kurdish Internal Security Forces (Asayish). The identities and exact number of victims were not disclosed. The site stated that it contacted the identification department at the Forensic Medicine Center to document the victims’ numbers and to

assist the families of the missing. However, the department did not issue any official statement. Instead, it told families to visit the Forensic Medicine Center in Jubb al-Qubba neighborhood to check for their loved ones, without providing details about the identities of the deceased, the causes of death, or the circumstances of the body transfers.

Sources also indicated that some bodies were buried because the morgue could not accommodate them, amid strict measures imposed during the initial days of the government forces establishing control over the neighborhoods. Overall, these findings highlight a deeply concerning situation marked by a high number of deaths under still-unclear circumstances and a lack of transparency in handling the bodies. This has worsened cases of missing persons, increased uncertainty among victims' families, and raised serious concerns about respect for the right to life, the authorities' obligation to disclose the fate of the missing, and the dignity of the deceased and the families' right to know.

5. Legal Characterization of the Documented Incidents

5.1. Deprivation of Liberty and Detention Outside Legal Safeguards

The documented incidents in this report show that many civilians were subjected to arrest and detention in the context of security operations that accompanied the military escalation in the Sheikh Maqoud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods, without following the basic safeguards required by Syrian law and international human rights law. Witnesses reported that they were not informed of the reasons for their arrest, the authority responsible for their detention, or the length of their detention. Additionally, some were transferred between multiple detention sites without any written procedures or official orders.

These cases demonstrate a pattern of depriving individuals of liberty without legal justification, directly violating Article 18 of the 2025 [Syrian Constitutional Declaration](#), which prohibits arrest or liberty restrictions without a judicial order. They also breach Article 9 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to liberty and security and requires authorities to inform detainees of the reasons for their arrest and to allow them to challenge it before a judicial authority within a designated timeframe.

Furthermore, the arrest of these individuals and the lack of information about their detention locations may constitute the crime of enforced disappearance, especially if it is proven that the act was carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilians, with knowledge of the attack (Article 7 of the [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#)).

These cases also clearly violate Article 555 of the [General Penal Code No. 148](#), which imposes a penalty of imprisonment for six months to two years for anyone who deprives another person of their personal liberty. The penalty is increased under Article 556 if the deprivation of liberty lasts more than one month or is combined with physical or psychological torture.

Considering the nature of the documented incidents, the lack of these procedural safeguards, along with the context of armed escalation and large-scale security operations in densely populated civilian areas, raises serious concerns that the arrests were based on general suspicion or presumed affiliation, rather than on specific and legally supported individual grounds.

5.2. Degrading Treatment During Arrest and Detention

The testimonies included in this report show that some civilians experienced degrading treatment during arrest and initial detention, including beatings, verbal abuse, threats, and the confiscation of personal belongings, under conditions characterized by humiliation and a lack of protection. These incidents demonstrate that the treatment during search and arrest procedures went beyond lawful security measures and amounted to prohibited cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Article 18 of the 2025 [Syrian Constitutional Declaration](#) states the government's obligation to protect human dignity and the sanctity of the body and to prohibit enforced disappearance and physical and moral torture. Additionally, the Anti-Torture Law No. 16 of 2022 imposes strict penalties, including imprisonment of no less than eight years if the act is driven by personal, pecuniary, or political interests, or out of malice and revenge. This law remains valid under Article 51 of the Syrian Constitutional Declaration.

International human rights law, especially Article 7 of the [ICCPR](#), forbids subjecting anyone to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, without exceptions or limitations, even during emergencies or conflicts. It also requires authorities to protect the dignity of all individuals under their control, whether they are formally detained or temporarily held.

Similarly, Article 5 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) states, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Likewise, Article 16 of the [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT) obligates States Parties to prevent acts of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment that do not constitute torture within their jurisdiction.

In this context, documenting the psychological and physical effects of such degrading treatment is especially important, even when there is no direct evidence of torture. Psychologically damaging experiences, especially during forced displacement and humiliating searches, can cause serious harm. This is highlighted by one testimony describing the death of a civilian shortly after being subjected to severe humiliation at a checkpoint, with a medical report attributing the cause of death to a heart attack resulting from severe nervous stress.

6. Recommendations

Based on the documented facts and legal analysis in this report, there is a clear need to implement specific measures to address the impact of violations during the escalation phase in the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh neighborhoods. These recommendations

aim to help authorities uphold legal safeguards and protect civilians' rights, aiming to prevent similar practices in the future.

6.1. To the Syrian Government and Relevant Security Authorities

- Immediately disclose the fate of all individuals who lost contact during security operations in Sheikh Maqoud and Ashrafiyah, and provide their families with clear information about their whereabouts and legal status.
- Review all detention cases from the escalation period and ensure the immediate release of anyone detained without legal grounds or refer them to the appropriate judiciary according to legal procedures.
- Make sure all arrests and detentions are officially documented, allow detainees to communicate with their families, and prevent any unacknowledged detention.
- Implement measures to prevent degrading treatment during arrests and searches, including issuing clear instructions to security personnel, respecting civilians' dignity at all times, and establishing protocols for interacting with civilians in populated areas to distinguish between security tasks and respect for fundamental rights.
- Conduct independent, effective investigations into allegations of beatings, humiliation, or confiscation of personal belongings during detention, and hold accountable those responsible under the law.
- Ensure transparency in future security operations through regular communication with local residents, avoiding collective measures based on suspicion or presumed affiliation.
- Collaborate with local human rights groups to share information, address violations' impacts, and prevent recurrence.

6.2. To Judicial Authorities

- Strengthen oversight over arrest procedures, especially those related to security operations, to prevent detentions outside legal safeguards.
 - Enable victims and their families to access legal remedies, such as filing complaints and challenging detention legality.
 - Judges, as outlined in Articles 422, 423, and 424 of the Criminal Procedure Code, should visit detention facilities and prisons, taking necessary legal actions. If they discover individuals detained at locations other than those authorized by the authorities, they must investigate those locations, order the release of unlawful detainees, and if legal grounds for detention exist, refer the detainee to the public prosecutor or a justice of the peace.
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◆ ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.