

North and East Syria: Killings, Detentions, Disappearances, and Torture During the January 2026 Events



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1. Introduction:

During January 2026, North and East Syria witnessed [a large-scale military escalation](#), particularly during the first half of January 2026, as intense clashes erupted across multiple axes including Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and al-Hasakah. This occurred in the context of a broad escalation of hostilities in the region between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), forces affiliated with the Syrian Transitional Government, and pro-government Arab tribal forces. Testimonies and cross-referenced information documented by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) indicate that these operations were accompanied by surprise attacks and rapid advances, [leading to](#) frequent shifts in lines of control within short timeframes and creating a state of operational chaos. This escalation was accompanied by a marked deterioration in protection conditions, particularly in areas that experienced disorganized withdrawals or a breakdown in communication between military units.

In the context of these clashes, a series of violations emerged targeting [personnel](#) working with the Autonomous Administration and SDF fighters, including both [women](#) and [men](#), outside the scope of direct clashes and combat operations. Contact with them was lost, or they were killed or went missing, amidst an absence of clear official information regarding their fate. Notably, many of them were hors de combat (out of combat), meaning they were not in an active state of combat, whether due to injury, capture, or separation from their units. Under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), these situations impose clear obligations regarding their protection from attack and ensuring their safety.

In addition to analyzing the testimonies and information gathered regarding incidents of killing and disappearance during the January 2026 events, this report includes an extensive case study based on the testimony of an eyewitness who was present during an ambush that targeted Kurdish fighters and civilians at the Makmen village junction, on the “Abyad Road” between al-Hasakah and Raqqa. This testimony holds particular importance as it documents a continuous sequence of events, starting from the moment of fleeing Raqqa and falling into the ambush, through detention, ill-treatment, and killing, culminating in the disappearance of several individuals and the ongoing search for their fate. The witness's account also corroborates other testimonies and information documented by STJ, granting it added documentary value for understanding the context of the events and the patterns that accompanied them.

According to STJ's documentation, several release and detainee exchange operations have taken place between the Syrian Transitional Government and the Autonomous Administration since March 2026. On March 8, 59 fighters were released, followed on March 10 by an exchange operation involving approximately 100 detainees from each side. On the 19th of the same month, al-Hasakah governorate witnessed a new exchange operation, the third in this series, which included the release of about 300

SDF fighters who were detained by the Syrian Government, in exchange for a similar number of detainees held by the SDF, in addition to 11 female SDF fighters. On April 11, 400 SDF fighters were released in exchange for 91 from the Syrian Government forces, and additional exchange operations took place during the month, contributing to partially resolving the detainee file and the handover of prisons (such as Ghuguayan and others). In the following month, approximately 232 SDF-affiliated fighters were released on May 8, before another 88 SDF fighters were released on the 25th of the same month, in addition to limited release operations such as 28 female fighters from the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).¹

In this context, it must be noted that [statements](#) issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, had indicated that the number of detainees in Syrian prisons amounts to approximately 1,070 individuals, including civilians and military personnel.

Testimonies documented by STJ, alongside visual evidence and verified open sources, reveal a recurring pattern of violations that goes beyond individual cases, intersecting at key indicators. These include loss of contact within the context of military operations, unacknowledged detention, exposure to torture and ill-treatment, as well as killings under unclear circumstances.

Some testimonies reveal that the documented violations were not limited to adult fighters, but also included children who had joined military or paramilitary formations, after which contact with them was lost and their fate remained unknown following the events.

These patterns indicate the existence of repeated practices related to unacknowledged detention, ill-treatment, and killing under unclear circumstances, along with continued ambiguity regarding the fate of a number of victims.

For the purpose of preparing this report, STJ interviewed 13 witnesses, comprising victims, their relatives, and eyewitnesses. The informed consent of the participants was obtained after explaining the voluntary nature of their participation and the use of the information—including the publication of this report—and informing them of their right to withdraw their consent at any time. At their request, pseudonyms were used to refer to the witnesses, withholding any details that might lead to the disclosure of their identities or expose them or their families to the risk of reprisal.

¹ Some testimonies documented by STJ indicate the possible release of other groups, particularly girls, without official announcement of their names or numbers. However, STJ could not independently verify the number of these cases or the circumstances of their release.

2. Case Study: From Ambush to Disappearance:

2.1 Eyewitness Account of the Makmen Village Ambush on the “Abyad Road”:

"Noura," a mother of five Kurdish children, was residing with her family in the city of Raqqa, and her husband works at the headquarters of the Wounded House Foundation, affiliated with the SDF. She recounts in her testimony to STJ how the rapid military developments during January 2026 forced her family to leave the city after receiving warnings from neighbors regarding the deterioration of the security situation and the potential expansion of the scope of clashes. According to her testimony, the departure took place amidst a state of chaos and confusion, with an absence of clear information regarding safe routes or the parties controlling them. The testimony also indicates that civilian families, personnel working with the Autonomous Administration, and fighters were leaving the area simultaneously, in a context characterized by the blurring of civilian and military statuses and the rapid collapse of lines of control.

"Noura" stated:

"We left Raqqa on January 18 heading towards al-Hasakah. The streets were completely empty of civilians and shops were closed. Vehicles were roaming the streets, carrying military personnel whose affiliation I did not know, and the sounds of shelling and gunfire filled the city."

The witness described how passengers received repeated warnings about an ambush at the Makmen village junction (which is located approximately in the middle of the road known as the "Abyad road" connecting al-Hasakah and Raqqa), before they later found themselves in the middle of it, in events that intersect with other testimonies and information documented by STJ. She stated:

"We met three young military men carrying their weapons and fleeing back. We asked them what was happening, and they told us: 'Go back, there is an ambush ahead of you.' We were stuck on the road, going back and forth... We reached the location of the ambush, and as soon as we stopped, they attacked us."

2.2 Detention and Torture of Men in Plain Sight of Their Families:

Following the ambush, "Noura" and her children found themselves in the midst of successive scenes of violence and threats, while the men, who had been separated from their families, were subjected to detention and ill-treatment in plain sight of the women and children. The witness states:

"The soldiers attacked us, apprehended the men, and marched them behind the vehicle. They ordered them to lie face down on the ground, and when they refused, they fired a hail of bullets over their heads. I opened the vehicle's door and found in

front of me a young man, approximately eighteen years old, with shoulder-length hair, wearing a grey jacket and a green headband that read 'There is no god but Allah'. As soon as I stepped out of the vehicle with my young daughter, he pointed his machine gun at my head, before another armed man intervened and pushed the barrel away, while bullets were continuously flying above me."

The witness continues:

"I held onto my daughter and begged them not to kill my children. My other daughter tried to throw herself onto her father, but the young man with the long hair pushed her. They then threw my other son out of the vehicle. As for my sick eldest son, he sat in the vehicle, surrendered, with his hands raised for over half an hour."

The witness adds that the women and children remained inside or next to the vehicle while the acts of violence against the men continued:

"I looked to my side and saw the men lying on their stomachs on the ground. At that very moment, my husband raised his head; his eyes were extremely red, and he said to his children: 'Do not be afraid, children. Do not be afraid.' He signaled to me to move the children away, and indeed I gathered my children away from him, covered them with a small red blanket I had with me, and told them not to look around."

According to the testimony, the situation was not limited to detention, but escalated into practices described by the witness as acts of deliberate torture and humiliation:

"Whenever one of them raised his head, they would kick him in the head. The side of the road was full of thorny plants, and they forced them to lie face down and put thorns in their mouths, stepped on their heads, or forced them to take off their jackets so that the thorns would pierce their bodies."

Although "Noura" witnessed gunfire directed at the detained men, their fate remained unclear to her. Upon returning to the site of the ambush, she did not find her husband's body among the corpses, while her son kept insisting that his father had not been killed and that he had seen the armed men leading him to a military vehicle.

Ultimately, the armed men permitted the witness and her children to leave the site accompanied by other civilians. "Noura" recounts how they took down the Kurdish flag from the vehicle that was carrying them and stomped on it, before asking two civilian drivers who were passing by to transport the women and children to their destinations.

After leaving the site of the ambush, the witness continued on her way, where she states she witnessed other killings and bodies strewn along the road.

2.3 Summary Executions and Bodies Left Along the Road:

"Noura" documented killing incidents and scattered bodies, including incidents that befell individuals who were restrained and unable to defend themselves. The testimony also describes leaving remains out in the open without collecting or evacuating them, in violation of the obligations imposed by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) regarding the protection of persons hors de combat and respect for the dead.

In her testimony, "Noura" describes a killing incident she witnessed while present at the site of the ambush. The victim was a young man accompanied by his mother and his brother with a disability:

"A vehicle arrived carrying a mother and her two sons, one of whom had no legs. The soldiers forced them out of the vehicle and made them sit on the edge of the road. The mother was holding one of her sons, who did not have a disability, while her other son sat beside her. She pleaded with them not to kill the son she was holding; she held onto him and embraced him, so they pried her hands off him and killed him in her lap with six bullets."

The witness added that the mother collapsed immediately after the incident occurred:

"The woman suffered a stroke and her mouth immediately twisted."

The witness recounted another incident she witnessed firsthand while proceeding on the road:

"The soldiers forced three people out of one of the vehicles. They blindfolded them with cloth, handcuffed their hands behind their backs, and ordered them to run towards the small, muddy hill. They readied their weapons, and as soon as they ran, they shot them. Two of them died instantly, while the third was still alive and moving."

She added:

"I saw two of the men in tribal attire going towards him, saying: 'Look at this one, he is still alive.' They picked up a stone to hit him on the head, but I turned my head so I would not see. I heard my son say to his brother: 'Look, they are hitting his head with the stone.'"

The witness also describes the spread of bodies along the road in scenes that remained vivid in her memory even months after the incident, adding:

"I later returned to the site of the ambush and saw three black dogs tearing at the corpses. I told the driver: 'They are eating the remains. If my husband's body is here, I will take it with me,' but I did not find him."

According to the witness, the ambush site was littered with the dead. accompanied by **persistent conflicting accounts** She estimated that there were approximately 25 bodies, including both fighters and civilians. She also recounted the killing of a woman who was trying to flee with her husband and her five-day-old infant, after she was struck by a bullet in the head.

2.4 Disappearance and the Search for Answers:

The moment "Noura's" husband was detained turned into a long and arduous search for his fate, amidst the absence of any confirmed official information regarding his place of detention or legal status. Over the following months, the witness resorted to checking prisons and courts, and communicating with released detainees and local intermediaries, in an attempt to find out whether her husband was still alive. This experience reflects the difficulties faced by the families of missing or detained persons in accessing reliable information about their relatives.

The witness recounted that she had lost contact with her husband since they were at the ambush, and had not received any official information regarding his fate:

"We did not find any of the men who were shot at while lying face down; we do not know if they were killed or are still alive, but they took them with them. I did not find my husband among the dead or among the released."

Over the following months, "Noura" received corroborating information from released detainees and individuals who stated they had met her husband during his detention. Most of these accounts indicated that he was held in al-Aqtan Prison and had sustained a leg injury.

At that point, "Noura" decided to travel to Raqqa to search for him herself. She recounts in her testimony that prison guards initially confirmed they had her husband in custody, before the narrative later changed. The witness states:

"I asked them: 'Do you have this name here?' The gate guard replied: 'Yes, he is here,' and asked me to return the following day, which I did. However, another person at the gate said that they did not have my husband and asked me to check with the court first. I went to the court, and the clerk asked me for the date of arrest, proceeding to blame me for not asking about him from the beginning. I told him that I did not dare to ask after what I had witnessed that day, to which he replied: 'You would have helped him had you asked about him earlier, but you delayed in asking.'"

The witness continues:

"After he completed some paperwork, he asked us to return to the prison. There was a large crowd of people in front of the prison, mostly women waiting for news about their relatives. We visited the prison three times a day, and ultimately, when they

received the paperwork, they wrote on it in pencil: 'Go to another prison; your husband is not here.'"

"Noura's" testimony aligns with other accounts documented by STJ regarding unacknowledged detention, killings under mysterious circumstances, and the ongoing ambiguity surrounding the fate of a number of individuals who were seen alive after their capture. The testimony also reflects the prolonged impact of these events on the families of victims and missing persons, particularly given the absence of official information and the persisting state of uncertainty regarding the fate of their relatives.

3. Arbitrary Detention and Torture in Detention Centers:

The testimonies documented in this report reveal a pattern of arrest that is not limited to depriving fighters of their liberty, but extends to form a system of [revenge](#), [humiliation](#), and unacknowledged detention, characterized by an absence of documentation, an information blackout, and the exposure of detainees to torture and a series of grave violations from the moment of their capture.

In the cases that could be tracked, the arrest was not an organized or documented procedure, but rather the result of the collapse of the field situation, where fighters found themselves surrounded or isolated, before being arrested without any official registration or subsequent notification. One survivor describes the moment of transition from combat to arrest, stating:

"We had no ammunition left, and this was the reason for our capture... I do not know what happened to the rest."

This moment does not merely represent the end of the combat, but the beginning of a complete break in the person's legal status and protection, as they disappear from any official record, and their existence becomes confined to unconfirmed accounts, whether from military entities, intermediaries, or other survivors. "Rojin's" testimony reflects this ambiguity, as the narrative surrounding her husband's fate fluctuated between killing and arrest without any conclusive proof:

"Initially, his colleagues told me he was martyred... then they told me he was subjected to an ambush on the road... and that the driver was killed, while they believe my husband was captured and transferred to a prison in Deir ez-Zor."

The danger of this ambiguity increases in cases of individuals who do not carry official documents, as this may affect their treatment during detention and increase their vulnerability. In this context, "Rojin" reported that her husband belonged to the category of "unregistered" stateless persons (maktoumeen al-qaid) and was not carrying any documents while moving:

"He did not have any personal identification in his possession... he left all his papers at home... he was only carrying his official mission order in his bag."

This ambiguity is not limited to the moment of arrest, but continues throughout the detention, as detainees are transferred between several locations without any transparency or clarity regarding the responsible party or the nature of the detention, which increases the difficulty of tracking them and heightens the likelihood of their exposure to additional violations.

These violations take on a systematic character inside places of detention, where testimonies indicate the use of severe violence as a primary means of dealing with detainees, resulting in serious physical injuries. Fighter Dilshad, who was arrested by a combat battalion affiliated with the Syrian Government and later transferred from the Abyad Station point to the al-Kam al-Sini Prison ("Chinese Camp Prison") in Al-Shaddadi, says:

"When they caught me, a person they called 'the Sheikh' interrogated me. They beat me with green plastic pipes until they broke against my body... They broke six of my ribs and five of my teeth."

However, what stands out particularly is [the systematic nature of the humiliation](#), and not just the physical violence. The witness Dilshad describes how the detainees in the Chinese Camp Prison were deliberately exposed to direct danger inside the place of detention:

"They placed the 14 of us in cells with ISIS detainees, three of us in each dormitory, which held around 50 ISIS members... we were still in our military uniforms... they were beating us severely."

He adds:

"I raised my index finger to recite the Shahada [profession of faith], but they kept beating me and one of them stepped on my mouth, preventing me from saying the Shahada. The guards were behind the dormitory door's viewing hatch, looking at us, laughing, and enjoying it. They would say to the ISIS members in the prison: 'These are the ones who separated you from your wives and threw them into the Al-Hol camp! They were inciting them against us.'"

This behavior indicates the use of arrest as a tool for [revenge and humiliation](#), by creating an open environment of violence within the place of detention itself, and exposing the detainees to direct danger from parties they had previously fought.

The testimonies also show a clear awareness among those in charge of detention regarding the nature of the violations committed, as in some cases they avoided carrying out these practices in areas subject to surveillance:

"We were subjected to beatings only in the dormitories... as for the corridors, we were not subjected to beatings because there were surveillance cameras."

This detail points to an implicit understanding of the illegality of these practices, and an attempt to conceal them, which reinforces their characterization as systematic rather than random acts.

Video clips also spread on social media showing the arrest of female fighters and their subjection to [ill-treatment and humiliation](#). Some of these clips showed them being treated as spoils of war or presented [as gifts to the fighters](#). Furthermore, [a clip](#) circulated showing a female fighter from the SDF being thrown from a high floor inside a building in the city of Aleppo, in a grave violation of the provisions of International Humanitarian Law.

In their entirety, these findings reveal a pattern of detention that goes beyond the deprivation of liberty, to include the de facto concealment of fate, the breakdown of legal safeguards, and organized practices of violence and humiliation. This raises serious concerns regarding the safety of the detainees and the possibility of their exposure to additional violations outside any framework of accountability or oversight.

4. Enforced Disappearance and Loss of Contact: Between Contradictory Narratives and Psychological Warfare:

The testimonies documented in this report reveal a broad pattern of cases involving loss of contact that cannot be explained solely by field factors, but evolve in many cases into a situation akin to enforced disappearance, where individuals are [arrested](#) and completely disappear from any traceable official process, and their families are deprived of access to reliable information regarding their fate.

The case of "Ammar" stands out as an example of the ambiguity that surrounded the fate of a number of fighters after contact with them was lost during the battles. According to the testimony of one of his relatives, Ammar had cut short a leave during which he was preparing for his wedding to rejoin his military unit as the clashes expanded in Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh. In his last communication on January 15, he indicated the gravity of the situation, before contact with him was completely lost days later, coinciding with the entry of government forces into the area where he was located. With the continued absence of any official information about his fate, the family began tracking news of him through fighters released from detention centers, until corroborating accounts emerged indicating his possible presence inside a military detention center in Aleppo. The witness describes this, saying:

"We would contact every fighter we heard was released from prison, ask about our son, and send his picture to them. A number of them told us they saw him in the

Military Intelligence / Northern Region Command prison in Aleppo near the Al-Basel roundabout, but we do not know his fate, and we are still waiting for his return."

The issue in these cases is not limited to the loss of contact, but is accompanied by persistent conflicting accounts, where families receive conflicting information about the fate of their relatives, ranging between killing, capture, and remaining alive, without any conclusive evidence. "Evin" describes this situation, saying:

"I know that one of my sons is a captive, but I know nothing certain about the second... We have been looking for him for more than two months and no information has reached us... Some say he is alive, and some say he has been killed... We do not know what happened to him."

However, what distinguishes a number of these cases is the transformation of the loss of contact into a tool of systematic psychological pressure, through the use of the victims' phones to communicate with their families and provide conflicting, insulting, or threatening information. "Evin" recounts:

"I called his number and someone answered me and said: 'We killed your son, cut off his head, and threw his body to the animals...' and hurled obscenities at me."

At other times, the person answering the same number would give her different accounts:

"Sometimes they say he is in prison... and sometimes they say he is dead... We do not know what to believe."

The matter was not limited to threats or misinformation; rather, it took on an intentional character of psychological abuse, as the person who seized the victim's phone would call at unusual hours, making remarks intended to break the family's morale. Evin's daughter (the sister of the two fighters) says about this:

"They would call us at four in the morning... and ask: 'Has your mother died or not yet?'... They are waging a psychological war against us."

In some cases, photos believed to depict the victims were published, or accounts from individuals who claimed to have seen them in places of detention, without the ability to verify their authenticity. One of the witnesses describes this internal torment, saying:

"I think the picture of the corpse I saw is the picture of my missing brother... All the details are his details... But I cannot be certain... And I cannot tell my mother because her heart would not bear it."

In their entirety, these cases reveal a pattern that goes beyond incidental loss of contact, reaching a level of deliberately maintained uncertainty and manipulation of

information, which undermines the right of families to know the fate of their relatives, and keeps the victims outside any clear framework for protection or accountability.

The testimony of "Hazar" (45 years old, from Qamishli) reveals that the ambiguity regarding the fate of the missing persons may continue even after the end of military operations, the return of fighters, and the start of release operations for detainees. Her 14-year-old daughter had joined the Revolutionary Youth Organisation in April 2025, and her family had been unable to contact her since then, before information arrived from her colleagues about her transfer to the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in Aleppo and her disappearance during the January 2026 battles. Over the following months, the family received conflicting accounts stating at times that she was injured and transferred to Raqqa, and at other times that she was captured and transferred to Aleppo, or was later transferred to Qandil. Also, one of the released individuals, after recognizing her photo, reported that she was among a group whose members were besieged and arrested, then transferred to Aleppo. Hazar says:

"We went to a person who was released from captivity after we were told that he recognized our daughter's picture. He told us that he and his colleagues met about nine girls and five young men at the Al-Abyad bridge, then they were besieged together inside one of the buildings there, where a commander and two girls were killed, while the rest were arrested and transferred to Aleppo. And when I asked him about my daughter, he said: 'Yes, she was with us!'"

Despite this, the family did not receive any official notification proving her detention or death, or specifying her whereabouts, despite checking multiple centers, following up on the lists of released persons, and communicating with officials and commanders who returned from Aleppo. The witness says:

"Since my daughter went missing, I have not heard her voice. Every time, someone tells me a different story; some say she is injured, some say she is a captive, or that she was transferred to Qandil. And when they told us that they had no more female captives left, I asked them: 'Then where is my daughter? I want nothing from them except to tell me: Is my daughter alive or dead?' All the commanders have returned from Aleppo, and they are aware of all the captives, martyrs, and missing persons, but they tell us nothing."

The testimony also points to the existence of contradictions in the circulated information regarding some girls, as "Hazar" reported that a girl who had previously been announced killed later appeared among the released, while the name of another girl appeared on the release lists without her returning to her family. These accounts, if proven true, underscore the necessity of cross-checking the lists of the killed, the detained, and the released, and verifying the actual arrival of the released individuals to their families, rather than merely announcing names or numbers.

5. Killing in the Context of Military Operations: Between Combat and Summary Executions:

Testimonies documented in this report reveal cases in which SDF fighters were killed in the context of military operations during January 2026. However, some of these cases raise serious questions about the circumstances in which they occurred, and whether they happened during direct clashes or after the victims were hors de combat.

In a number of cases, the victims had been injured or were in a situation that did not allow them to fight before contact with them was lost, raising the possibility that they were subjected to retaliatory killing while they were unable to defend themselves. A relative of one of the victims describes his last moments before contact was lost:

"At 3:30 AM, he sent a message to his father saying he was injured and was going to die... and after that, contact with him was completely lost. The following morning, a stranger answered his phone and told us: 'This is an enemy of God, a dog, and he perished,' and then his phone went out of coverage."

Later, the victim's body was found—alongside other bodies—after the family published his photo on social media searching for him. A civilian recognized the photo, having buried the bodies collectively. The witness says about this:

"The man who buried them told us: 'They were a group of young men. I saw their bodies at the edge of the town, so I placed them in one location, put their jackets over their faces, and covered them all with dirt. This is what I was able to do for them.'"

Upon recovering the body, the injuries revealed the nature of the violence he was subjected to:

"He had been shot with two bullets to the head, one in the forehead and the other in his face, in addition to other injuries on his body."

These findings indicate that the killing was not limited to direct confrontation, as it could have occurred at a later moment, especially given the presence of multiple injuries in vital areas. This raises the possibility that the victim was subjected to gunfire from close range or in circumstances where he was unable to fight.

In other cases, there were accounts of large numbers of bodies left in the clash areas, without evacuation or documentation, as on the road between Raqqa and al-Hasakah, where one testimony indicated that:

"Large numbers of bodies were strewn along both sides of the road."

The impact of these violations against fighters extends to their families, who are often forced to rely on unofficial sources or individual initiatives to recover the bodies or verify identities, in light of the absence of any official channels.

In one case, the family was unable to access the body until days later, through local intermediaries, and by paying special transportation costs, in an indication of the absence of any organized mechanism for dealing with the dead in the context of operations.

These cases reflect a pattern of killing linked to the context of military operations. However, some facts, particularly those related to the victims' injuries before the loss of contact, the nature of the injuries, and the circumstances of finding the bodies, raise doubts about the possibility of killings occurring after the victims were hors de combat, which necessitates an independent investigation to determine the circumstances of these cases and the responsibilities associated with them.

6. Common Patterns and Legal Characterization:

Testimonies gathered for the purposes of this report indicate that the military escalation in North and East Syria during January 2026 occurred in a field context characterized by rapid shifts in control and overlapping trajectories of advance and retreat. This created a state of disruption across several axes that witnessed direct clashes or successive withdrawals. Under these conditions, many fighters found themselves separated from their units or forced to move individually or in small groups, without sufficient information regarding safe routes or the positioning of other forces. Furthermore, the weakness or interruption of communication means in some cases contributed to complicating the ability to track and coordinate.

The cases documented in this report cannot be read as isolated incidents, but rather as part of a recurring pattern that reveals a gradual dismantling of the legal protection framework for individuals. This process begins from the moment of loss of contact and extends through an undocumented trajectory of detention or absence, culminating in the possibility of their exposure to grave violations in an environment lacking the minimum level of transparency or accountability.

The first indicator of this pattern is **the loss of any clear information regarding the status of individuals or their whereabouts once contact is lost or they fall outside the scope of monitoring**. In all documented cases, there is an absence of any official registration of the arrest, no entity claims responsibility for the detention, and there is no available mechanism allowing families to access reliable information. This disruption leads to a situation where the person effectively falls outside any defined legal framework, including the fundamental guarantees associated with detention or protection in armed conflicts.

Connected to this is a second indicator, represented by **the multiplicity of detention locations without clarity regarding direct responsibility for these sites**. Testimonies indicate that detainees are transferred between different locations in an unorganized or unacknowledged context, which complicates the ability to track them or identify the entity responsible for them. This overlap undermines any possibility of oversight and creates an environment conducive to the occurrence of violations without accountability.

As for the third indicator, it manifests in **the recurring and systematic nature of violence and ill-treatment**, whether upon arrest or inside places of detention. Testimonies intersect at similar patterns of severe beating, humiliation, and endangerment, alongside practices indicating an awareness of their illegality by those carrying them out, including avoiding cameras or concealing violations from direct monitoring.

The fourth indicator is the presence of **killing cases that occurred under unclear circumstances**, particularly in instances where the victims' injuries preceded the loss of contact with them, or where their bodies were later found without official documentation or information regarding the circumstances of death. These findings raise serious questions about whether some of these cases occurred during combat, after the victims were hors de combat, or in circumstances where they were incapable of defending themselves.

Intersecting with these patterns is **a systematic behavior predicated on ambiguity and information manipulation**. Families are left in a continuous state of contradiction between unconfirmed narratives, and are subjected to direct threats and psychological pressure through the use of victims' phones or the relaying of insulting or contradictory information. This transforms the absence of information from an incidental consequence into an instrument of harm in itself.

In light of these findings, a number of these cases can be legally characterized within the framework of enforced disappearance, given the coupling of the deprivation of liberty with the denial of the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned. Furthermore, cases of detention carried out outside any legal basis or without procedural safeguards fall under the concept of **arbitrary detention**. Likewise, the facts related to **torture and ill-treatment** point to a violation of the absolute prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, which is a peremptory norm (*jus cogens*) that permits no exception, including in the context of armed conflicts.

An additional factor that contributed to deepening this pattern also emerges, represented by the widespread and repeated disruption of communication services during periods of military operations. According to testimonies, this coincided with pivotal phases of the offensive, including periods of shelling, incursions, and

displacement movements. In the context of armed conflicts, communication services are not viewed as a neutral technical infrastructure, but rather as an essential means for the protection of individuals, enabling them to access information, identify safer routes, and request assistance, in addition to their role in facilitating documentation and accountability. In this context, the repeated reference to the loss of communication in the testimonies, alongside [documented precedents in other contexts within Syria](#), raises serious questions regarding the nature of this disruption and its potential role in creating an environment that allows for violations to occur or be concealed, and for evidence to be erased.

Within this framework, legal responsibility for the aforementioned violations rests with the Transitional Government, in its capacity as the entity exercising effective control over the areas and detention facilities to which a number of victims were transferred, as testimonies indicate. This responsibility is not limited to ensuring the humane treatment of detainees, but extends to include the prevention of enforced disappearance, disclosing the fate of the missing, ensuring the registration of all cases of deprivation of liberty, preventing torture and ill-treatment, and investigating killing cases that occurred under unclear circumstances, particularly those that may have occurred after the victims were injured or rendered incapable of fighting.

This responsibility is not confined solely to the scope of the Transitional Government's effective control over territory or its affiliated places of detention, but also extends to acts committed by personnel or formations operating within the State's military or security structures, or under its supervision or effective control. In this context, the State is obligated to ensure the compliance of these entities with the rules of International Humanitarian Law, to prevent violations, and to hold perpetrators accountable, including through the chain of command and internal oversight mechanisms.

This responsibility also requires adopting effective measures to ensure that individuals do not remain outside any legal framework. This includes enabling families to access reliable information, preventing information manipulation or the use of ambiguity as a tool of pressure or harm, and ensuring that no measures—including restrictions on communications—are utilized in a manner that deepens informational isolation or obstructs the documentation of violations.

In this context, International Humanitarian Law imposes a continuous obligation to search for the missing, clarify their fate, and ensure respect for and protection of all persons hors de combat. These are obligations that do not lapse amid military operations or their complexities.

In their entirety, these patterns reflect an operational environment where field chaos intersects with an absence of transparency and the presence of multiple controlling actors. This leads to the undermining of fundamental legal safeguards and leaves

individuals vulnerable to grave violations including unacknowledged detention, disappearance, torture, and killings under unclear circumstances, without sufficient documentation or effective accountability.

7. Recommendations:

The facts documented in this report demonstrate that the violations targeting fighters, including both women and men from the SDF during January 2026 were not limited to the context of military clashes, but extended to subsequent stages. These included cases of unacknowledged detention, disappearance, torture, and killings in circumstances that raise serious questions about their lawfulness.

In this context, the report affirms that a victim holding the status of "fighter" does not negate their entitlement to legal protection. All persons who are *hors de combat*—whether due to injury, capture, or separation from their units—remain covered by fundamental guarantees under International Humanitarian Law. This includes the right to humane treatment, protection from torture, and the prohibition on killing persons *hors de combat*.

The documented patterns, particularly those related to ill-treatment, humiliation, and hostile treatment of victims, indicate practices that exceed military necessity. They appear retaliatory in nature, especially given the rhetoric used, the nature of the violations committed, and the environment in which they occurred.

In their entirety, these cases reveal a grave failure to respect the minimum legal guarantees required in armed conflicts, underscoring the urgent need to take immediate measures to ensure the protection of persons who have become *hors de combat* and to prevent the recurrence of these violations. Accordingly, STJ recommends the following:

7.1 To the Transitional Government:

- Immediately disclose the fate of all persons with whom contact was lost during the military operations, and adopt effective measures to search for the missing and clarify their fate.
- Publish official lists with the names of detainees and their places of detention, enabling families to access reliable information about their relatives.
- Immediately cease all forms of torture and ill-treatment during the arrest process and in detention centers, and hold those responsible accountable.
- Ensure the humane treatment of all persons *hors de combat*, in accordance with International Humanitarian Law obligations.
- Take urgent measures to identify children, including both girls and boys among the missing, detained, and killed; verify their ages and identities; immediately disclose their fate; inform their families of their whereabouts and health and legal status; and

ensure their treatment in a manner that considers their best interests and special needs.

- Open independent and transparent investigations into all killings that occurred under unclear circumstances, particularly those that may have occurred after the victims were injured or rendered hors de combat.
- Align national legislation with Syria's obligations under International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, including the integration of provisions prohibiting torture, enforced disappearance, and arbitrary detention into national laws, and ensuring their effective enforcement. They approach a retaliatory nature.
- Operationalize the role of the National Commission for Missing Persons, enabling it to fulfill its mandate independently and effectively, particularly regarding disclosing the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared, and collecting and documenting information. This includes launching safe mechanisms to receive testimonies from families and encouraging them to provide any information or evidence they possess.
- Issue a binding code of conduct for military personnel and general security forces that clearly outlines their legal obligations during military operations and the execution of their duties, particularly regarding the protection of persons *hors de combat*, the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment, and ensuring the humane treatment of all detainees.

7.2 To the International Community:

- Pressure the Transitional Government in Syria to disclose the fate of the missing and ensure respect for its obligations under International Humanitarian Law.
- Support independent monitoring and documentation mechanisms, including local initiatives, to ensure the collection of evidence related to violations.
- Support efforts aimed at holding perpetrators of grave violations accountable, including through existing international mechanisms.
- Urge international mechanisms and institutions working on the Syrian file, particularly the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) and the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP), to conduct field visits to Syrian detention centers and facilities to review detention conditions and the treatment of detainees.

7.3 To Civil Society Organizations (particularly those working in the human rights field):

- Monitor hate speech issued by military commanders and influencers on social media, and document it as evidence of "incitement" or "intent" to commit war crimes.
- Provide awareness sessions for the families of victims on how to navigate the legal avenues available with the Transitional Government to request visits to their relatives or learn their places of detention, ensuring they are not subjected to exploitation in all its forms.

- Train local activists on preserving digital evidence (such as videos of humiliation and ill-treatment circulating on social media) using tools that guarantee they are not tampered with and accurately determine the time and place of the crime.
 - Continue to document violations committed by all parties professionally and independently, ensuring the preservation and timely documentation of evidence to support accountability efforts. This includes referring documented information, when appropriate, to competent national authorities and relevant international mechanisms and institutions, within a framework that maintains independence, promotes accountability, and prevents impunity.
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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 unflinching 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.