

DEFILED IN NORTHERN SYRIA

RIGHTS TO HOUSING, LAND, WATER AND LIVELIHOOD



Housing and Land Rights Network – Habitat International Coalition

Defiled in Northern Syria

Rights to Housing, Land, Water and Livelihood



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HABITAT INTERNATIONAL COALITION

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Cover photo: Syrian civilians flee from Afrin, Aleppo Governorate, Northern Syria on 13 March 2018.
Source: AFP.

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Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France Presse
HIC	Habitat International Coalition
HIP	Humanitarian Implementation Plan
HLRN	Housing and Land Rights Network
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
MENA	Middle East/North Africa
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)
SNA	Syrian National Army
UN	United Nations

Contributing organizations:



Insight is an independent, non-partisan and non-profit organization dedicating its efforts to monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Syria. Based on the principle that "justice is a right for all," Insight strives to support victims, their families, and survivors of violations within Syrian society. Additionally, it works to promote human rights values and is committed to remedying violations fairly and justly. Insight aims to contribute to exposing human rights violations in Syria, shedding light on them, advocating for their redress, and calling for necessary actions to stop these violations and achieve justice.

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Housing and Land Rights Network is part of Habitat International Coalition, an independent international nonprofit Coalition of organizations and individuals working in the field of human settlements. HIC members include some 350 non-governmental and community-based organizations, academic and research institutions, social movements and like-minded individuals from over 80 countries in both North and South. Their binding commitment is expressed in a shared set of objectives that shape HIC's dedication to communities working to realize their human right to adequate housing and improve their habitat conditions. HIC-HLRN is committed to creating knowledge and developing HIC Member and ally capacities to apply and further develop international human rights norms in their local, regional and global forums to promote remedies applying the human right to adequate housing and human rights-based methods to issues affecting the human habitat.

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For more information, see

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Contents

Abbreviations	iii
Contributing organizations:	iv
Introduction.....	1
2023	2
___Iranian factions have seized properties and forcibly evicted inhabitants	2
___Turkish forces and loyalist factions have violated housing and land rights	4
2024	6
Targeting the energy infrastructure	6
Seizing and looting public and private property.....	7
More displacement and demographic manipulation	8
Cumulative violations	9
Conclusion	9

Introduction

Throughout 13 years of conflict in Syria, around 2.9 million displaced persons in northeast and northwest Syria have been forced to live with displacement, dispossession, looting and theft. They are compelled to seek alternatives for housing, work and income, instead of the displaced persons returning to their properties, holding the perpetrators accountable, or redressing their costs, loss and damage.

It is not possible to provide comprehensive figures to depict the sheer volume of these violations and losses in northern Syria, because the causes and circumstances of the conflict remain in place. The same military entities continue to control and threaten the victims in a territory disputed by various parties, and where all types of violations are repeated.

However, based on the monitoring efforts of the Insight Organisation, evidence can be shared recounting violations of the local population's universal human rights to livelihood, land, housing and water. Despite the plurality of perpetrators, these violations form a common and systematic policy in certain areas where various foreign-backed militias operate. The reader will appreciate that, because of the inherent difficulties on gathering information, figures provided here for land area, extent of damage and numbers of affected persons are estimated.

The pattern of these violations is not linear. Nor is the presence of the military actors consistent, stable or predictable; they are constantly vying with each other for territorial control. Caught in the middle, the diverse civilian population nonetheless endures the common deprivation that is the outcome of such geostrategic competition over spheres of influence, the land and its people.

For the purpose of presenting a coherent picture from this mosaic, this presentation largely pursues a chronological approach. To develop a current snapshot of the ongoing situation, this report covers only the most-recent period (2023–24). Partial though this documentary record may be, it gives the reader a glimpse into what everyday Syrians are forced to endure at the hands and arms of foreign occupants of their territory.

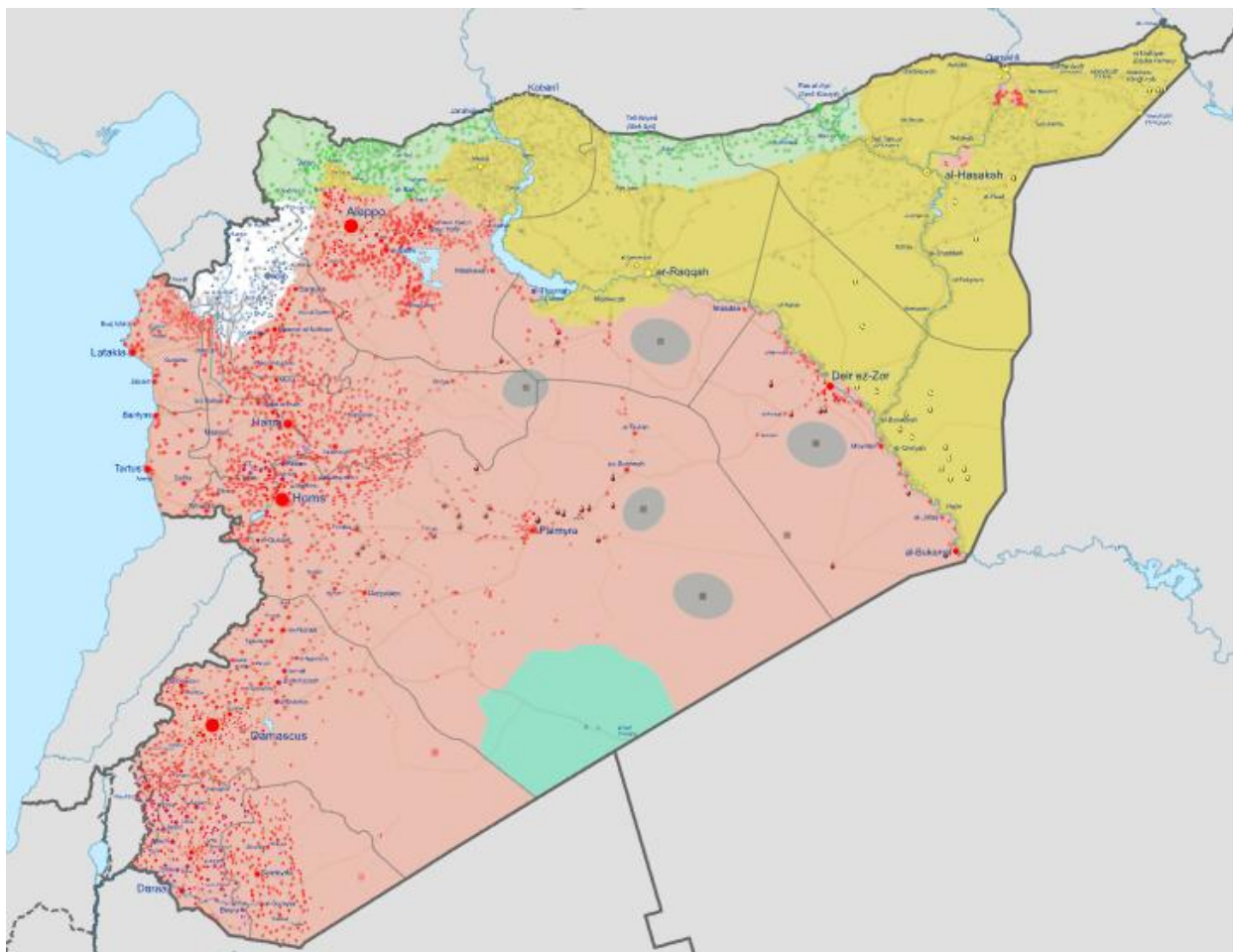


Figure 1: Map of the military situation in Syria as of October 2024. Source: Wikipedia. See detailed map [here](#).

2023

Iranian factions have seized properties and forcibly evicted inhabitants

Armed groups loyal to Iran have seized civilian homes in Dhayr al-Zawr city and its region, converting them into military headquarters or religious and cultural centers for themselves. Incidents in 2023 include the following:

Iran-backed militias force six families to vacate their homes in the town of al-Quriyah, in the Dhayr al-Zawr countryside. These Iranian forces subjected the inhabitants to threats of forced eviction and dispossession under the pretext of the location's strategic importance. Among these victims are:

- **Hussain al-Mansour's** household left their home forcibly, only to learn that Iranian Revolutionary Guard units had installed a missile launching pad in his house.
- **Ahmad al-Hamad** and his family left their house in al-Mayadin, in the Dhayr al-Zawr countryside, after Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) units took up residence in the

neighborhood, repeatedly provoking and harassing him. This abuse included accusing him of terrorism and harassing girls in the neighborhood. After al-Hamads left their house, Ahmad learned that it had been turned into a weapons warehouse. He objected because the occupiers led him to believe that the militants needed the house to live in. But he retracted his objection after being arbitrarily arrested for two days under the threat of newly fabricate charges against him.

- **Jabir al-Amash**, from al-Mayadin, left his house and headed to Dhayr al-Zawr city after Iranian militants repeatedly sought refuge there during US raids on their sites.
- **Raghib al-Salim**, also from al-Mayadin, was forced, along with the majority of the residents of his neighborhood (Tamu neighborhood) in the southern part of the city. They had to vacate their homes to accommodate foreign (Afghan) fighters working with the IRGC. He says they were forced to leave because the militants removed the walls between the houses, and opened holes between them to hide ammunition from enemy aircraft. That made the lives of the families impossible, and most of them resorted to living in rented houses in other neighborhoods.
- **Zain al-Muhammad** and his family fled from al-Mayadin for fear of arrest after they refused to “convert to Shiism,” and headed to the town of al-Tayyana, on the opposite bank of the Euphrates River.

Meanwhile, the pro-Iran factions opened at least 13 *hussainiyas* (prayer and cultural centers) in various areas of Dhayr al-Zawr.

- **Muhammad al-`Abd** fled from the city of al-Bukamal to the opposite bank of the Euphrates River, which is under the control of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. That was the result of an accusation by a leader in the IRGC (an Iraqi national) that al-`Abd gave the location of their military centers near his home to hostile forces. Al-`Abd said that the accusation came after he refused several orders to vacate his home so that Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces could be stationed there.

Some sources in al-Bukamal estimated that the pro-Iran factions (Fatimiyun Brigade, al-Hashimiyun, al-Nujaba, and the IRGC) **systematically and forcibly** seized **200 properties**, including homes, lands, and stores in the city of al-Bukamal and the surrounding villages of al-Sukkariyah, al-Salihiyah, and al-Hamdan.

In another layer of destruction on top of dispossession, unidentified aircraft also destroyed **five buildings in the al-Jam`iyyat neighborhood** in central al-Bukamal after IRGC units had converted them into headquarters and warehouses.



Figure 2: Iranian militia elements in Syria, 2023. Source: AFP.

Turkish forces and loyalist factions have violated housing and land rights

Türkiye has continued to exploit the situation of displaced and refugee Syrians to implement demographic change in `Afrin—which has a Kurdish majority—by settling displaced families that include 10,000 Palestinians who were displaced in Syria and **militants involved in the Syrian opposition factions** loyal to it.

Various external parties have established 29 residential complexes during 2023, 13 of which were built with the support of **Palestinian organizations**, four with **Kuwaiti support**, three with **Saudi support**, three with **Qatari support**, three with the support of **the Sawasiyya** and **Social Development International** organizations in coordination with others, two with the support of the Turkish Deniz organization, and one with the support of a Gulf businesswoman.

These complexes were distributed near the Kurdish Syrian city of `Afrin and in its adjacent districts and villages, most notably Jandairis, Shirawa, Sharan, Jabal al-Ahlam, Ghazawiya, Khalidiya, Kafr Safra, and Kafr Rum. While these developments provided housing for those in need, they also have contributed to the deliberate anti-Kurd demographic manipulation that the Turkish occupation has pursued across the region.

The factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) loyal to Turkey have extorted cash payments (duties) from the population there. These include payments in to restore a house seized by a member of the SNA, or a faction affiliated with it, and amounts determined for agricultural land on the basis of the number of trees on the land, and then again during harvesting.

The SNA has extended this extortion also by levying duties on oil presses and owners of agricultural tractors and trucks, including those transporting aid to those affected by the 6 February 2023 earthquake.

During the past year, the Insight Organisation monitored the imposition of levies in 114 cases, 51 of which were imposed by the **Suleiman Shah faction** (also known as al-Amshat), eight cases by the Military Police and the Sultan Murad faction, and the Hamza Division and the Majd Corps, each of which imposed levies in five cases, and each of the Eastern Army, Suqur al-Shamal and the Sham Corps imposed levies in four cases. The same factions carried out **97 seizures** of property in the **`Afrin and Ra's al-`Ayn** regions, 38 of which were private properties belonging to elderly men and women.

They cut down 12,566 trees, including 8,831 olive trees, during 2023 in the **`Afrin** region for the purpose of selling wood or charcoal. In **`Afrin** alone, they set fires out of hatred for the indigenous population, destroying 3,505 trees during the year, on the pretense of making charcoal for sale.

During 2023, Insight recorded ten cases of random bulldozing and excavation of **archaeological sites in `Afrin, and two in Ra's al-`Ayn**. The factions also damaged and **destroyed other historic and cultural sites** in **`Afrin**. The destruction affected the Nabi Hori castle and the Jil Khana Yazidi shrine, the **`Ayn Diba** and **Kovijeh hills**, and mountainous areas around the village of **Iskan**. Included also were the minaret of the **Maidan Akbas mosque**, the demolition of the **Kakhra village mosque** and the destruction of the **Sheikh Hamid (Yazidi) shrine and cemetery** near the village of **Qastal**.

In the areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES),¹ Turkish forces escalated their attacks from outside the borders, using warplanes, drones and artillery shelling during three periods in 2023: January, October and December. During these attacks, Türkiye targeted 952 sites, 728 of which were residential areas, 81 were infrastructure facilities, 55 military sites of the Syrian Democratic Forces, 65 sites of Syrian government forces, and 23 strikes on agricultural lands. This means that 76% of its targets were residential areas, in addition to other damage to homes near the other targeted sites.

Türkiye's control of **`Afrin** in its 2018 "Operation Olive Branch" led to the displacement of **about 300,000 people**, some of whom live in five camps in the northern countryside of Aleppo, while others were distributed in the cities of Aleppo, Hasakah, Qamishli, and al-Malikiyah, or

¹ Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava (Kurdish: *Rojavayê Kurdistanê*), is a *de facto* autonomous region in northeastern Syria consisting of self-governing sub-regions in the areas of Afrin, Jazira, Euphrates, Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and Dhayr al-Zawr. The self-governing territory has an administrative structure, inspired by concepts of democratic confederalism, that involves and serves a multi-ethnic Syrian population of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrian, Armenian, Circassian and Yazidi individuals and communities, representing various language groups and religious denominations.

migrated outside the country after the elements of the Syrian National Army loyal to Türkiye took control of their homes and fields.



Figure 3: Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army militia celebrates around a statue of Kawa, a mythology figure in Kurdish culture as they prepare to destroy it in city center of Afrin, 18 March 2018. Source: Hasan Kirmizitas/AP.

Turkey's control of the Ra's al-`Ayn and Tal Abyad areas in its 2019 "Operation Peace Spring" also led to the displacement of another 300,000 people, who were distributed across the cities of the Syrian Jazira, while a large number of them remained in camps established by the Autonomous Administration in al-Hasakah and al-Malikiyah.

Turkey's control over the Allouk wells that supply the drinking water network in the city of al-Hasaka and parts of its northern countryside has led to a long-term crisis by cutting off the water. Consequently, the population has had to rely on unsafe water

transported by tankers at high financial cost and consequences for public health at a time when epidemics and diseases have spread, and prevention measures depend heavily on clean water.

Türkiye's control over the flow rate of the Euphrates River its smaller tributaries (most notably the Khabūr), to 200 cubic meters per second at certain times of the year, as well as exacerbated the consequences of drought in recent years.

2024

The escalation of Turkish raids at the beginning of 2024 on electrical energy sources and transformers, oil fields and tanks, and the only cooking gas plant have caused long-term destruction, impeding inhabitants' enjoyment of basic services, which the state exercising effective control over the territory is treaty bound to provide. The year 2024 saw an accelerated combination of deprivation, denying rights to adequate housing, land, water, livelihood and other basic civic and environmental goods and services.

Targeting the energy infrastructure

The houses of Qamishli city have not been supplied with public electricity since the Turkish raids targeted the electricity transformers in mid-January 2024, and the price of bottle of cooking gas rose from 8,000 Syrian pounds (€49)² to 150,000 pounds (€9.12). Then the Autonomous Administration decided to reduce the price to SYP 100,000 (€6.08). Administrators

² The official Syrian pound (SYP) exchange rate was 13,000 to the US dollar (\$), or 14,225 euros (€) at the time. However, the parallel exchange rate in al-Hasaka hovered around SYP15,000/\$, or SYP16,425/€. This report applies the exchange rate SYP16,425/€. According to Dataviz, <https://dataviz.vam.wfp.org/the-middle-east-and-northern-africa/syrian-arab-republic/economic/exchange-rates>.

at the Swaidiyah gas facility estimated the cost of repairing the damage at **US\$100 million** (€91,575,000).

The Turkish attacks also led to continuous increases in the prices of petroleum derivatives, including heating fuel, car oils and oil products needed for operating agricultural well pumps. An assessment of loss and damage to infrastructure from over 580 Turkish attacks on 104 sites in northern and northeastern Syria between 5 and 9 October 2024, including vital infrastructure such as power, gas, and water stations and educational facilities, estimated repairs costs at **more than US\$1.270 billion** (€1.163 billion).

During the current year 2024, the Autonomous Administration raised the price of subsidized bread and reduced the quantities of fuel sold at a generally reduced price, while reducing the price of basic crops that it buys from farmers in the region, most notably wheat, then barley and cotton. The damage affected about three million people of all ethnicities in the governorates of al-Hasakah, Dhayr al-Zawr and al-Raqqah.

Through its Minister of Defense, Türkiye had threatened to destroy the infrastructure of the Autonomous Administration region. On 13–15 January 2024, the Turkish Ministry of Defense published footage of the destruction of facilities, some of which were private factories, claiming that they were financing the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is banned in Türkiye and other countries, and to which Türkiye accuses the Syrian Democratic Forces of being linked. Despite Türkiye's allegations, the Autonomous Administration did not receive money for public electricity and water, and most of the destroyed electricity stations were only transformer stations that did not produce or sell electricity. The same applies to fuel facilities, mills and the gas plant, which provided services at a subsidized price, meaning that no money was derived from their operation. (However, no information about oil extraction operations is available.)

Seizing and looting public and private property

In the first half of the current year 2024, the “National Army” factions carried out **16 operations**, seizing and looting public and private property, 15 of which were private property such as agricultural lands, homes and cars. In the `Afrin region alone, the factions carried out 14 cases of seizure and one case in each of the city of `Azaz, in the northern countryside of Aleppo and Ra's al-`Ayn. Moreover, during the first half of the current year, Insight has recorded the felling of 2,020 trees, including 1,263 olive trees, by these factions. The most prominent parties responsible for destroying forests and farmers' fields are the factions of the Hamza Division, Sultan Murad and Malak Shah.

Insight also has monitored acts of vandalism against the Yazidi religious **shrine of Mannan**, located near Kafr Janna, in the countryside of `Afrin, where the acts included destroying its dome and digging inside it.

In addition, government checkpoints in the `Afrin camps have besieged displaced people, blocking food, fuel and medicine supplies. Those persons moving between different areas of

ruling forces have been subjected also to the theft of their belongings and financial extortion, especially by the checkpoints of the Syrian government forces' elite Fourth Armored Division.

More displacement and demographic manipulation

In 2024, Türkiye continued to build housing units for displaced people from other Syrian regions and resettle opposition militants' families in the `Afrin region. That has resulted in Turkish forces seizing public properties and large swaths of land and **accelerating Türkiye's intended demographic change** in `Afrin and its surrounding northern Aleppo countryside. The Insight team monitored 11 residential complexes, one of which was built with Palestinian support, two with the support of Britian-based organizations, and the rest with Turkish support.

In 11 August 2024, Syrian government forces and their proxies attacked the Syrian Democratic Forces in the eastern countryside of Dhayr al-Zawr, which conflict intensified for about a week. All military parties failed to respect the humanitarian law principle of distinction between military and civilian objects.

The victims' families faced difficult times suddenly erupting into conflict. They had family members killed or injured in the shelling exchanges, **with 25 deaths and 28 injuries**, their homes and properties were damaged and were forced to move to nearby areas to wait for military operations to end.

Witnesses reported that the security points and guards are distributed near the banks of the river, considering it the contact line between the two areas of influence, but this puts them close to the houses on the bank, or sometimes in the middle of them.

The attackers' use of artillery and mortars also meant that the shells fell within an area of populated housing. This while, in the midst of operations, civilians displaced from both banks of the Euphrates River to safer nearby locations or the Al-Badia areas (desert).

The shelling focused on the villages of al-Dahlah, Abu Hammam, al-Kashkiyah and al-Basira. **Around 100,000 local residents** risked deprivation of food and drinking water.

Witnesses estimate the number of displaced persons due to the August 2024 conflict in Dhayr al-Zawr at several thousand residents. **3500 Families displaced** to safer nearby locations or the Al-Badia areas (desert), additional to **around 6,500 families** did not move far from their homes, since the armed clashes in 2023, hoping that the fighting would remain in specific areas.



Figure 4: Displaced Syrians from Afrin hold placards in front of the UN office the city of Qamishli on 1 June 2020, demonstrating in protest against the “Turkish occupation.” Source: VoA.

Cumulative violations

Amid this escalation, the extortion of villagers continued. In July and August, al-Amshat militias imposed duties on Kurdish residents across the Shih/Sheikh al-Hadid district, in the town of Ma`batli, and several surrounding villages under its control, **reportedly** collecting the equivalent of over €730,000.

In the village of Kakhra, where al-Amshat militias demolished a local mosque in 2023 (see above), women mounted a protest on 15 September 2024 against the continuing extortion and other abuses by al-Amshat militias, who reportedly had stolen \$17,000 from 170 Kurdish families still residing in the village. Armed al-Amshat militiamen **attacked** the peaceful demonstration with sticks, batons, and live bullets, injuring 20 some villagers: women of all ages, children, and older persons, including a man and a woman each 80 years old.

Conclusion

Many reports by human rights organizations and appeals from civilians in northeastern Syria indicate the systematic and repeated violations against civilians in northern Syria by all warring factions, whether loyal to the Syrian government, Iran, the **United States** military occupation, or militias loyal to and supported by the Turkish government. Whether through illicitly imposing levies and duties on the remaining population, or through military means to force civilians to forcibly displace, loot property, land and housing, to cause demographic change, in addition to depriving them of access to adequate food and potable water as collective punishment. This constitutes an obstacle to the return of the displaced and refugees to their homes and the

restoration of their property in accordance with the principle of the right to redress, to achieve lasting peace and stability.

All governments operating directly or through surrogates on the Syrian people's territory bear human rights and humanitarian law obligations, including extraterritorially to avoid violations of economic, social and cultural rights of the affected population. Whether committed directly or through proxies, these states' practices may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity in the northern Syria context. All cases of displacement recounted here may amount to forced evictions. Whether in peacetime, or in situations of conflict, occupation and war, forced evictions are classified as a 'gross violation' of human rights. Being subjected to such a gross violation, affected persons and households are entitled to **reparation**, which is comprehensive package of entitlements, including rights to restitution, return, resettlement, compensation (for conditions and values impossible to be physically restored), guarantees of nonrepetition and victims' satisfaction that the justice—as the Insight Organization seeks³—has been done.

As HLRN previously has **submitted** in the UN Human Rights Treaty System, all Syrians displaced and whose sacrosanct human rights have been otherwise defiled—like everyone—enjoy the treaty-guaranteed right to remedy. Syrians have endured well over a decade of systematic violations of their housing, land, water and livelihood in the context of conflict, occupation and war covered in this report. However, these violations also have a longer scope, and all affected persons have the same right to remedy. These Syrians, long enduring yet untold costs, loss and damage, remain our most-urgent priority.

³ See contributing organization profiles on page iv above.