

**Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences; the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons; the Special Rapporteur on minority issues; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment**

Ref.: AL SYR 1/2026  
(Please use this reference in your reply)

27 April 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons; Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 59/20, 54/14, 53/4, 52/10, 59/12 , 52/5, 58/14 and 52/7.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning reported violence against women and girls in northern Aleppo and Al-Hasakah in North-East Syria, including allegations of killings, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture and ill-treatment, forced displacement, deprivation of food and medical care, and attacks on civilians and civilian objects.

According to the information received:

Since December 2025, there have been hostilities between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Government of Syria Forces. On 6 January 2026, the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya in Aleppo, and territory under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava - under the control of the SDF at the time - were attacked by forces of the Syrian Government, reportedly using heavy weapons. On 7 January 2026, the Syrian Government reportedly declared the area a closed military zone. Intense clashes continued between 6 and 10 January 2026, during which tens of thousands of individuals, mainly members of Kurdish communities, were reportedly displaced, including women, children and the elderly, mainly towards Qamishli and other areas of North-East Syria. Between 9 and 10 January 2026, the SDF forces withdrew from Aleppo and the Syrian Government forces took control of the city.

The information received also indicates that at least 7 civilians were killed and 52 others injured, including women and children. The hostilities generated a severe humanitarian crisis, with women and children reportedly constituting the large majority of those displaced.

The affected civilian population suffered reportedly from electricity cuts, food scarcity (including baby food), lack of access to water, shelter, and medical care for the wounded and the sick. Humanitarian access was severely curtailed, including due to damaged infrastructure, movement restrictions, contamination by explosive ordnance and prevailing insecurity. The lack of heating and the cold, as well as the damage done to houses and the ongoing fighting forced some families to remain in their vehicles. It is further reported that children died from the cold in villages surrounding Kobane.

According to the United Nations, and as of 11 February 2026, an estimated 128,400 people had been displaced across Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakah and Deir-ez-Zor, with women and children constituting 91 per cent of those displaced.<sup>1</sup> United Nations further reported that damage to infrastructure and the suspension of public services significantly limited access to health care and gender-based violence prevention and response services, while approximately 1,336,200 people required health services and 394,000 required protection services<sup>2</sup>. Around 900,000 people required urgent humanitarian assistance, including approximately 225,000 females of reproductive age, around 13,500 of whom were pregnant<sup>3</sup>. UNICEF similarly reported that humanitarian access remained constrained due to damaged infrastructure, movement restrictions, explosive ordnance contamination and ongoing insecurity<sup>4</sup>. While there have been some improvements in the security and humanitarian situation, there were still 116,900 Internally Displaced Persons as of 4 March 2026 spread across 165 communities in 17 sub-districts within Aleppo and Al-Hasakah governorates.<sup>5</sup>

The reported escalation of hostilities has allegedly been accompanied by grave violations affecting civilians, in particular women and girls, including members of the Kurdish community. The allegations include extrajudicial killings (including in front of children), enforced disappearances, and acts tantamount to arbitrary detention, forced displacement, looting of homes and property, attacks on civilian infrastructure, sexual violence (including reports of at least one rape), desecration of bodies and graves, and attacks in civilian areas.

Women were reportedly told by armed actors that they would be treated as “spoils of war” and some were reportedly abducted by armed actors in uniform. They had also received reports that one woman was abducted in Rumeilan in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, during the clashes between

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), [Situation Report on Aleppo and North-East Syria](#) (6 January–12 February 2026).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, [Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Flash Update No. 4: Escalation of violence and developments in Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh](#) (29 January 2026).

<sup>5</sup> OCHA, [Syria: Humanitarian Response in Aleppo and the North-East | Humanitarian Situation Report No. 4](#) (As of 4 March 2026)

the Syrian Government Forces and the SDF. Threats of rape, including filmed threats of rape, were used to spread fear amongst the civilian population.

Syrian Kurdish women in the affected areas of Aleppo had heard accounts of violence reportedly committed by the Syrian forces in other regions of Syria against women and girls, such as As-Suwayda and Raqqa, that exacerbated their fears. Syrian women that had arrived to Aleppo from Raqqa reportedly stated that their husbands had been killed and that they had been forced to wear black chadors when they were in Raqqa. They had also heard of the reported killing of a 17-year-old girl in Suwayda by persons wearing *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) uniforms, believed to be affiliated with the Government of Syria.

Once the Syrian Government took control of Aleppo, women were reportedly also required to wear black chadors and instructed that they could no longer go outdoors.

In mid-January 2026, following the Syrian Government's assault on the SDF-held neighborhoods in Aleppo, hostilities expanded eastward toward Tabqa in Raqqa Governorate. Between 16 and 18 January 2026, clashes and reported drone strikes occurred in and around the area as Syrian Government forces advanced into territory held by the SDF. These developments were linked to a broader pattern of SDF withdrawals and shifting frontlines rather than a prolonged siege. By 18 January 2026, Government forces had entered and taken control of Tabqa, consolidating their presence along the Euphrates corridor and marking a significant territorial shift from SDF to State authority in that area. Internally displaced Syrians from Afrin living in Tabqa and others reportedly had to flee again to areas in Raqqa governorate and Hasakah governorate. It is reported that at least one woman was killed in a civilian convoy travelling between Hasakah and Raqqa, and that homes belonging to Kurdish families who had fled Tabqa were subsequently looted by armed men reportedly belonging to the Syrian Government Forces and affiliated groups entering the city.

Without prejudging the accuracy of the allegations described in this letter, we would like to express our serious concern regarding the reported pattern of violence against women and girls in northern Aleppo and North-East Syria, including allegations of rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction, enforced disappearances and acts tantamount to killing, torture and ill-treatment, forced displacement, pillage, restrictions on women's movement and dress, and denial of access to essential food, shelter, heating and medical care. We are further concerned by the reported impact of these events on children, including against alleged deaths from cold and starvation, lack of medical treatment, exposure to repeated displacement, and the trauma of witnessing extreme violence.

We are also concerned that these allegations, if confirmed, may indicate violence directed against Syrian Kurdish women and girls and other members of the Kurdish community, including their lives, safety, dignity and freedom of movement and in violation of international human rights and humanitarian law.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights and humanitarian law** attached

to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide information on the measures adopted since January 2026 to protect women, girls and other civilians in northern Aleppo and North-East Syria, including measures to prevent and respond to violence against them including sexual violence, abduction, enforced disappearance and acts tantamount to, torture, killings, pillage, and attacks on civilians and civilian objects.
3. Please provide information on the steps taken to search for disappeared persons and establish their fate and whereabouts, ensuring that, in particular, in cases involving adolescent girls and women who have disappeared, all stages of the search are conducted in a gender-sensitive manner and by staff, including female staff, who have received proper training.
4. Please also provide information on the steps taken to ensure safe humanitarian access and access to essential services, including food, water, shelter, heating, medical care, health services and psychosocial support.
5. Please provide information on the measures taken to protect and assist survivors, witnesses and family members, including through access to medical care, psychosocial support, shelter and legal assistance.
6. Please further indicate what mechanisms exist to ensure prompt, thorough, transparent and impartial investigations into unlawful killings, enforced disappearance and acts tantamount to accountability, survivor-centred support, and reparation where violations are identified.
7. In particular, please indicate whether investigations have been opened, which authorities are in charge of these investigations, whether these investigations conformed to the standards outlined in the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death, and what results, if any, have been reached to date. If no investigation has been undertaken or did not comply with international standards, please explain the reasons why.
8. Finally, please provide information on measures taken to preserve evidence, restore housing and property, and ensure the safe and dignified return or resettlement of displaced women and children.

This communication, and any response received from your Excellency's Government, will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) at the 60 days mark. Should your Excellency's Government respond within 60 days, both the communication and the response, may be published before the 60 days mark. The communications and responses will also be made available in the subsequent periodic report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government that should sources submit the allegations concerning individual cases of enforced disappearances for the consideration of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances under its humanitarian procedure, the case will be examined by the Working Group according to its methods of work, in which case your Excellency's Government will be informed by separate correspondence.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

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Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences

Gabriella Citroni

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Morris Tidball-Binz

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Ben Saul

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Alice Jill Edwards  
Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or  
punishment

## Annex

### Reference to international human rights and humanitarian law

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to its obligations under the international human rights treaties to which the Syrian Arab Republic is party, as well as to relevant rules of international humanitarian law and other applicable international standards concerning the protection of women and girls, and other civilians and children in situations of armed conflict, displacement and denial of humanitarian access.

We wish to refer to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which the Syrian Arab Republic acceded on 28 March 2003, in particular articles 1, 3, 5, 12 and 14. These provisions require States parties to eliminate discrimination against women in law and practice, ensure women's equal enjoyment of health care and other services, address discriminatory stereotypes and gender-based violence, and pay particular attention to rural and displaced women.

We also wish to recall general recommendation No. 30 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, which clarifies that obligations under the Convention apply before, during and after conflict; require due diligence to prevent, investigate, punish and provide reparation for gender-based violence by State and non-State actors; require equal and safe access to humanitarian assistance, health care, documentation, property restitution and justice; and require the protection of internally displaced, refugee and minority women and girls from violence, coercion and discrimination.

We also wish to refer to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), acceded to by the Syrian Arab Republic on 21 April 1969, in particular articles 2, 6, 7, 9, 12, 16, 17, 26 and 27, read alone and in conjunction with article 2(3) with regards to the disappeared. As well as articles 7 and 17, read alone and in conjunction with article 2(3) with regards to the families. These provisions protect the rights to life, freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, liberty and security of person, right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law, freedom of movement, privacy and family life, equality before the law and non-discrimination, as well as the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities to enjoy their own culture and to use their own language, and the right to an effective remedy where human rights violations occur. In relation to allegations affecting Kurdish women and girls and other minorities, these provisions require effective protection against discriminatory practices, coercive restrictions and interference with cultural and linguistic rights. We also make reference to general comment No. 36 (2018) on article 6 of the ICCPR, which states, inter alia, that extreme forms of arbitrary detention that are themselves life-threatening, in particular enforced disappearances, violate the right to personal liberty and personal security and are incompatible with the right to life (para. 57), and that enforced disappearance constitutes a unique and integrated series of acts and omissions representing a grave threat to life, and States parties must take adequate measures to prevent the enforced disappearance of individuals and conduct an effective and speedy inquiry to establish the fate and whereabouts of persons who may have been subject to enforced disappearance (para. 58).

In particular, we wish to recall article 6 of the ICCPR, which protects the inherent right to life of every human being and prohibits arbitrary deprivation of life. As clarified by the Human Rights Committee in its general comment No. 36, this protection is non-derogable, including in situations of armed conflict, and requires States not only to refrain from unlawful killings but also to respect and ensure the right to life through preventive, protective and accountability measures, including by taking reasonable and appropriate steps to protect persons, especially those in vulnerable situations, from reasonably foreseeable threats to life and life-threatening conditions. The Committee has further clarified that article 6 continues to apply alongside international humanitarian law during armed conflict, and that conduct incompatible with international humanitarian law which endangers civilians and other protected persons, including attacks directed against civilians or civilian objects, indiscriminate attacks, failures to respect precaution and proportionality, and attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, may amount to arbitrary deprivation of life. We further recall that all potentially unlawful deaths, including deaths resulting from acts or omissions and from an alleged failure to protect life, must be investigated promptly, effectively, thoroughly, independently, impartially and transparently, in accordance with article 6 of the ICCPR and the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016).

We further wish to refer to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), acceded to by the Syrian Arab Republic on 21 April 1969, especially articles 11 and 12, which protect the rights to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, water, clothing and housing, and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. In accordance with article 2(2) of the ICESCR, States Parties undertake to guarantee these rights without discrimination of any kind, including as to race, sex, religion, national or social origin, and birth or other status. In circumstances of siege, displacement and destruction of infrastructure, these obligations are key to ensuring non-discriminatory access to essential goods and services, including medical care, maternal health services and psychosocial support.

In this regard, general comments No. 12 and No. 14 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights underscore that States must ensure access to food and health care without discrimination and must refrain from measures that impede such access.

We also wish to recall the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), to which the Syrian Arab Republic acceded on 19 August 2004, in particular articles 2, 12, 13, 14 and 16, which require States to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, promptly and impartially investigate allegations, protect complainants and witnesses, and ensure redress and compensation. We further remind that in situations of non-international armed conflict, common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions also applies. And further that sexual violence committed by public authorities is strictly prohibited as a form of torture under international law (A/77/502, para. 29). The obligations and rights must also be applied to cases of sexual torture.

We further wish to refer to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), acceded to by the Syrian Arab Republic

on 21 April 1969, which requires States to prohibit and eliminate racial and ethnic discrimination and to guarantee equality before the law in the enjoyment of security of person, housing, public services and effective remedies. These obligations are particularly relevant where allegations suggest that Kurdish women, girls or families may have been targeted or disproportionately affected on the basis of ethnic origin.

We wish to recall the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by the Syrian Arab Republic on 15 July 1993, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, to which the Syrian Arab Republic acceded on 17 October 2003. Articles 2, 3, 6, 19, 22, 24, 27, 30, 38 and 39 of the Convention, together with the Optional Protocol, require the protection of children from violence and discrimination, the consideration of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration, protection of children's rights to life, survival and development, access to health care and an adequate standard of living, special protection for children affected by armed conflict and displacement, respect for the cultural identity and language of children belonging to minorities, and recovery and reintegration for child victims. These standards are directly relevant to allegations involving killings of children, denial of humanitarian access, displacement, attacks on civilian infrastructure, and restrictions affecting children's welfare and family life.

In situations of displacement, we also wish to recall the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which reaffirm that internally displaced persons shall be protected against arbitrary displacement and are entitled, without discrimination, to protection, humanitarian assistance, safe shelter, medical care, documentation and conditions permitting safe, voluntary and dignified return, resettlement or local integration.

We are further drawing your Excellency's Government's attention to the absolute and non-derogable prohibition of enforced disappearances (articles 2 and 7) which has attained the status of *jus cogens*. We draw your Excellency's Government's attention to the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, which establishes that no State shall practice, permit or tolerate enforced disappearances. The Declaration also proclaims that each State shall take effective legislative, administrative, judicial or other measures to prevent and terminate acts of enforced disappearance in any territory under its jurisdiction. We further recall that the Declaration sets out the necessary guarantees to be offered by the State and in particular, make reference to its articles 2, 7, 9 – 13 and 19. Furthermore, we make reference to the UN Working Group on enforced or involuntary disappearances, report on Standards and public policies for an effective investigation of enforced disappearances (A/HRC/45/13/Add.3), General Comment on women affected by enforced disappearances (A/HRC/WGEID/98/2) highlights that gender perspective is crucial in explaining, understanding and dealing with unique disadvantages and obstacles that women face in the exercise of their human rights and as well as the Guiding Principles for the search for disappeared persons, in particular principle 4, which provides that the search for persons in situations of vulnerability requires special procedures, experience and knowledge that meet their particular needs, in the case of women and girls, all stages of the search should be conducted with a gender perspective. We also wish to recall the four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, ratified by the Syrian Arab Republic on 2 November 1953. Common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which applies to non-international armed conflicts, requires

humane treatment without adverse distinction and prohibits violence to life and person, murder, mutilation, cruel treatment, torture, hostage-taking, outrages upon personal dignity and the passing of sentences without judicial guarantees of persons taking no active part in the hostilities. Customary international humanitarian law further prohibits rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillage, collective punishment, forced displacement except where required for the security of civilians or imperative military reasons, attacks directed against civilians and civilian objects, and starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, and requires respect and protection for medical personnel and facilities and the facilitation of impartial humanitarian relief (ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Study, vol. I: rules 1, 7, 25, 28, 52, 53, 55, 93, 98, 103, 117 and 129). Rules 34 and 135 provide that women and children are entitled to special protection and rules 98 and 117, affirms that enforced disappearance is prohibited, both in international and non-international armed conflicts and provides that each party to the conflict must take all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict and must provide their family members with any information it has on their fate. To the extent that particular operations may occur in an international armed conflict or occupation context, the Fourth Geneva Convention and Additional Protocol I reinforce protections relating to civilians, civilian objects, medical units and humanitarian relief.

We further wish to recall the Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, including resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 2106 (2013) and 2467 (2019), which call for the prevention of conflict-related sexual violence, the protection of women and girls in armed conflict, women's meaningful participation in responses to conflict, and survivor-centered accountability and reparation.

We also wish to draw attention to the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (S/2025/535) and the 2026 report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (A/HRC/61/37), which reiterate the persistence in Syria of grave violations against children, including killing and maiming, recruitment and use, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access, and underscore that all parties must comply with international humanitarian law and international human rights law, facilitate humanitarian access, investigate violations and ensure age- and gender-sensitive responses and reparation.

Finally, we wish to emphasize that allegations of serious human rights violations and serious violations of international humanitarian law require prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigation, including through searches for disappeared persons, accountability in accordance with international standards, protection for victims and witnesses, and adequate, effective and prompt reparation, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.

We emphasize that, under international criminal law, serious violations of international humanitarian law and certain widespread or systematic attacks against civilians may entail individual criminal responsibility. Serious violations of common article 3 and other serious violations of international humanitarian law applicable in non-international armed conflict may, depending on the circumstances, amount to war crimes. We further recall that criminal responsibility may arise not only for direct perpetrators, but also, where the legal requirements are met, for military commanders

and other superiors. States must therefore ensure prompt, independent, impartial and effective criminal investigation and, where appropriate, prosecution of such crimes, in accordance with international standards.

The full texts of the human rights instruments and standards recalled above are available on <http://www.ohchr.org/> or can be provided upon request.