



University of Essex

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Seeking accountability for human rights breaches in Syria at the European Court of Human Rights

Partner: [Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights](#)

About

Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights is an international charity based in the UK which supports civilian-led monitoring of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, helps civilians to secure justice, and promotes civilian protection and military accountability. We work in a number of conflict-affected jurisdictions in the Middle East, Africa and Europe, operating in some of the world's most challenging environments. Ceasefire conducts research, produces evidence-based reports, and engages in advocacy at national and international levels. Ceasefire also pursues strategic litigation to promote accountability for serious violations. In Syria, Ceasefire works closely with Syrian civil society organisations and has documented hundreds of violations and produced several reports on violations in northern Syria.

Project overview

This project will support Ceasefire in its preparation of a case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), stemming from human rights breaches in northern Syria. The application would be the first of its kind before the European Court of Human Rights, with the project team conducting research that will feed directly into the preparation of the case. The project will explore how European human rights law deals with situations of armed conflict and inform the development of the application, which Ceasefire is committed to pursuing over following years. The project will support Ceasefire's wider goals of achieving paths towards justice for human rights violations in Syria, including the potential for international accountability.

Background

Ceasefire has been documenting human rights violations in northern Syria for several years, working closely with Syrian civil society organisations to collect evidence, support victims by amplifying their voices, and promote accountability for abuses committed in conflict-affected areas. These efforts form

part of wider strategies to pursue accountability and justice through international mechanisms, including documentation initiatives, engagement with UN mechanisms, and strategic litigation.

In this context, the project explores the potential for pursuing accountability before the ECtHR for violations committed in Syria. It focuses on abuses following military operations in northern Syria. These operations were backed by affiliated local armed groups, including the Syrian National Army (SNA), and resulted in the state responsible for the operations exercising sustained control over parts of northern Syria.

Under established ECtHR jurisprudence, states may be held responsible for human rights violations occurring outside their territory where they exercise “effective control,” as recognised in cases such as [*Loizidou v. Turkey*](#) and [*Al-Jedda v. the United Kingdom*](#). In this context, the sustained military presence, the imposition of administrative structures, and the provision of public services in parts of northern Syria may amount to effective control, thereby engaging obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). This creates a potential pathway for victims of abuses to bring claims before the ECtHR.

[Documentation](#) by Ceasefire and its partner YASA, along with several human rights organisations, provides evidence of widespread and systematic abuses against the civilian population in northern Syria, particularly targeting Kurdish communities. Reported violations include arbitrary detention, torture, kidnapping for ransom, and extensive housing, land, and property (HLP) violations, as well as the destruction of cultural heritage. In addition to Ceasefire’s findings, organisations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria have documented patterns of unlawful detention by armed factions, often for extortion purposes, with detainees denied fair trial rights and access to legal representation. Torture in detention facilities is reported to be systematic, involving severe physical and psychological abuse, with multiple cases of deaths under torture. Civilians have also been subjected to widespread kidnappings, frequently linked to ransom demands or gender-based violence.

Furthermore, the situation in northern Syria has been characterised by large-scale property confiscation and forced displacement, particularly affecting Kurdish residents. Armed groups have seized homes, repurposed them for military or civilian use, or transferred them to displaced populations from other regions. Cultural heritage has also been deliberately targeted, including the destruction of Yazidi religious sites and archaeological locations, alongside restrictions on cultural expression such as Newroz celebrations.

Some of the expected challenges in bringing cases before the ECtHR arise from the requirement under Article 35 of the ECHR to exhaust domestic remedies. In this context, such remedies are widely considered ineffective. Courts in areas under foreign control lack independence, and accountability for abuses remains limited. [Human Rights Watch](#) has highlighted that internal prosecutions by armed groups are rare, lack transparency, and fail to ensure accountability, with proceedings often closed and little information disclosed.

In addition, victims face serious risks of retaliation when seeking justice. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has [documented](#) cases where individuals pursuing claims – particularly related to property –

were threatened, beaten, abducted, or even killed. The involvement of the Syrian National Army in local grievance mechanisms further undermines their credibility, rendering domestic remedies both ineffective and unsafe.

This project will support Ceasefire in pursuing accountability through the ECtHR and contribute to its broader efforts to identify viable legal pathways to justice for Syrian victims. Students' research will directly inform the case selection and violations that are ultimately presented before the ECtHR.

Project output

The project team from Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic will work with Ceasefire to draft materials supporting a ECtHR application (totalling approximately 10-15,000 words) focused on:

Preliminary research questions to help determine final case selection:

1. Under what conditions can a state be held to exercise jurisdiction in a situation of armed conflict outside its own territory for the purposes of Article 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights?
2. To what extent can violations committed by affiliated armed groups be attributed to a state under the ECHR?
3. How does the relevant national legal framework address accountability for human rights violations committed abroad and under what circumstances can the requirement to exhaust domestic remedies be satisfied or waived before the ECtHR in conflict-affected contexts?
4. In terms of the available evidence, what makes a strong case before the ECtHR? Which factors should guide case selection?

Application drafting based on final case selection:

- Statement of the facts (following final case selection)
- Statement of alleged violations of the ECHR (by article invoked) and relevant arguments
- Compliance with admissibility criteria, including exhaustion of domestic remedies and time limits.

It is intended that the project output will directly inform the preparation of an application before the European Court of Human Rights. In doing so, it will support Ceasefire's broader goal of seeking international accountability for human rights breaches in northern Syria.

• Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2026:

- Understanding the project and familiarisation with the ECtHR application process.

- Investigation of preliminary research questions.

Phase 2: January – March 2027:

- Presentation of preliminary research questions and their application in case context.
- Drafting of application materials.

Phase 3: April – May 2027:

- Revision and finalisation of application drafts.
- Presentation of final project output to the partner organisation.

Initial reading

- Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, "Cultivating Chaos: Afrin after Operation Olive Branch", https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CFR_Syria_EN_July20.pdf
- Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, "Afrin after Operation Olive Branch: An update on the situation in north-west Syria", <https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Afrin-briefing-09.2021-1.pdf>
- Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, "Escalating human rights violations in Syria's Afrin", <https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Ceasefire-report-Afrin-2024-update.pdf>
- European Court of Human Rights, *Application materials*, available at: <https://www.echr.coe.int/apply-to-the-court>
- Philip Leach, *Taking a Case to the European Court of Human Rights* (4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2017)
- UK House of Commons Library, [*The Syrian civil war: timeline and statistics*](#), December 2024.
- UN Syria Commission of Inquiry, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - Sep 2020", <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/45/31>
- UN Syria Commission of Inquiry, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - Mar 2023", <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/52/69>
- UN Syria Commission of Inquiry, "Pillage and plunder: unlawful appropriation and destruction of properties of refugees and internally displaced persons in the Syrian Arab Republic", <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyr/a-hrc-58-crp2-coi-syria-20250206.pdf>

Focal point

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