



'IT BREAKS THE HUMAN'

TORTURE, DISEASE AND DEATH IN SYRIA'S PRISONS

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Torture and other ill-treatment have been perpetrated by the Syrian intelligence services and other state forces for decades, fostered by a culture of impunity that is reinforced by Syrian legislation. However, since the current crisis in Syria began in 2011, the situation has become catastrophic, with torture committed on a massive scale.

The Syrian authorities have attempted to keep information about what is going on inside their detention facilities secret. They have refused access to human rights monitors and – both in the media and in international forums such as the UN Security Council – deny that violations take place despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Monitoring bodies, such as the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry for the Syrian Arab Republic (UN Commission of Inquiry), have collected sufficient evidence to estimate that “tens of thousands of people are detained by the Syrian government at any given time” and to show that torture and other ill-treatment are a routine occurrence in government detention facilities. Their evidence, which is corroborated by Amnesty International’s research, includes testimony from former detainees and families of detainees; it also relies on civilians and military personnel who previously worked in detention facilities, courts and state-operated hospitals and who have, after escaping the country, provided credible evidence to complete the gruesome picture of the reality for Syrian detainees.

These widespread abuses in detention are taking place in a context in which Syria’s human rights situation, in general, has deteriorated disastrously following the brutal repression of peaceful protests calling for political change in March 2011. Following the evolution of the situation into an internal armed conflict by mid-2012, civilians have been caught in the middle as Syrian government forces and non-state armed groups violate the laws of war. At the current time, no justice is in sight for the overwhelming majority of those whose rights have been violated.

This report focuses on the experience of 65 torture survivors interviewed by Amnesty International. It charts their journeys through what many, such as the UN Commission of Inquiry, consider to be Syria’s most lethal detention facilities, including the detention centres operated by Syria’s four intelligence services – Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Political Security and General Intelligence – and Saydnaya (also spelt Sednaya) Military Prison. In doing so, it reveals the changing patterns of torture and other ill-treatment that detainees face through the phases of arrest, interrogation by intelligence services and imprisonment. It also shows the challenges faced by those who survive the ordeal following release.

The research for this report took place between December 2015 and May 2016. The majority of interviews were carried out in person by Amnesty International staff members in southern Turkey, though some were also conducted over the phone or via electronic communications with interviewees based in Lebanon, Europe and the USA.

Of the 65 torture survivors interviewed for this report, 54 are men, one of whom was under 18 at the time of his arrest, and 11 are women. Five of the men interviewed were members of the Syrian military

at the time of their arrest, while two were engaging in activities that could be perceived as supporting the military activities of a non-state armed group. The remaining 58 persons interviewed were civilians and had not engaged in any military activities, as far as Amnesty International is aware. Their occupations span Syrian society and include accountants, lawyers, teachers and academics, students, engineers, electricians, architects, business owners, gym managers, sales assistants, writers and journalists, actors, artists, NGO staff, human rights defenders, farmers and day labourers.

This diversity reflects Amnesty International's research findings since the beginning of the crisis in 2011, which indicate that anyone perceived to oppose the government is at risk of arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearance and death in custody. Grounds for arrest on suspicion of opposing the government are often extremely flimsy and can include having provided humanitarian support to those displaced by the conflict, or being "reported" to a member of the security forces by an informer.

These 65 men and women, who were detained between 2011 and 2015, exemplify the suffering of tens of thousands of others. Despite the risks they or their families still face from the Syrian authorities, they spoke to Amnesty International to share their experiences with the international community and give a voice to those who remain detained and who the Syrian government is attempting to silence.

The abusive events that the people interviewed for this report experienced or witnessed began in each case with their arrest. The witnesses were all detained by members of the security forces or militias under the effective control of the Syrian authorities. They were mostly picked up at their homes, their work places, their university or similar such places while going about their daily business. Some were arrested at government-operated checkpoints; others were asked to report to one of the security forces' branches for questioning. In almost all cases, their arrests were accompanied by torture or other ill-treatment, including what was described by many witnesses as the "welcome party" – a term commonly used to refer to the severe beatings received upon their initial arrival at a detention facility.

In every case, the torture and other ill-treatment continued during their interrogations. Every interviewee said they had been tortured or otherwise ill-treated during at least one of their interrogations, in most cases during almost every interrogation. Shiyar described to Amnesty International an interrogation in which he was subjected to the torture technique known as *shabeh*, which involves the victim being suspended by their wrists, which are usually manacled to a hook or over a door or pipes in the ceiling, often for several hours:

"They had me stand on the barrel, and they tied the rope around my wrists. Then they took away the barrel. There was nothing below my feet. They were dangling in the air. They brought three sticks... [They were] hitting me everywhere... After they were done beating me with the wooden sticks, they took the cigarettes. They were putting them out all over my body. It felt like a knife excavating my body, cutting me apart."

Most were interrogated repeatedly over several days or weeks, and in many cases interrogations started again if they were transferred to a different facility. The incidents of torture documented in this report cover a variety of methods, which are often used in combination, for example, being held in a stress position while being beaten or subjected to electric shocks, as well as psychological torture. Sexual violence was reported by men and women. Umm Omar described her experience while detained by Military Intelligence in Aleppo:

"They beat me until I was lying on the ground and then they kicked me with their military boots, in the places where I have had my hip operations, until I passed out. When I woke up, I was back in the solitary cell – they had dragged me back there from that room – but my trousers had been opened and moved down a bit, my *abaya* [full-length robe] was open and my undershirt was moved up. Everything was hurting, so I couldn't tell if I had been raped. It was overwhelming pain everywhere."

Torture is used routinely to extract false confessions. Most of the former detainees interviewed for this report eventually "confessed" to whatever they were accused of by the interrogator in an attempt to end their suffering or to protect their friends or family. Some said that they thought a "confession" would mean that they would be taken to a court and subsequently be placed in a civilian prison and thus their suffering in the appalling conditions in the security branches would end. Hani described his experience in detention: "You would think we were praying to get released only, but actually most of us were praying

just to escape from the hell that we were in, even if that meant ending up in 'Adra [a civilian prison near Damascus]. In 'Adra, at least there is a better life."

In addition to the violations they experienced during their interrogations, all of the former detainees reported appalling detention conditions across all of the detention centres operated by the security forces. Survivors spoke of prolonged periods of solitary confinement; severe overcrowding of cells; lack of adequate access to medical treatment, sanitation, food and water; exposure to extreme temperatures; and prolonged detention for hours or days in cells containing the bodies of deceased detainees.

Noman developed an infection in his leg while detained by Military Intelligence in Damascus, where he could not access medical treatment. He said:

"There was another detainee who was a nurse. He said that the wound would need to be opened, otherwise I would get gangrene. He had a razor... He managed to empty the two toilets for a short while. He and another detainee took me there and gave me a towel to put in my mouth. I bit on it. They burned the razor with a lighter, then they cut open the wound from two sides. All the dirty blood came out. Then they brought a shirt and ripped it into pieces to tie up my leg."

All of the former detainees interviewed for this report described being regularly humiliated by guards, while the women interviewees in particular reported either witnessing or being subjected to sexual harassment and assault by prison guards. Bayan described an incident which occurred while she was detained by General Intelligence in Aleppo:

"[One of the guards] touched my body inappropriately, and aggressively forced me to touch him. I started crying and shouting. My hands were tied; he tried to attack me. I refused, and he got angry. He sent me back. I knew he was angry. He came back to ask for me at lunch the next day. He hit me in the face and hit my head against the wall and I started bleeding... [A doctor later confirmed] I had lost 70% of my hearing in my left ear."

None of the survivors interviewed for this report were allowed any contact with the outside world, including their families or lawyers, while they were detained by the security forces. Only in cases where relatives were able to bribe someone inside or close to the security forces was it possible for families to obtain information about the fate and whereabouts of the detained person, and even then it was impossible for the families to verify whether the information they were given was correct.

Following months or even years spent in the branches of the various intelligence agencies, some of the interviewees were transferred to Saydnaya Military Prison. Such transfers often took place following a flagrantly unfair trial before a Military Field Court. Others arrived at the prison without having been before a judge or without knowing the alleged charges against them or the length of their sentence. This happened to Shappal: "They didn't tell us the judgment of the court. But after I was released, I got my document from the prison, and I found out that they [had sentenced] me to 15 years in prison."

All interviewees who had been held at Saydnaya reported systematic daily beatings, grossly inhuman detention conditions and degrading treatment, leading to detainee deaths on a daily basis. The survivors said that no interrogations take place at Saydnaya: detainees are tortured and otherwise ill-treated not to obtain information, but seemingly as a way to systematically and relentlessly degrade, punish and humiliate them. Some of the interviewees reported being allowed to receive family visits at Saydnaya; others remained detained in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance. Prisoners at Saydnaya do not have access to a lawyer. In several cases, relatives of a prisoner were incorrectly told by government officials that the prisoner had died.

The experiences faced by detainees in Syria's detention system are often lethal. Of those former detainees interviewed by Amnesty International for this report, most had witnessed at least one death in custody while detained in the facilities covered in this report.

The Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), an NGO that uses scientific approaches to analyse human rights violations, in particular in the context of armed conflicts, estimates that at least 17,723 people were killed in custody across Syria between 15 March 2011 and 31 December 2015. HRDAG further found that this is likely a conservative estimate with the real numbers being higher.

For those very few detainees who survive and are released, the ordeal is not over. All of the survivors interviewed for this report said that the trauma they experienced during their detention fundamentally impacted their lives and the lives of their families and loved ones. Three of the women who spoke to Amnesty International said that, since their release, their families are no longer in contact with them as the result of the social stigma that is attached to women who have been detained. Most of the survivors continue to face difficulties, in particular with their health, both psychological and physical, long after their release, although some also say that the experience has made them stronger.

Based on the evidence presented in this report, as well as prior research by Amnesty International and the documentation of credible national and international monitoring groups, Amnesty International considers that the torture and other ill-treatment of detainees carried out by the Syrian government since 2011 have been perpetrated as part of an attack against the civilian population, pursuant to a state policy, that has been widespread, as well as systematic, and therefore amounts to a crime against humanity.

An end to these violations is not yet in sight. The Syrian authorities continue to degrade, arrest, torture, and kill anyone perceived to be opposing them, even in the face of demands from the UN Security Council, for example resolution 2139 of 2014, and other UN bodies to release those detained arbitrarily and end the use of torture and other ill-treatment as well as the practice of enforced disappearances. Accountability for the victims and their families remains all but impossible at the national level. At the international level, only limited attempts are being made to ensure justice, truth and reparation for the war crimes and crimes against humanity that are being committed in Syria. The Syrian government also remains shielded from facing the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court by their ally, Russia, which has vetoed several resolutions on Syria from being passed in the UN Security Council.

This report therefore contains an urgent call on the international community to pressure the Syrian authorities to abide by their international obligations and end the use of torture and other ill-treatment, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances, and prevent further deaths in custody.

The Syrian government is fully aware of the actions it needs to take to stop the crimes against humanity, including systematic torture and other ill-treatment, being carried out by the security forces. Amnesty International has called on the Syrian government repeatedly to undertake the following:

- End enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions and make clear to all government forces and militias that such violations will not be tolerated;
- Ensure that all persons deprived of their liberty are protected from torture and other ill-treatment and are treated humanely in accordance with international standards, including the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules) and the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules);
- End the use of unfair trials, abolish Military Field Courts and reform the Anti-Terrorism Court in line with international fair trial standards in law and in practice.

In light of their role in the negotiations between the conflicting parties in Syria, members of the International Syria Support Group and the UN Special Envoy for Syria must play a more prominent role in addressing the widespread, as well as systematic, use of torture in Syria. Amnesty International urges these states, as well as the Special Envoy, to do the following:

- Prioritize the issue of torture and other ill-treatment in discussions with the Syrian authorities and other parties relevant to the situation in Syria;
- Call on the Syrian government to immediately guarantee that detainees will be protected from torture and other ill-treatment, ensure they have unrestricted access to their family and lawyers, reveal the whereabouts of all detainees who have been subjected to enforced disappearance and publish the names of all those detained by Syrian government forces;
- Call on all parties to provide immediate and unhindered access for recognized international detention monitors to all persons deprived of their liberty, without prior notification;

- Call on all parties to the conflict to immediately and unconditionally release all those who are currently arbitrarily detained as a result of their peaceful activism, promotion and protection of human rights, and humanitarian and media work.

2. METHODOLOGY

Despite repeated requests by Amnesty International for access to Syria, and specifically to detention facilities operated by the Syrian security forces, as well as media statements made by President Bashar al-Assad claiming that the Syrian authorities would welcome an “unbiased and fair” investigation into allegations of torture and other ill-treatment,¹ Amnesty International and other independent human rights monitoring groups continue to be barred by the Syrian authorities from carrying out research in the country.²

The research for this report therefore took place outside of Syria, between December 2015 and May 2016. Amnesty International researchers conducted field work in Turkey between 6 and 15 December 2015, 14 and 29 February and 10 and 29 April 2016. The majority of the interviews were carried out in southern Turkey, though some were also conducted over the phone or via electronic communications methods with interviewees based in Lebanon, European countries and the USA.

For this report, Amnesty International interviewed 65 people who had been detained by the Syrian authorities: 54 men, one of whom was under 18 at the time of arrest, and 11 women.³ Five of the men interviewed were part of the Syrian military at the time of their arrest, while two were engaging in activities that could be perceived as supporting the military activities of a non-state armed group. The remaining 58 persons interviewed were civilians and had not engaged in any military activities as far as Amnesty International is aware. Their occupations span Syrian society and include accountants, lawyers, teachers and academics, students, engineers, electricians, architects, business owners, gym managers, sales assistants, writers and journalists, actors, artists, NGO staff, human rights defenders, farmers and day labourers.

Most of the interviewees are referred to by their first name only, following requests by many of the interviewees. Several asked for their names to be withheld, either to protect their own safety or the safety of family members living in Syria. In these cases, Amnesty International has included their testimonies but their names have been changed. These names appear in quotation marks throughout this report.

The sample of testimonies gathered by Amnesty International for this report covers events between April 2011 and December 2015. All of the security forces and intelligence services operating under the Syrian government were found to be responsible for the alleged abuse. Interviewees had been detained in branches of the security forces in all major cities of Syria, including Aleppo, Damascus, Deir al-Zour, Dera'a, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Latakia and Tartous.

Amnesty International further collaborated with the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), an NGO specializing in using scientific research methods to investigate human rights violations, in order to

¹ Foreign Affairs, 'Syria's president speaks: A conversation with Bashar al-Assad', March / April 2015, available at www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2015-01-25/syrias-president-speaks

² Amnesty International most recently requested access from the Syrian authorities in a communication sent to the Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN in New York on 13 July 2016.

³ This proportion reflects the pattern Amnesty International and other organizations have observed of men being particularly vulnerable to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and subsequent torture and other ill-treatment and death in custody. Though women, as well as children, are also targeted, they appear to be arbitrarily arrested and subjected to subsequent violations to a lesser extent than men. For additional information, please see: Amnesty International, *'Between prison and the grave': Enforced disappearances in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/2579/2015)

obtain an estimate of the number of deaths in the custody of the Syrian authorities for the period from 2011 to 2015.⁴

Amnesty International also consulted with three Syrian lawyers, two former military judges who had defected and fled the country, a doctor who worked in various military hospitals before fleeing Syria, a Syrian women's rights activist and British forensic specialist Professor Derrick Pounder to confirm the credibility of testimony obtained.

Amnesty International researchers reviewed government statements on the issue of torture and other ill-treatment, and reports from international monitoring bodies, such as the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UN Commission of Inquiry), UN agencies and human rights mechanisms, as well as from international and Syrian NGOs. Finally Amnesty International co-operated with individual activists and Syrian monitoring groups, such as the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, and the Syrian Institute for Justice and Accountability, to establish contact with persons who had been detained by the Syrian authorities.

Despite the apparent unwillingness of the Syrian government to engage with independent human rights organizations, Amnesty International and its members have repeatedly attempted to communicate with the authorities on the issues of arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearance and torture and other ill-treatment, as well as other violations being committed in the context of the crisis in Syria since it began in 2011, including via official correspondence, submission of research findings for comments, urgent communications on individual cases and mass campaigning.⁵ On rare occasions, the Syrian government has shared with Amnesty International a media statement that it had made on the general issue being raised by way of a response, but it has never provided any comments on the specific allegations of violations submitted by Amnesty International.

A letter requesting clarification on the allegations raised in this report, as well as reiterating Amnesty International's request for access to all persons deprived of their liberty in Syria, was sent on 13 July 2016 but at the time of publication of this report, no answer has been received. Amnesty International will reflect any comments subsequently received from the Syrian government in future public material.

⁴ For additional information, refer to Chapter 9 of this report, as well as Human Rights Data Analysis Group, *Technical memo for Amnesty International report on deaths in detention*, August 2016, available at hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/HRDAG-AI-memo.pdf

⁵ In December 2015 for example, more than 200,000 people wrote to the Syrian Permanent Representative in New York to express their concerns for a mother and her six children who had been arrested by Military Intelligence agents in 2013 and who are all at risk of torture and other ill-treatment as part of the annual Amnesty International Write for Rights campaign. For more information on the campaign, see: Amnesty International, 'Write for Rights', December 2015, available at www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/write-for-rights/

3. BACKGROUND

“When I started the demonstrations, all I wanted was to live in a developed, respectful country... I pay my taxes, I want my rights.”

Abu Anas⁶

3.1 CONFLICT IN SYRIA

Syria's human rights situation has rapidly deteriorated since the start of peaceful protests calling for political change in February 2011. When the demonstrations began, government forces responded by violently repressing the peaceful protesters.⁷ With the subsequent proliferation of non-state armed groups, the situation had evolved into an internal armed conflict by mid-2012.⁸ Since then, civilians have been caught in the middle as Syrian government forces and non-state armed groups continue to commit human rights abuses with impunity.

Research conducted by Amnesty International indicated that crimes against humanity were being committed by government forces as early as April 2011.⁹ During the armed conflict, the organization has documented deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian objects, including hospitals, and indiscriminate attacks by the Syrian authorities and its allies.¹⁰ Amnesty International found evidence that the government has imposed sieges depriving the civilian population of food and other essential means for survival.¹¹ The Syrian authorities have arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared tens of thousands of people, the vast majority of whom are civilians.¹²

Amnesty International has also documented grave violations, including war crimes, committed by non-state armed groups, some of whom continue to target civilians, including through suicide bombings in civilian areas¹³ and abducting and killing aid workers, local activists and foreign journalists; and

⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

⁷ See for example: Amnesty International, *Deadly detention: Deaths in custody amid popular protest in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/035/2011); Amnesty International, 'Syria video points to 'shoot to kill' policy of security forces' (News story, 26 May 2011); Amnesty International, 'UN urged to act following deadly weekend in Syria' (News story, 6 June 2011).

⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Syria: ICRC and Syrian Arab Red Crescent maintain aid effort amid increased fighting', 17 July 2012, available at www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/update/2012/syria-update-2012-07-17.htm

⁹ Amnesty International, 'Security Council must refer Syria to the ICC' (News story, 26 April 2011).

¹⁰ See for example: Amnesty International, *Death everywhere: War crimes and human rights abuses in Aleppo, Syria* (Index: MDE 24/1370/2015); Amnesty International, 'Civilian objects were not damaged': Russia's statements on its attacks in Syria unmasked (Index: MDE 24/3113/2015).

¹¹ Amnesty International, 'Left to die under siege': War crimes and human rights abuses in Eastern Ghouta, Syria (Index: MDE 24/2079/2015); Amnesty International, *Syria: Squeezing the life out of Yarmouk: War crimes against besieged civilians* (Index: MDE 24/008/2014).

¹² Amnesty International, 'Between prison and the grave': Enforced disappearances in Syria (Index: MDE 24/2579/2015).

¹³ Amnesty International, *Iraq: Taking stock: The arming of Islamic State* (Index: MDE 14/2812/2015).

summarily killing captured soldiers and pro-government fighters.¹⁴ The UN has found that some of these groups, such as the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS), have restricted access by UN humanitarian aid workers and the implementing partners working to deliver aid to people in need.¹⁵

In light of these grave violations, Amnesty International has been campaigning since 2011 for the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. Yet the Security Council did not issue its first real resolution addressing the violations taking place in Syria until February 2014. By then, according to the UN, 100,000 people had already died as a result of the conflict, including 10,000 children.¹⁶ UN Security Council Resolution 2139 demanded that all parties to the conflict end arbitrary detention, kidnappings, abductions and enforced disappearances. The resolution also reminded all parties to the conflict of their obligation under international humanitarian law to ensure the protection of civilians not participating in hostilities. However, the UN Security Council did not specify any sanctions for non-compliance.

More than a year later, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254, endorsing a road map for a peace process. In February 2016, the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, facilitated talks in Geneva between the Syrian government and representatives of the opposition. However, the peace talks have been on hold since April 2016.¹⁷

By the beginning of January 2016, the violence in Syria had displaced more than 11 million people¹⁸, and 13.5 million were in need of humanitarian assistance. As the conflict continues, ever more Syrians are attempting to flee the country as well as the region. Yet they face great challenges in finding a safe haven, as neighbouring countries impose increasingly tight restrictions on the entry of Syrian refugees and there are few safe, legal routes to refuge elsewhere.¹⁹

3.2 TORTURE BY GOVERNMENT FORCES

Torture and other ill-treatment have been used by the Syrian authorities to quell dissent for decades. It was particularly widespread in the 1980s and the early 1990s when the government was headed by Hafez al-Assad, father of current Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. Arrests and torture and other ill-treatment of suspected opponents of the government were then, as they are now, mostly carried out by Syria's four intelligence services, Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Political Security and General Intelligence (also referred to as State Security), as well as the Military Police. In a 1987 report, Amnesty International documented 38 different methods of torture and other ill-treatment practised by the Syrian security forces.²⁰

These violations were facilitated by the state of emergency in force in Syria between March 1963 and April 2011.²¹ The state of emergency gave the security forces explicit powers that allowed them to bypass ordinary laws by implementing preventative detention for indefinite periods, placing detainees outside the protection of the judiciary and leaving the security forces unaccountable for their treatment of detainees. The state of emergency suspended legislative safeguards protecting people in Syria against arbitrary arrest and torture and other ill-treatment. As a result, thousands of people were reported to have

¹⁴ Amnesty International, 'Torture was my punishment': Abductions, torture and summary killings under armed group rule in Aleppo and Idlib, Syria (Index: MDE 24/4227/2016); Amnesty International, Syria/Iraq: Amnesty International condemns the summary killing of David Haines by Islamic State (Index: MDE 24/039/2014).

¹⁵ UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015) – Report of the Secretary General, 23 March 2016, available at www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2016_272.pdf

¹⁶ UN, 'Security Council unanimously adopts resolution 2139 (2014) to ease aid delivery to Syrians, provide relief from 'chilling darkness'', 22 February 2014, available at www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11292.doc.htm

¹⁷ At the time of writing, no new date for talks had been set. See for example: Reuters, 'Major powers fail to agree new date for Syria peace talks', 17 May 2016, available at www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0Y81G2

¹⁸ For more information, see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'About the crisis', 2016, available at www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis

¹⁹ Amnesty International, A union of protection: Amnesty International's international agenda for refugee protection in Europe (Index: EUR 01/2417/2015).

²⁰ Amnesty International, Syria: Torture by the security forces (Index: MDE 24/009/1987).

²¹ For additional information on the state of emergency and associated violations in the judicial process, see: Amnesty International, Syria: Memorandum on the Supreme State Security Court: A summary of Amnesty International's concerns (Index: MDE 24/039/2007).

been subjected to arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention or enforced disappearance. Many were tortured or otherwise ill-treated in secret detention.

As people took to the streets in mostly peaceful demonstrations from March 2011, the Syrian authorities stepped up their violent repression of peaceful dissent with snipers targeting the demonstrators and waves of arbitrary arrests of persons suspected of involvement in the demonstrations. The state of emergency was lifted in April 2011.²² However, this brought no improvement for the protection of the people from the vast powers of the security forces, as shortly afterward the government passed new laws that allowed the security forces to continue their established practices.²³ Since then, the situation has only continued to deteriorate.

3.3 TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT BY NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

Non-state armed groups have also carried out abuses against persons in their custody, including torture and other ill-treatment and summary killings. Amnesty International has documented such abuses by IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other non-state armed groups and found that some of them amount to war crimes.²⁴ The UN Commission of Inquiry has also found that, in the context of detention, IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other non-state armed groups have committed war crimes such as torture and murder, while IS has also carried out crimes against humanity.²⁵

Nevertheless, Amnesty International's assessment is that the vast majority of detention-related violations since 2011 have been carried out by the Syrian authorities.

²² Amnesty International: 'Syrian reforms pledges ring hollow as more protesters killed' (News story, 19 April 2011).

²³ This includes for example Legislative Decree No. 55 of 21 April 2011, which extends the maximum period of detention without charge to 60 days and further empowers the security and intelligence services, as well as anti-terrorism legislation, which came into force in 2012 and established the Anti-Terrorism Court – a court that operates contrary to international fair trial principles. For more information on the Anti-Terrorism Court and the legislation, see for example: Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Counterterrorism Court used to stifle dissent', 25 June 2013, available at www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/25/syria-counterterrorism-court-used-stifle-dissent

²⁴ See for example: Amnesty International, 'Torture was my punishment': Abductions, torture and summary killings under armed group rule in Aleppo and Idlib, Syria (Index: MDE 24/4227/2016); Amnesty International, *Rule of fear: ISIS abuses in detention in northern Syria* (Index: MDE 24/063/2013).

²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

4. OVERVIEW

“The first thing this torture does is take your dignity... It breaks the human. I don’t know why, but it does.”

Omar A²⁶

WHAT IS TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT?

The UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, to which Syria is a state party, defines torture as:

“any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.”

It is not always possible to make a sharp distinction between acts which amount to torture and those which amount to other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (other ill-treatment). But from a practical standpoint, any such distinction is not significant because all forms of torture and other ill-treatment are absolutely prohibited by the Convention against Torture, other treaties to which Syria is a party such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and by customary international law.

4.1 SCOPE OF THE VIOLATIONS

Despite the best efforts of the Syrian authorities to keep information about their detention facilities secret,²⁷ monitoring bodies have been able to collect sufficient evidence to estimate that “tens of thousands of people are detained by the Syrian government at any given time.”²⁸ Moreover, former detainees and their families, as well as civilian and military defectors who worked in detention facilities, courts and state-operated hospitals, have provided credible evidence to illustrate the gruesome picture of the reality that detainees in Syria are facing. Some of the most compelling evidence was presented in

²⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 10 December 2015.

²⁷ As outlined in Chapter 2 of this report, the Syrian authorities have refused access to independent human rights monitoring groups including Amnesty International and the UN Commission of Inquiry.

²⁸ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

2014 by a former military photographer who defected from his role and published tens of thousands of images (the so-called “Caesar photos”) of thousands of detainees killed in the custody of Syrian security forces – in particular Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence – in Damascus.

The international NGO Human Rights Watch analysed some of the images when investigating the deaths of 27 of the individuals whose pictures appeared as part of the Caesar photos and, following interviews with relatives, witnesses, defectors and forensic specialists, concluded that the analysed photos are authentic.²⁹

The Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), an NGO that uses scientific approaches to analyse human rights violations, in particular in the context of armed conflicts, estimated that there have been at least 17,723 deaths in custody across different facilities in Syria between March 2011 and December 2015. Both HRDAG and Amnesty International believe that this is a conservative estimate, with the real number likely to be higher.³⁰

The UN Commission of Inquiry also conducted extensive information-gathering on violations taking place in government-operated facilities and in the course of their investigations interviewed more than 500 former prisoners who were detained between 2011 and 2015. They concluded that the Syrian authorities intentionally created a lethal environment causing “mass deaths of detainees” as part of a systematic state policy attacking the civilian population and found “reasonable grounds to believe that the conduct described amounts to extermination as a crime against humanity.”³¹ They further found sufficient evidence to conclude that the Syrian authorities have also committed “the war crimes of murder, cruel treatment, torture, rape, sexual violence and outrages upon personal dignity.”³²

Amnesty International also concluded, as early as August 2011, that the systematic use of torture and the increased numbers of deaths in custody across Syria’s detention facilities indicated that the Syrian authorities were committing crimes against humanity.³³

4.2 PROFILES OF PEOPLE TARGETED

Amnesty International’s research since the beginning of the crisis in 2011 indicates that anyone who could be perceived to be opposing the government is at risk of being arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment and possibly death in custody.³⁴ Grounds for arrest on suspicion of opposing the government vary and can include peaceful activism, such as being a human rights defender, journalist or other media worker, providing humanitarian or medical support to civilians in need or having been involved in organizing or attending pro-reform demonstrations. Having a relative who is wanted by the security forces or being “reported” by an informer, including reports that are motivated by financial profit or personal grievances, can also lead to arrest. Majd, an accountant and photographer who spoke to Amnesty International about his experience in detention, explained: “Most people were detained solely because of what informers had said about them. The informer’s report was considered a reality, and you needed to confess to that.”³⁵

Previous research indicates further that the government generally targets men during their arrest campaigns.³⁶ Women are also routinely detained, tortured and ill-treated, though in lower numbers

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, *If the dead could speak: Mass deaths and torture in Syria’s detention facilities* (hereinafter Human Rights Watch, *If the dead could speak*), 2015, available at www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities

³⁰ For additional information, refer to Chapter 9 of this report, and Human Rights Data Analysis Group, *Technical memo for Amnesty International report on deaths in detention*, August 2016, available at hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/HRDAG-AI-memo.pdf

³¹ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

³² In its February 2016 report, the UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that “the government has committed the crimes against humanity of extermination, murder, rape or other forms of sexual violence, torture, imprisonment, enforced disappearances and other inhuman acts” (UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*).

³³ Amnesty International, *Deadly detention: Deaths in custody amid popular protest in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/035/2011); Amnesty International, *‘I wanted to die’: Syria’s torture survivors speak out* (Index: MDE 24/016/2012).

³⁴ For additional details on the profiles of people targeted, see: Amnesty International, *‘Between prison and the grave’: Enforced disappearances in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/2579/2015).

³⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

³⁶ The Syrian Network for Human Rights found that, by August 2015, 90% of the victims of enforced disappearance were male (Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Forced disappearance in Syria: Gone without a trace*, 2015, available at www.sn4hr.org/blog/2015/08/30/11397).

compared to men. Children are also detained, either for the same reasons as adults or because they are held with their imprisoned mothers.³⁷

4.3 A LETHAL INFRASTRUCTURE: SECURITY BRANCHES, UNFAIR TRIALS AND PRISON

In almost all cases, people perceived to be opposing the government are arrested by one of the four branches of the Syrian security forces: Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Political Security and General Intelligence (also referred to as State Security). In some cases, arrests are also conducted by militias associated with the Syrian government, including the National Defence Forces and government-affiliated paramilitary groups known as *shabiha*.

Detainees are generally transferred to a branch of the security force that conducted the arrest, where they may be held for hours, months or even years before being transferred to other branches. In many cases the detainee is eventually transferred to one or more of the branches operated by the four intelligence services in Damascus. Joint investigation committees composed of representatives of various security forces were set up in 2011.³⁸ However, a person may be wanted by different security forces for different or similar allegations and might be transferred between branches, sometimes several times. Former detainees said that investigators in each branch generally appeared to be extensively briefed on previous investigations.

Transfers are either carried out by the security force in question or by the Military Police, though detainees may also be transferred by Criminal Security, an agency under the Ministry of the Interior generally tasked with investigating ordinary crimes.

Interrogation usually involves torture and other ill-treatment and generally takes place shortly after the initial arrest and continues for days or weeks, often until detainees are forced to sign a “confession”. Interrogation is often repeated when a person is transferred to a different branch. Detainees held in the branches of the security forces are generally subjected to enforced disappearance, though in some cases family members are able to bribe or otherwise co-operate with intermediaries, called “middlemen” or “brokers” by witnesses, to obtain information about their loved ones or try to protect them from torture and other ill-treatment.³⁹

When persons perceived to be opposing the government are taken before a court, it is likely to be the Anti-Terrorism Court, established in 2012, or a Military Field Court, even though it is contrary to international fair trial standards for civilians to be tried in military courts.⁴⁰ Proceedings before both courts are flagrantly unfair.

The Anti-Terrorism Court does not operate in accordance with basic fair trial procedures.⁴¹ In practice, court sessions last mere minutes. In some cases, defendants report that they have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated, but judges fail to order investigations into the allegations. In others, they do not, intimidated by the presence of members of the security forces in the courtroom. “Confessions” obtained under torture are routinely accepted as evidence, and the right to counsel is severely restricted.⁴² While

³⁷ For cases of mothers detained with their children, see for example: Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: Syria: Parents and six children must be released* (Index: MDE 24/045/2014).

³⁸ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

³⁹ An enforced disappearance occurs when the government either denies the arrest and detention of a person or refuses to give any information about their whereabouts to their families. People are thus placed outside of the protection of the law, making them especially vulnerable to torture and other ill-treatment. For more information on bribes in this context, see: Amnesty International, *‘Between prison and the grave’: Enforced disappearances in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/2579/2015).

⁴⁰ Military Field Courts were set up in Syria through Legislative Decree No. 109 of 1968 in order to prosecute military personnel. They were used extensively up until the 1980s, after which their use diminished. They were then revived following the outbreak of the crisis in 2011 and are currently used extensively to try civilians, including peaceful activists, contrary to international law.

⁴¹ The Anti-Terrorism Court was set up by Law no. 22 of 2012 (available at www.bit.ly/1P9AJIU) as a “court that has jurisdiction in cases of terrorism” (Article 1) and over both civilians and military personnel (Article 4). While the court retains “the right of defence”, the law states that it does not have to abide by existing legislation or fair trial procedures (Article 7). Terrorism-related crimes are defined by Law no. 19 of 2012 (available at www.bit.ly/1srzJx8).

⁴² Syrian human rights lawyer Anwar Albunni, Head of the Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research, told Amnesty International that the role of lawyers before the Anti-Terrorism Court is very limited. They are only allowed to speak to their clients after they have already been questioned by the investigating judge and they have only very restricted access to the case files of their clients, including the evidence

their trial is ongoing before the Anti-Terrorism Court, prisoners are generally transferred to civilian prisons, in particular 'Adra Prison in Damascus. Families of prisoners regularly pay bribes to the judges ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands of US dollars to free their relatives.

Military Field Courts operate closed proceedings and defendants do not have access to a lawyer.⁴³ Their verdicts, again usually issued after trials lasting only a few minutes, are not subject to appeal and they can impose harsh sentences, including the death penalty.⁴⁴ In many cases, defendants are not informed of the sentence they have been given.

Persons sentenced by the Military Field Courts are frequently transferred to Saydnaya (also spelt Sednaya) Military Prison – a prison under the control of the Military Police.⁴⁵ Saydnaya holds both civilian detainees and persons arrested while in military service, though the vast majority appear to be civilian. Torture and other ill-treatment are rife at Saydnaya, and deaths in custody are routine. A small percentage of detainees in Saydnaya have access to family visits; others remain detained in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance.

As the UN Commission of Inquiry states, "the Syrian Criminal Justice system... is systematically failing to uphold international human rights standards at every step of the judicial process."⁴⁶

4.4 LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Torture and other ill-treatment have been carried out by state forces for decades, fostered by a culture of impunity that is reinforced by Syrian legislation.⁴⁷ Five years into the crisis, as the Syrian authorities continue to deny that violations take place in their detention facilities,⁴⁸ the suffering inflicted on detainees and their families continues unabated, even in the face of demands from the UN Security Council and other UN bodies to release those detained arbitrarily and end the use of torture and other ill-treatment as well as the practice of enforced disappearances.⁴⁹ The pursuit of accountability for the victims and their families remains all but impossible at the national level.⁵⁰ The Syrian government remains shielded from facing the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court by the veto wielded by their ally, Russia, in the UN Security Council. Only very limited progress is being made in third countries, through the exercise of universal jurisdiction, to ensure justice, truth and reparation for the war crimes and crimes against humanity that are being committed in Syria.⁵¹

against them, which they are only allowed to see after their client has been formally charged by the investigating judge. Syrian lawyer Aoiiss from the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center echoed these observations in an interview with Amnesty International on 29 July 2016.

⁴³ Interview with Anwar Albunni, lawyer and Director, Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research, 29 March 2016.

⁴⁴ Legislative Decree no. 109 of 1968.

⁴⁵ The other prison operated by the Military Police is Boloni Prison in Homs; see for example: UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

⁴⁶ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

⁴⁷ While in theory there are some limited legislative safeguards against torture and other ill-treatment in Syria, in practice, these provide no protection as they are routinely disregarded by the security forces and the judiciary. Recent legislative amendments have further curbed the right of persons to be protected from torture and other ill-treatment. Legislative Decree no. 55 of 2011 extends the maximum period of detention without charge to 60 days, though in many cases observed by Amnesty International the person remains subjected to incommunicado detention without judicial oversight for months, or even years, beyond these initial 60 days. The same decree further empowers the security forces.

⁴⁸ See for example: NPO2 TV, 'Interview with President Assad', 17 December 2015, transcript available at www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1503:president-assad-s-dutch-npo2-tv-interview-decembe-17-2015&catid=314:2015&Itemid=468

⁴⁹ See for example: UN Security Council, *Resolution 2139 (2014)*; UN Human Rights Council, *The grave and deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 30 September 2015, available at www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/ct/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_hrc_res_30_10.pdf

⁵⁰ In the context of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances, the UN Commission of Inquiry found that the Syrian authorities have created a system of reprisals, intimidation and withholding of information that makes it virtually impossible to file official complaints. They further note "the absence of genuine investigations." See UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 12 February 2014, available at www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/ct/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_hrc_25_65.pdf

As a result of legislation issued between 1950 and 2008, members of the security forces are effectively granted immunity from prosecution for crimes committed in the course of exercising their duties except in cases when a warrant is issued by "the general leadership of the army and military forces". In reality, this means no cases can be brought against members of the security forces except where special permission is given by their own or military leaders. See Legislative Decree no. 61 of 27 February 1950, Legislative Decree no. 14 of 25 January 1969 and Legislative Decree no. 69 of 30 September 2008, as well as Amnesty International, *Deadly detention: Deaths in custody amid popular protest in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/035/2011).

⁵¹ For more information, please see: Neil Sammonds, 'Baby steps on the long road to justice for atrocities in Syria', 11 April 2016, available at www.jurist.org/hotline/2016/04/neil-sammonds-syria-justice.php

4.5 SCOPE OF THIS REPORT

In light of the extensive evidence already available indicating that the Syrian authorities are responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes in the context of their treatment of detainees, this report focuses on the detailed experience of 65 torture survivors and describes their journeys through what many consider to be Syria's most lethal detention facilities: the branches operated by Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Political Security and General Intelligence, as well as Saydnaya Military Prison.⁵²

These survivors' ordeals began with their arrest and continued throughout every stage of their journey: through torture such as beatings, including in stress positions and electric shocks, subhuman detention conditions including inadequate access to food and water, severe overcrowding and denial of medical care; through their release and beyond, as they spend months, if not years, recovering from the physical and psychological effects of their experiences. The men and women interviewed for this report, detained between 2011 and 2015, exemplify the suffering of tens of thousands of others. Despite the risks they or their families still face from the Syrian authorities, they spoke to Amnesty International in order to give a voice to those who remain detained.

⁵² Human Rights Watch's analysis of the Caesar photos indicates that the majority of the victims died in the custody of the Syrian security forces, in particular Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence. See Human Rights Watch, *If the dead could speak*. The UN Commission of Inquiry found that "most deaths were documented as occurring in locations controlled by the Syrian intelligence services" but "a high number of deaths were also documented from Sednaya military prison". See UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

5. ARREST

“Someone kicked me with their military boots in the face and in the eyes. Another one took my cigarettes off me, lit them, and then put them out on me. All of this took place in the car.”

Said⁵³

In Syria, the abusive and often deadly journey of detainees begins with their arrest. Those interviewed for this report were detained by members of the security forces or militias under the effective control of the Syrian authorities. Some were picked up at their homes, their work, at university, and similar such places while going about their daily business. Some were arrested at government-operated checkpoints, others were asked to report to one of the branches for questioning. In almost all cases, their arrest was accompanied by a catalogue of torture or other ill-treatment.

5.1 TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT DURING TRANSPORT TO FACILITIES

The majority of survivors interviewed described being ill-treated while being transported either from the place of their arrest to the security branch where they would be interrogated, or between branches, or both. The most common form of abuse described was being hit or beaten by the security personnel, including with their weapons, or other objects such as sticks, generally while the detainee was handcuffed and often also blindfolded. In most cases, families, friends or other persons close to the detainee who were present during their arrest were not told where the person was taken, though in several cases persons close to the wanted person were also arrested or threatened with arrest.

One such case is that of Tarek. At the time of his arrest, Tarek was providing humanitarian support to people displaced by the fighting in his home town, Aleppo. He had recently become engaged and was living with his family. Tarek had previously been arrested briefly in 2012 and 2013 after he was suspected of attending peaceful demonstrations in Aleppo. He was beaten repeatedly in both instances.

On 23 June 2014, Tarek's younger brother, whom Amnesty International interviewed separately, Saad, was arrested from their family home by armed men in civilian clothing. Later the same day, another

⁵³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

group of armed men arrived for Tarek. He tried to evade arrest but in so doing broke his leg. He told Amnesty International:

“When they caught me, they started hitting me in the back with their weapons. They dragged me. They asked me to walk but I couldn’t, so they threw me into the car boot while hitting me all along. They took me to the Air Force Intelligence branch in Aleppo and left me in the corridor. They kept me there all day and whoever passed me, hit me. I was in a lot of pain. I was screaming.”⁵⁴

Ali, a doctor from Homs whose religious background is the Alawite sect of Islam (the same one to which President al-Assad belongs), described being arrested and taken to a neighbourhood where the majority of inhabitants were also Alawite. He was presented as a “traitor”. The local population was encouraged to hit and insult him as a “punishment”.⁵⁵

Less common methods of abuse during transport, which were described by several of the survivors, included being subjected to electric shocks or burnt with cigarettes. “Laila”⁵⁶ told Amnesty International that she was raped while being transported. “Laila” was a peaceful activist, documenting human rights violations in Syria, when she was detained in October 2012 as the Syrian army were attacking the al-Qadam neighbourhood, south of Damascus, where she lived with her family. She tried to flee the area after her house was bombed but was arrested by soldiers as she tried to escape. They accused her of being part of a non-state armed group. She told Amnesty International:

“The commander came and asked the soldiers to put me into the bullet-proof car... Then soldiers came into the car and started harassing me. At night, a lieutenant came. I can’t forget his voice and his smell. He started taking my clothes off, he started raping me. Then two more soldiers came, they also raped me. I had my period at the time.

“The car had two front seats. He raped me, then he sat in the front seat and called four soldiers. Two were raping me at the time, while the other two were waiting their turn. I started shouting, I lost my mind. The lieutenant threatened me for making noise: ‘If you shout, I will kill you.’ I said to him, ‘Kill me! I don’t want to live any more after what you and your dogs did.’ He slapped me to shut me up [and said]: ‘You deserved this. You betrayed your country.’

“I was so tired. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t feel anything. Then the car started moving. They took me into a big building... I was in total shock. People were asking me questions. I wasn’t conscious... I was in a corridor, and it smelled very bad. On both sides of the corridor were black doors with numbers. My cell was about 2m by 1.5m. I was shocked. I saw women in this room. I realized where I was and started crying. I ran to them... My hands had been cuffed all this time. They were black. I said, ‘Where am I?’ It was Military Intelligence Branch 227.”⁵⁷

5.2 FORCED CONFESSIONS AND INFORMERS

In several cases documented in this report, it appeared that persons were detained as a result of “confessions” obtained through the torture of their friends, family or acquaintances. Saad found out shortly after his arrest that he and his brother had been detained as the result of the forced confession of one of his friends. He told Amnesty International:

“I realized that my friend was in the same cell. He was blindfolded and covered in blood. He had told them that my father and brother had been helping the armed groups, which was not true, and that I had gone to demonstrations. I was annoyed with him at first but then I forgave him when I understood the pain that he went through... He told us that they had taken him and his mother. He apologized to us: ‘I was tortured, so I said your names.’”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 24 February 2016.

⁵⁵ The statements by the survivors are consistent with information collected by Amnesty International since the beginning of the crisis in Syria. See in particular: Amnesty International, *‘I wanted to die’: Syria’s torture survivors speak out* (Index: MDE 24/016/2012). Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 16 February 2016.

⁵⁶ Name has been changed.

⁵⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 23 February 2016.

⁵⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 24 February 2016.

The friend later died in detention.

Luna is a journalist from Damascus who was reporting on the situation in Syria and was also working in humanitarian support for displaced civilians. She was arrested by General Intelligence forces in January 2014. Following her detention, intelligence forces forced her to participate in the arrest of her colleagues by tricking her into thinking that her children had been arrested and their safety was at stake after they pretended to arrest her son in front of her. “It was not true, but I didn’t know at the time,” she said. “In the branches, you are removed from the world. You don’t know anything.” Luna was forced to set up a fake meeting with her contacts so that the General Intelligence agents could arrest them. They were placed in the same cell. “They would not speak to me. They thought I was involved,” she said.⁵⁹

Others were arrested after informal reports about them were submitted to the security forces by informers or people in their community, including in order to settle personal grievances. For example, one of the humanitarian workers interviewed for this report said that she was detained following allegations of pro-opposition activities made against her by one of the displaced persons for whom she was providing food who was unhappy about the distribution of tomato paste.⁶⁰

5.3 ‘WELCOME PARTY’ BEATINGS

Almost every former detainee interviewed described witnessing some form of “welcome party”, a term commonly used by Syrians to refer to the severe beatings received upon their initial arrival at a detention facility. The “welcome party” may occur repeatedly if a detainee is transferred from one facility to another. These beatings usually take place when detainees are registered and before they enter their cells, for example in a hallway or a courtyard. A group of guards usually carries out the beatings, often with tools such as silicone bars or hoses. These beatings appear to be carried out in order to punish prisoners for their perceived opposition to the government and to intimidate them.

Samer is a lawyer. He was arrested in February 2012 near Hama when he was trying to bring humanitarian supplies, in particular baby food, from government-held territory into an area controlled by non-state armed groups. He was initially taken to the Air Force Intelligence branch in Hama, but was quickly transferred to Damascus. He told Amnesty International:

“The ‘welcome party’ is what everyone is subjected to as soon as they arrive at al-Mezzeh Air Force Intelligence branch in Damascus. It’s normally held in the courtyard outside the detention centre. Basically, as soon as you get out of the vehicle you were transported in and your feet touch the ground, the ‘welcome party’ begins. I was one of 50 men brought in that day and we were all beaten badly in the courtyard. They used plastic and metal cables, even electric cables. They hit absolutely everywhere, even the head. They hit me very hard on the head several times.

“During this ‘welcome party’ they registered us and took away our possessions and clothes. They made us strip naked and walk inside the building. They did not spare anyone. I saw an old man being beaten even worse than we were...

“They had to break us; they treated us like animals. They wanted people to be as inhuman as possible... I didn’t see anyone die but I saw the blood, it was like a river... When we entered the cells, we asked others if this had happened to them as well and they said it was routine... We used to always say here that there was no justice in Syria but I never imagined humanity would reach such a low level. I never imagined how deliberately lethal they would try to be. I saw that, when they started hitting our heads, they would have had no problem killing us right there and then.”⁶¹

The duration of the “welcome party” beatings seems to vary. One survivor told Amnesty International he was forced to stand in a corridor for three days, during which time he was repeatedly beaten by guards.

⁵⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 10 May 2016.

⁶⁰ Amnesty International has previously documented patterns of persons “informing” against others that eventually led to the arrest and/or enforced disappearance of the other person in the pursuit of financial profit or to settle personal grievances. See: Amnesty International, *‘Between prison and the grave’: Enforced disappearances in Syria* (Index: MDE/24/2579/2015).

⁶¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 16 February 2016.

5.4 RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT DURING ‘SECURITY CHECKS’

The “welcome party” was often described as being connected to or followed by “security checks”, where prisoners are subjected to cavity searches by the guards. About half of the women interviewed reported that they had been subjected to an invasive “security check” by a male guard or male member of the security forces.⁶²

Bayan was 19 years old and studying law at Aleppo University at the time of her arrest by General Intelligence forces in June 2014. She believes someone informed on her to the security forces and as a result she was arrested from her family home, together with her mother and her younger sister. She told Amnesty International about her experience at the General Intelligence branch in Aleppo: “When we arrived at the branch, they ‘checked us’, but it is always men who check the women. They do this on purpose to humiliate women.”⁶³

Dina is an NGO worker who lived with her family, also in Aleppo, prior to her arrest by Air Force Intelligence agents in November 2013. She was accused of dealing with armed groups, participating in terrorist activities and going to demonstrations. She spoke about her experience:

“When I entered the branch, a guard took me to the bathroom to undress me, to check me. I wouldn’t allow this so he tried to check me over my clothes. He tried to touch my breasts but I pushed him off and said ‘no!’ so he stopped. He told me that I should co-operate, [that] the interrogator was crazy and he would have many surprises for me.”⁶⁴

One of the “security checks” that “Maha”⁶⁵ was subjected to amounted to rape. “Maha” was arrested by Military Intelligence agents in 2012. She was initially interrogated, beaten and intimidated at two different branches outside of the capital before being sent to Damascus in 2013. She said she experienced these “security checks” at Military Intelligence Branches 291 and 215, both in Damascus:

“[At Branch 291] I was handcuffed and blindfolded when I arrived. They made fun of us when we arrived. They said things like ‘come here, I got you a gift’. The head of the branch was a very bad man. He touched all the girls inappropriately. I asked all the girls. All of them they said it had happened to them. When we first arrived, they took us to his office. He brought us in one by one and he touched us in a bad way while he was masturbating.

“[After we were transferred to Branch 215] they took us to a room on the sixth floor. They said this was the ‘checking room’. In the room, the head of the branch asked me to take off my clothes. I cried and asked why. He said [it was] to check if I was going to cry. He told me he would call for 10 guards to come and watch. I begged him. I said, ‘Please, for the mercy of God, don’t do this!’ He told me: ‘Don’t mention God! You enjoy having sex with the FSA [Free Syrian Army, a coalition of non-state armed groups]. Don’t act all innocent now!’ He forced me to be totally naked, then he starting touching me. He put his fingers inside me.”⁶⁶

⁶² Amnesty International also spoke to a Turkey-based Syrian women’s rights campaigner who works with women detention survivors on 21 June 2016. She also said that women former detainees frequently told her they were “touched inappropriately during searches.”

⁶³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

⁶⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

⁶⁵ Name has been changed.

⁶⁶ In 2015, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network issued a report on violations faced by women in Syria’s detention facilities, in particular the branches operated by the intelligence services. They interviewed 53 female former prisoners. They, too, found that especially in Branch 215 women prisoners were generally checked by the male head of the branch. See Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, *Detention of women in Syria: A weapon of war and terror* (hereinafter Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, *Detention of women in Syria*), 2015, available at www.euromediterrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/EMHRN_Womenindetention_EN.pdf

6. TORTURE DURING INTERROGATION

“In Syria, they have no other way to investigate but through torture. This is the basic way, the only way.”

Ahmad H

Every one of the 65 people who shared their experiences with Amnesty International for this report said they had been tortured or otherwise ill-treated during at least one of their interrogations, in most cases during almost every interrogation. Most were interrogated repeatedly over several days or weeks, and in many cases interrogations started again if they were transferred to a different facility.

In Syria, torture is used as a routine tool to extract false “confessions”. The incidents of torture documented in this chapter cover a variety of methods, which are often used in combination, for example being held in a stress position while being beaten or subjected to electric shocks, as well as being subjected to psychological torture. Sexual violence was reported by both men and women. Rape by state officials always constitutes an act of torture under international law.

Most of the former detainees interviewed for this report eventually “confessed” to whatever was asked of them by the interrogator in an attempt to end their suffering or to protect their friends or family. Some said that they thought a “confession” would mean that they would be taken to a court and subsequently be placed in a civilian prison, thereby escaping the appalling conditions in the security branches. As Hani described his experience in detention: “You would think we were praying to get released only, but actually most of us were praying just to escape from the hell that we were in, even if that meant ending up in ‘Adra [a civilian prison near Damascus]. In ‘Adra, at least there is a better life.”⁶⁷

Several of the survivors told Amnesty International that their “confession” was dictated or otherwise provided to them by the guard or the interrogator. The majority of “confessions” requested of the prisoners focused on supporting non-state armed groups (a charge usually brought against those providing humanitarian assistance), carrying arms, or participating in activities against the government, such as organizing demonstrations.⁶⁸

Hamoudeh, a café owner from Damascus, was arrested by Political Security agents in February 2015. He was initially accused of supporting IS, even though the sole evidence against him was a Facebook post in

⁶⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

⁶⁸ Based on over 200 interviews with former prisoners, Human Rights Watch found similar patterns of forced “confessions”. See Human Rights Watch, *Torture archipelago: Arbitrary arrests, torture and enforced disappearances in Syria's underground prisons since March 2011*, 2012, available at www.hrw.org/report/2012/07/03/torture-archipelago/arbitrary-arrests-torture-and-enforced-disappearances-syrias

which he was actually critical of IS. However in the course of his interrogation he was also accused of operating a prostitution ring out of his café and fighting for another, unspecified non-state armed group. He told Amnesty International none of these accusations were true. Hamoudeh “confessed” after the interrogator made threats against his sister. He told Amnesty International:

“I told him that I would confess to anything, so he asked me to confess that I was a fighter. So I said I was the best fighter, the master of all those who carried a gun... I didn’t know any armed groups, so I had to make one up... They knew I was lying, but he didn’t act surprised... He asked for specifics, and I made them up... Then he asked for names...”

“I whispered to the guard: ‘Help me out, I have no names!’ They beat me and left, then the guard came back and told me some names of well-known families of fighters... They asked me what weapons I had used, I said a stick... They beat me hard after that. So I said I had an AK47 [assault rifle]. They asked how many magazines. I didn’t know so I said one. They beat me, so I said two. They asked for my salary. I said US\$50 and they beat me, so then I said US\$100.”⁶⁹

PROHIBITION OF TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

The prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment is a rule of customary international law. It applies to all states irrespective of whether they are party to international treaties setting out the prohibition. It applies in all circumstances, with no exceptions of any kind, and cannot be suspended in any circumstances, even in times of war or public emergency.

The prohibition is explicit throughout international human rights law. Torture and other ill-treatment are also prohibited in all circumstances under international humanitarian law, the body of law applicable in armed conflict. This means that states have recognized that even in time of war such practices must be prohibited even if some military advantage may be gained. It also means that all parties to an armed conflict, including non-state armed groups, are prohibited from using torture and other ill-treatment. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which covers the most serious crimes under international law, includes torture and other ill-treatment as a crime against humanity and as a war crime.

6.1 BEATINGS AND STRESS POSITIONS

Every survivor interviewed for this report was subjected to some form of beatings during their interrogation, either with the hands and feet of the interrogator or guards, or with specific instruments, such as a green plastic pipe, which later became known as “Lakhdar Brahimi” – a word play on the Arabic word for green and the name of the former UN and Arab League Special Envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi. Other instruments that have been described to Amnesty International include electric cables, silicone bars and wooden sticks. In many cases detainees are beaten while being held in stress positions.⁷⁰ The torture methods below have been documented by Amnesty International for over several decades in Syria.

FALAQA

⁶⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 16 April 2016.

⁷⁰ The UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that such torture allegations were made consistently across the country. They, too, documented patterns of beatings, including *falaqa* and beatings while prisoners were held in stress positions. See for example: UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2012, available at www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf. Amnesty International, too, has previously documented patterns of such abuse before the current crisis. Its 1987 report on torture by the security forces in Syria documents 38 types of torture, many of which still feature prominently today, in particular in the context of beatings such as *falaqa* and the stress positions *dulab*, *shabeh* and the “flying carpet”. See: Amnesty International, *Syria: Torture by the security forces* (Index: MDE 24/009/1987).

Falaqa is an Arabic term which refers to beatings on the soles of the feet. Male and female survivors told Amnesty International that during *falaqa* they were generally ordered to lie on their stomachs and lift up their feet, which were then repeatedly beaten with sticks or other instruments. Following these beatings, prisoners are often unable to stand or walk. Dina for example said she could not stand after being subjected to *falaqa*: “Whenever they finished beating the soles of my feet, they would pour water over them, and then start the beatings again, so it was even more painful. Afterwards I had to use the bathroom lying on the floor.”⁷¹ One of the survivors interviewed said that *falaqa* created blisters on his feet, which then became severely infected.

Mahran is originally from Damascus but was working as a peaceful activist and humanitarian support provider in Homs at the time of his arrest. He was arrested in November 2011 by Political Security in Homs before being transferred through several Political Security branches in Damascus. He said he was subjected to *falaqa* at the al-Fayha branch of Political Security in Damascus:

“The guard laid me down on my stomach. He tied my legs to a stick with a rope, and lifted up my feet. The beating was focused on the bottom of my feet. He struck me around 35 to 40 times... For the first 10 strikes I felt the pain. Then all the feeling left my body. I went out of my body. After the beating was done, my feet swelled to a huge size. It was unimaginable. They didn’t look like feet any more. I couldn’t stand. I felt I would fall over. They made me jump from one foot to the other foot. This made the blood go back into my feet, so that I could feel the pain again. Then they started again. The second time was the worst, much worse than the first time.”⁷²

DULAB

Dulab is a Syrian Arabic word meaning “tyre”, and this position generally involves the victim being forced into a vehicle tyre, usually while bent forward from the hip with their hands tied or cuffed behind their back so that the victim’s feet and head are on one side of the tyre, while their hands and back are on the other. The person is then beaten. Both male and female former prisoners reported being tortured in this position.

“Khalil”⁷³ was a teacher in Latakia when he was arrested with his mother and brother at his family home by Political Security agents in February 2014. Approximately 60 armed men, some in uniform and others in civilian clothing, carried out the arrest. “Khalil” was accused of supporting “terrorists” after security forces found pictures on his phone of opposition fighters with an opposition flag. He said he was subjected to *dulab* shortly after his arrest in the custody of the Political Security in Latakia:

“First you sit in [the tyre], with your legs and head out. Your hands are behind your back, and they tie them to a stick. Then they start beating you on the chest. They brought the ‘Lakhdar Brahimi’ pipe, which was green and long, and they hit you on your feet and everywhere else, too. You feel pain for the first 10 hits, and then you can’t feel the pain anywhere. I was hit 100 times. After they are done, they make you jump up and down to get your circulation going, and then they do it again.”⁷⁴

SHABEH

Shabeh involves the victim being suspended by their wrists, which are usually manacled to a hook or over a door or pipes in the ceiling, often for several hours. The victims’ wrists are handcuffed, either in front of or behind them, and their feet may or may not touch the floor. While in this position, the victim is usually beaten, and is sometimes subjected to electric shocks. Both male and female survivors interviewed for this report described being subjected to *shabeh*, the vast majority with their wrists cuffed in the front of their bodies. Some reported that older prisoners were allowed to keep their feet on the floor. Ali, a medical doctor from Homs, was working in a local hospital at the time of his arrest. He had previously been arrested briefly in 2011 and 2012 when he was accused of organizing demonstrations and working as a peaceful activist in Homs. He was arrested again in October 2014 by Military

⁷¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

⁷² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 7 December 2015.

⁷³ Name has been changed.

⁷⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

Intelligence agents in Homs and remained detained until March 2015. Shortly after his arrest, he said he was placed in the *shabeh* position, with his arms tied behind his back, at the Military Intelligence branch in Homs:

“They hung me like this four times. They tie your hands behind your back with a rope and make you stand on a chair. Then they attach the rope to a hook on the wall and tighten it, and then they push the chair away, so you hang with your shoulders up, your feet not touching the ground.

“When they first push the chair, you will fall and you will get a shock in your head and in your eyes. You lose consciousness briefly. And then the pain [comes to] your shoulders. It is so painful. You shout and scream but then you become thirsty, because you sweat. They hit me with a hose pipe while in this position. It’s too much pain; you can’t really think. But you can’t remove some pictures in your mind of your family. You blame yourself. You think, ‘Maybe I’m stupid. I brought this on to myself. Why did I protest?’ But you can’t think rationally because of the pain and the thirst. If a guard brings you some water or food, you feel like you’re in love with him. They put me into this position for two hours.”⁷⁵

‘FLYING CARPET’

The “flying carpet” (known in Arabic as *bisat al-rih*), refers to a method of torture where the victim is strapped face up on to a foldable wooden or metal board, and one end is brought near the other, effectively folding the victim in on themselves, causing severe pain to the lower back. The victim is usually also beaten during this process and in some cases subjected to electric shocks.

Ahmad H is a civil engineer from Daraya, a suburb of Damascus. He helped to organize peaceful protests in Daraya in March and April 2011. After being shot by government forces during one of these protests, he focused on helping to provide medical supplies to makeshift hospitals set up to treat injured demonstrators who could not go to government hospitals out of fear of arrest. He was arrested in December 2012 and remained in prison until October 2015. He was subjected to the “flying carpet” shortly after his arrest by Political Security in Daraya.

“They tortured me. They made me lie down on my face and put my legs out and started hitting me with a ‘Lakhdar Brahimi’ [a plastic pipe]. It didn’t work for them, they didn’t see me suffering. So the captain said to put me in the flying carpet. I laughed in my mind at first because I couldn’t imagine what this was.

“They cuffed me very quickly and professionally. They fixed me in place with rope. I couldn’t move my hands or legs one millimetre. I tried to move my hip but the guard yelled at me. He kicked my face and my private areas. I thought they just wanted me to be tied up so they could hit me but then they raised the lower part [of the bed]. I thought they wanted to hit my legs but then they closed it tight. It lasted about 10 hours in my mind. They closed it very tight, the seal locked. My shoulders and knees were touching, it was hard to breathe. I thought I would die right there, but the human body is amazing.

“Then they started torturing me with everything. They used the electric stick; I shook like a rabbit. It is about 30cm to 40cm long, it’s plastic with metal at the top, it looks like an electroshock baton. You could see electricity going from one prong to the other. They were using it all over... I was yelling and screaming... There are different types of electricity coming from the wall. The lamps don’t flicker like in those Hollywood movies, that’s a lie. There are no words to describe the experience. It makes you feel like you have run for a million metres and you get bigger and bigger until you are about to explode.

“After about 10 minutes, or maybe less, they unlocked the bed and my body snapped back and cracked very loudly, my lower back especially. When they untied me, I couldn’t stand. They put me on the ground. They saw the suffering in my face. I had been blindfolded the entire time with a piece of fabric but if I looked down I could see a little through the gap between the fabric and my cheek. My face was dark brown, I smelled very badly, I had blood on me...

⁷⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 16 February 2016.

“They put me outside and every guard that came by would step on my head or spit on me. They said: ‘That’s what comes to you when you raise your head against Bashar al-Assad.’”⁷⁶

6.2 ELECTRIC SHOCKS

The use of electric shocks as a form of torture has been widely documented in Syrian detention facilities in the context of the current crisis.⁷⁷ Of those survivors interviewed who had been subjected to electric shocks, the majority described two different forms of torture with electricity: in some cases, survivors were forced to stand in water or were splashed with water and were then given electric shocks through the water; in other cases, cables were attached to the body of the victim directly, or electroshock devices were used directly on their bodies. Nour described this experience: “Imagine what you feel when you get a shock, but ten times worse, and for 30 seconds. That’s what it feels like.”⁷⁸

“Maha” was initially interrogated, beaten and otherwise intimidated at two different regional branches before being sent to Military Intelligence Branch 291 in Damascus in 2013. There she was interrogated and beaten for two weeks before she was asked to sign a blank “confession”. She later found out she had “confessed” to supporting the Free Syrian Army, an umbrella organization of armed groups opposing the Syrian authorities. She said she was then sent to Military Intelligence Branch 215 where she was interrogated for an additional 20 days:

“[At Branch 215] I was electroshocked twice. They put two cables to my head for the first time; the second time they put water on the floor and used cables. I started bleeding like I had my period. It’s difficult to explain how it feels. Your mouth and nose become blue and you faint. It’s so much pain. They have different levels of intensity; it’s generally higher levels for men.”⁷⁹

Nadim, a human rights activist from Damascus, was subjected to electric shocks at an Air Force Intelligence branch located at the military airport in al-Mezzeh (Damascus), where he was held following his arrest in 2013. He said:

“They took me into the corridor with a bucket of water. I had to stand in it. They put electric cables from the wall into the water in the bucket... I got three shots of electricity before I collapsed... I had no strength at all, I was shaking, then I passed out for a few minutes, I didn’t know how long it lasted. I heard two guards talking. One said: ‘Check if this donkey is still alive.’ They kicked me but I couldn’t react. I started hallucinating. I thought I was inside the bucket and I was drinking, I was so thirsty.”⁸⁰

6.3 RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

As a recent report by the UN Secretary-General has noted, documenting sexual violence is challenging, particularly in light of the stigma attached to it.⁸¹ Nevertheless, monitors have documented sexual violence being inflicted on both male and female detainees across Syria’s detention facilities.⁸² Some men who spoke to Amnesty International about their experiences for this report described targeted violence such as beatings directed at the sexual organs or being raped with objects, such as a stick, or in the case of Said with an electroshock device.

⁷⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

⁷⁷ As well as being widely documented against adult detainees across Syria, the use of electric shocks as a torture technique has also been reported against children in facilities operated by the Syrian authorities. See for example: UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2014, available at www.documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/627/07/PDF/N1362707.pdf?OpenElement

⁷⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

⁷⁹ Interview with Amnesty International on 23 February 2016.

⁸⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 24 February 2016.

⁸¹ See for example: UN Security Council, *Conflict-related sexual violence: Report of the Secretary-General*, 2015, available at www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/203

⁸² See for example: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Open wounds: Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2014, available at www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/PaperOnTorture.pdf

Prior to his arrest, Said was an activist calling for democratic change in Syria. He was arrested by Military Intelligence agents in Aleppo in 2011. He described one of his interrogations:

“All of this time I was blindfolded. I was hung from my left hand, my shoulder was dislocated. I lost the feeling in my hand... While I was hanging in the *shabeh* position with one hand, they used an electroshock baton to hit my penis. Then they took the electroshock device and inserted it into my anus and switched it on. This was my first experience of rape. Then one of the guards asked for my face to be uncovered and I saw my father there. He had witnessed all of it.”⁸³

ASSAULT AND THREATS OF RAPE

Threats of sexual violence against friends or relatives during interrogation to force a “confession” were commonly described by both male and female survivors who spoke to Amnesty International (see section below). Several of the women interviewees, in particular, reported threats of sexual violence against them in the context of the interrogation and two described being sexually assaulted by the guards as part of their interrogation.⁸⁴

Bayan, a law student from Aleppo, said:

“Once they take you to the interrogation room, your hands are tied and you are blindfolded. They told my mother, ‘We will bring your daughter and rape her.’ They brought me from my cell but I was blindfolded, I couldn’t see. They asked me to lie on the floor and started taking my clothes off. I started shouting, my mother heard me, and they started beating me. I heard my mother say, ‘I confess! I’ll tell you!’

“Then they took me back to my cell and my mother confessed everything she knew... If my mother hadn’t confessed, they would have raped me. It happened to another girl; they had brought her brother and her father. They do this systematically. I wasn’t the first and I won’t be the last.”⁸⁵

Umm Omar is from Aleppo. At the time of her arrest, she was living with her family and was working to provide humanitarian assistance to those displaced by the conflict, both in government-held areas and territories under the control of armed opposition groups. She was arrested in March 2014 at a Military Intelligence checkpoint in Aleppo.

She described what happened shortly after she was taken to the Military Intelligence branch:

“First they insulted me, and that was the worst... He [the interrogator] mentioned a specific school where internally displaced people were living, which is near an Islamic brigade. He asked me how many times I practised sexual jihad for them to allow me to work in that school...”⁸⁶

“I said that I’m single, I’m a virgin... I was still blindfolded. He said [to the guards], ‘You take her and prove that she is lying. She practiced *jihad al-nikah* with them, so she will do it with us, so that she regrets it.’ They took me to another room. I didn’t know where I was. They brought me in and then I heard steps going away... I could see a little under the blindfold; I saw blood. I smelled blood, too... In that interrogation room, I was thinking about killing myself before they could do anything to me...”

“I waited... then I heard footsteps, more than one set... When they came in, I was like a wild beast. I thought they were going to rape me. They beat me until I was lying on the ground and then they kicked me with their military boots, in the places where I had had my hip operations, until I passed out.

⁸³ Interview with Amnesty International, 22 February 2016.

⁸⁴ The Turkey-based women’s rights campaigner mentioned above told Amnesty International that several women she works with confided to her not only about their experiences of assault, harassment and threats of sexual violence, but also about being raped by guards in the detention facilities. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network has also documented cases of attempted rape and rape in order to force “confessions”, not only of relatives but also of other female detainees; see: Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, *Detention of women in Syria*.

⁸⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

⁸⁶ Several of the women interviewed for this report recalled being accused of “sexual jihad” or *jihad al-nikah* – a term that refers to women engaging in sexual activities with men fighting in armed groups that consider themselves to follow Islamic precepts. According to the research conducted by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, such allegations are used widely against women in Syria in order to humiliate them, sometimes publicly in televised confessions, and in order to discredit opposition groups. See Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, *Detention of women in Syria*.

“When I woke up, I was back in the solitary cell – they had dragged me back there from that room – but my trousers had been opened and moved down a bit, my *abaya* [full-length robe] was open and my undershirt was moved up. Everything was hurting, so I couldn't tell if I had been raped. It was overwhelming pain everywhere and I realized I had urinated on myself.”⁸⁷

6.4 OTHER FORMS OF PHYSICAL TORTURE

Other forms of physical torture during interrogation that were reported by interviewees for this report include: being placed in a stress position simulating crucifixion; the pulling out of fingernails or toenails; being scalded with hot water; and being burnt with cigarettes. All of these torture methods have been widely documented in the context of the ongoing crisis in Syria.⁸⁸

Shiyar, a journalist, was burnt with cigarettes after having been beaten while suspended in the *shabeh* position in Military Intelligence Branch 235 in 2013. He said:

“They had me stand on the barrel, and they tied the rope around my wrists. Then they took away the barrel. There was nothing below my feet. They were dangling in the air. They brought three sticks... [They were] hitting me everywhere... After they were done beating me with the wooden sticks, they took the cigarettes. They were putting them out all over my body. It felt like a knife excavating my body, cutting me apart.”⁸⁹

Nour was a student at the time of his arrest in February 2012. He was providing medical supplies to communities under the control of non-state armed groups who had been cut off from government supplies. Following his arrest by Air Force Intelligence agents, he was held at the Air Force Intelligence branch in al-Mezzeh, Damascus, where he was interrogated for two months. He described one such interrogation:

“They took me to a window, which had metal bars on it. It was very high. They stripped me naked and chained my wrists to the bars. My feet were hanging in the air. They covered my hands and wrists with cloth, so that I wouldn't have any scars. They did their best not to leave a trace on my body, since I was a university student – and they would do the same for journalists and doctors, anyone who might talk to the media.

“They put me up there for 10 hours, from 10pm until breakfast. For the first two hours, it's not so bad – the body adapts. But by the end of 10 hours, you feel it has been 100 hours. After two hours, I started losing the feeling in my upper body. I felt a searing pain in my armpits, which went all the way down to my feet. I remember I also felt pain in the centre of my chest. My neck started to become numb, but I had shooting pain down my spine and to my back. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I could only moan, and even that took too much energy.

“At the end I felt nothing, but I didn't pass out. Actually I wanted to pass out – it wasn't good to be strong for this type of torture. When the guard saw me, I remember that he said, 'now I have something to work with', because I was tall and muscular...

“When they brought me down, my arms were completely numb. I could only move my legs. I had to pick up my clothes with my mouth. A guard came to me and he dragged me to the cell. I didn't feel my hands or arms for three hours. There was another man in my cell who massaged my arms after. This was really important, because otherwise you might have to amputate the arms. Actually everyone inside knows how to do the massage – everyone must learn this.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

⁸⁸ See for example: Human Rights Watch, *Torture archipelago: Arbitrary arrests, torture and enforced disappearances in Syria's underground prisons since March 2011*, 2012, available at www.hrw.org/report/2012/07/03/torture-archipelago/arbitrary-arrests-torture-and-enforced-disappearances-syrias

⁸⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 9 December 2015.

⁹⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

6.5 PSYCHOLOGICAL TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

The prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment is not limited to severe physical pain and suffering. It also prohibits the intentional infliction of severe mental pain. Amnesty International believes that the experiences shared by survivors below meet this threshold and thus amount to acts of torture or other ill-treatment.

THREATS AGAINST RELATIVES

Several former detainees interviewed by Amnesty International reported threats made against their relatives, including rape threats against female family members (see above), in order to extract a confession from them. In some of these cases, relatives were brought to the branch in order to further coerce the prisoner into “confessing”.

Muhannad was studying law at Aleppo University, where he co-ordinated a pro-democracy student group and helped with the organization of peaceful protests. He was briefly arrested twice before his final arrest on 20 December 2011 by Air Force Intelligence agents in Aleppo, who had forced his mother to trick him into returning home on the pretext that his father needed him urgently. He said he was initially detained for three months in the local Military Intelligence branch:

“After these days of torture, my whole body was black and blue, my eyes were swollen, and they had broken two of my teeth... At the end, I told them I had no energy. [I said], ‘Just let me rest and I will tell you everything.’ I said I used to organize the demonstrations... One of the investigators brought a piece of paper that said I was responsible for planting a bomb in Aleppo, with my mother... They forced me to put my fingerprint on the paper. They said they would bring my mother into the cell to confirm it. They took me to the wall, and made me face it, so I couldn’t see the room. I heard that they had brought a woman in, and she was screaming. I could hear the sound of the stick, beating the woman’s *abaya* [full-length robe]. Again and again the stick would hit the fabric. They said, ‘Are you happy now? We brought your mother to prove what you did.’ There was an electric cable on the wall, and I ripped it down. I thought I could electrocute myself with it – I wanted to kill myself. I got a big electrical shock when I grabbed it, and I fainted.

“They took me to solitary cell number 11, and somehow the person in the cell next to me had been sent a message from his neighbour, and his neighbour before that, that it wasn’t my mother. I found out that day, thank God. In the moment, I believed it was my mother. Now, looking back, it seems strange that I did – but I did.”⁹¹

EXECUTIONS AND MOCK EXECUTIONS

One former detainee interviewed for this report described being forced to watch an extrajudicial execution, while another was forced to participate in a mock execution in order to intimidate and threaten him.

Abu Anas is a businessman from Aleppo. He had already been arrested twice before the detention period described here, and once again afterwards because he had allowed university students to use his office to discuss the crisis in Syria and to organize peaceful protests. He was arrested by Air Force Intelligence agents at a demonstration on 23 December 2011.

During the interrogation period at the Air Force Intelligence branch in Aleppo, he had initially been called to the interrogator’s office and told he could pay a bribe to avoid continued detention and torture. He described what happened later:

“[The interrogator] asked me to come to his office again late at night. He told me: ‘You can’t go out this time. I am dangerous. I have the ability to kill you here, and no one will ask questions. I can help you, if you pay me again US\$100,000, or more, and you have to write a certificate that you will leave the country,’

⁹¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

“Then he took me into the basement. There it was him, me, and two other men. One was the director of the branch, the other a captain from Air Force Intelligence who had defected. The major said to the defector: ‘You are a captain in Air Force Intelligence. You are a traitor. We charge you with treason and a traitor should be killed.’ He shot the man in the head.

“When I witnessed this, I collapsed. I screamed and shouted. He sent me out of the room and back to my cell. [He said:] ‘You think about my offer until tomorrow.’

“The next day I was brought to his office again at midday. He gave me a lecture on how to love the country: ‘[President] Bashar is God. He can give life and take life.’ I was very scared, I agreed to give him the money. I called my family on my mobile and asked them to provide the money. The following day, I was released.”⁹²

Nour, a student who provided medical support to communities cut off from government supplies, described being subjected to a mock execution at an Air Force Intelligence branch in al-Mezzeh:

“They took four people from the cell, blindfolded us, and put us on our knees. I realized later that they put three other new people with you, so that when they shoot at us with the AK47, the three others fall down. The detainee would think that the three on the ground were other detainees, but they were actually security forces who were like actors.

“Then they take off the blindfold, and you see the people on the ground, covered in blood... It would look like they were all dead to the detainee. They even put blood on them, but they were still alive. It’s like a play. Then they take you to the room, and there is no way you will not confess.”⁹³

BEING FORCED TO WATCH OR LISTEN TO OTHER DETAINEES BEING TORTURED

All of the interviewees who spoke to Amnesty International for this report said that they had at some point during their time in detention witnessed others being tortured or otherwise ill-treated, for example while they were being taken to the bathroom or when they saw or heard these practices from their cell. Others were intentionally placed in the area where torture took place and were forced by the guards to watch. This happened to Reem.

Reem was studying for a Master’s degree in theatre studies in Aleppo, where she lived with her parents. She also provided humanitarian support to people displaced by the fighting in Aleppo, mostly blankets and baby food. She was arrested on 1 December 2013, when Air Force Intelligence agents arrived at her family home in the early morning. Reem, told Amnesty International she was interrogated for a week while held at the Air Force Intelligence branch:

“I was taken to the *shabeh* area almost every day, and I had to sit there and watch the guards beat the male detainees for an hour... The guards beat them with different objects, they used the green hose, a silicone bar, and an iron bar that had a ball with spikes at the top. There was one young man. When I saw him hanging there again on the way to the bathroom, I wanted to tell him not to be afraid, that he was not alone...

“I was made to watch as a punishment, to break my composure, but they also wanted to see if I had any reactions to any of the men they were torturing. They wanted to know if we had a relationship with any of them, so they could accuse us again of being terrorists.

“I cried the first three times when they made me watch but the guards hit me when I cried. They called me a terrorist, a prostitute, a whore. We had to stay completely neutral the entire hour, otherwise they would hit us and accuse us of being terrorists.

“After the third time, I could tell when the men had become numb. It usually takes about 15 minutes for the soul to leave the bodies; I could tell from the sounds that they were making when it was that time. Then I know he doesn’t feel anything any more. I would wait for this. He wouldn’t feel the hits any more and I wouldn’t feel [anything either]...

⁹² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

⁹³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

"I would tell myself that it was a scary movie, it wasn't real... I wished that I could be taken back to interrogation and be hit; it's better to be tortured physically than psychologically."⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 20 February 2016.

7. DETENTION CONDITIONS IN THE BRANCHES

“When they brought me in, I didn’t see people, I saw worms, all wriggling and mixed together. I couldn’t stand on both feet, there was not enough space.”

Noman describing Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus.⁹⁵

All of the former detainees interviewed by Amnesty International reported inhuman conditions in the detention facilities operated by the security forces across Syria. Survivors spoke of prolonged periods of solitary confinement; severe overcrowding in cells; lack of adequate access to medical treatment, sanitation, food and water; being subjected to extreme temperatures; and being held for hours or days in cells containing the bodies of deceased detainees. All former detainees reported being regularly humiliated by guards, while the women interviewees, in particular, reported either witnessing or being subjected to sexual harassment by the prison guards. Observations made by the interviewees for this report corroborate patterns observed by human rights monitoring groups, including the UN Commission of Inquiry, which observed that “prison conditions were similar across detention facilities” and contributed to “a larger [than previously documented] number” of deaths in custody.⁹⁶

Combined with the torture and other ill-treatment described above, such conditions can be lethal. Of those detainees interviewed by Amnesty International, most witnessed at least one death in custody while detained in one of the branches of the security forces.

The Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), an independent non-profit organization that analyses human rights violations around the world, partnered with Amnesty International to analyse deaths in custody in Syria. HRDAG found that at least 17,723 persons are likely to have died in the custody of the Syrian security forces between the beginning of the crisis in March 2011 and the end of 2015. HRDAG

⁹⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

⁹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

and Amnesty International believe that this is a conservative estimate and that the real number is likely to be higher.⁹⁷

None of the survivors interviewed for this report were allowed any contact with the outside world, including with their families or lawyers, while they were detained by the security forces. Only in cases where relatives were able to bribe someone inside or close to the security forces was it possible for families to obtain information about the fate and whereabouts of the detained person, and even then it was impossible for the families to verify whether the information they were given was correct.

WHEN DO PRISON CONDITIONS AMOUNT TO ILL-TREATMENT?

A combination of poor conditions such as overcrowding, lack of food and medical care, inadequate sanitation, violence, arbitrary punishment and denial of contact with family members can amount to ill-treatment.

For example, the UN Human Rights Committee has held that detention conditions that do not comply with certain aspects of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules) – in particular around floor space, access to sanitary facilities, provision of a separate bed, and access to proper nutrition – amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.⁹⁸

The Mandela Rules set out “what is generally accepted as being good principles and practice in the treatment of prisoners and prison management.”⁹⁹ Amnesty International calls on governments to ensure that laws and practice confirm to these rules.

7.1 SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Several of the detainees reported being held in solitary confinement in very small cells, often underground without any light, for several days, weeks or months. They described only being able to leave these cells for interrogation, or at set times to use the toilet if the cell did not have a toilet.

Jamaal T is a writer and academic who worked with international postgraduate students in Aleppo. He suffered from bladder cancer and had undergone surgery and other medical treatment shortly before his arrest in July 2011. He was arrested from his home by two men from Military Intelligence who forced him into a taxi and took him to the local Military Intelligence branch. He told Amnesty International:

“I spent one and a half months in solitary, and that was the worst part of my detention. The cell was as long as my body. I could lie down and put my hands out, and touch the walls on all sides My cell was close to the torture room, so I could often hear the sound of shouting or screaming. I would have to cover my ears with my hands, so that I could fall asleep...

“There was no light in the room, except for a small window, very high. There were a lot of flies in the cell...

“I didn’t become crazy while I was in solitary, since I was training my brain. I was thinking about what I would do when I was released... I found a small screw on the floor, and I was writing the days on the wall. I would recognize that the days were passing because I usually received some kind of breakfast in the morning and dinner at night...

“During my time in the solitary cell, I was never allowed a shower. I was only allowed to go to the toilet twice a day, for 2 minutes after breakfast and dinner.

⁹⁷ For more information, please refer to Chapter 9 of this report and Human Rights Data Analysis Group, *Technical memo for Amnesty International report on deaths in detention*, August 2016, available at hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/HRDAG-AI-memo.pdf

⁹⁸ UN Human Rights Committee Fifty-first session, *Views: Communication No. 458/1991*, 1994, available at www.refworld.org/docid/4ae9acc1d.html

⁹⁹ UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules), adopted by General Assembly Resolution 70/175 on 17 December 2015, available at www.refworld.org/docid/5698a3a44.html

“Near the end of the time in the cell, I was very close to losing my mind. I remember saying: ‘Please, I need to be with someone.’ I called out through the vent in the door... When they finally brought me out, I remember seeing the sky through the mesh covering in the courtyard of the prison. I felt numb, like I had lost my emotions.”¹⁰⁰

Said tried to cut his wrists in solitary confinement. “They bandaged me and beat me. They said: ‘You can’t die at the time that you choose.’”¹⁰¹

Prolonged solitary confinement, as well as the reduced sensory stimulation which can result from this practice, amounts to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and can constitute torture. The Mandela Rules prohibit both prolonged solitary confinement (more than 15 days) and the placement of a prisoner in a dark cell (Rule 43).¹⁰²

7.2 OVERCROWDING

The majority of survivors interviewed for this report described being detained in vastly overcrowded cells, often underground with no access to sunlight or fresh air, while only being allowed to wear underwear. Many said they were held in such conditions for months and were only allowed to leave the cell for interrogation. They described not having adequate space to lie down at night, and organizing shift systems whereby some detainees would stand so that others had space to lie down, and other systems to preserve space, such as sleeping “like knives” where detainees slept on their sides and took turns changing the direction that their heads and feet were facing. All who experienced this situation described it as psychologically stressful and many interviewees said that the conditions in which they were forced to live presented a worse experience for them than the torture and interrogation.¹⁰³

Jalal is a psychiatrist from Damascus. When peaceful protests began in Damascus, he joined a group of activists who regularly met up to discuss peaceful change for more equality in Syrian society. He was briefly arrested as a result of this in 2011. After his release, he began to work with a group of medical professionals who focused on providing medical care to civilians injured in the protests. As a result, he said he was accused of working with “terrorists” and was detained again between April and July 2012:

“My cell [at the Air Force Intelligence branch in al-Mezzeh] was 3m by 2m, and the number of detainees in it ranged from 28 to 41. We were given two small tiles of the floor to stand on, so we had about 20cm by 40cm of our own. Two small tiles – to sit, sleep, and eat. We had shifts for sleeping, and 12 of us could sleep at one time, for about five or six hours. This kind of overcrowding makes people very tense. Even rats would attack each other in this position. Everyone around me was irritable – but as I had studied this in my psychiatry training, I was dealing with it a bit better.

“I would try to tell the others what they were doing to us, and why they were doing it: to make us more nervous and irritable. But we had to whisper. We could never speak out loud. There was always something to fight about, either the food or the lack of space. Sometimes the prisoners would become impulsive and aggressive with me, but I knew it wasn’t against me – it was against the prison, the way we were held... I could accept this, though. It wasn’t that they were bad people, it was a bad situation.”

Jalal was detained again between January and July 2014 when he was working with other peaceful activists to organize talks about democratic change in Syria. This time, he was arrested by Military Intelligence and detained at Military Intelligence Branch 215. He described the conditions of his cell:

“It was like being in a room of dead people. They were trying to finish us there... My cell was 3m by 3m, and there were between 48 and 75 people... When the cell had 48 people, we would get a space of 40cm by 80cm, and we could sleep. When it had 75 people, we would have to sleep while squatting. We called it ‘military sleeping’. Every minute in Branch 215 was a kind of torture.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 9 December 2015.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Amnesty International on 22 February 2016.

¹⁰² UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules), adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution 70/175 on 17 December 2015, available at www.refworld.org/docid/5698a3a44.html

¹⁰³ Overcrowding and its contribution to illness, disease and deaths in custody has been documented by other organizations. See for example: Human Rights Watch, *If the dead could speak*.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

The conditions described above fall far below international standards. Such crowded conditions, particularly in combination with other issues such as lack of ventilation and daylight, violate the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.¹⁰⁵

Rules 12 and 13 of the Mandela Rules address accommodation of prisoners, and Rule 13 in particular specifies that “accommodation shall meet the requirements of health, due regard being paid to climatic conditions and particularly to cubic content of air, minimum floor space, lighting, heating and ventilation”.¹⁰⁶ The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture further provides as guidance that single cells should be at least 7m², and shared cells should provide at least 4m² per person.¹⁰⁷

7.3 INADEQUATE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

All of the survivors who spoke to Amnesty International for this report described health care in the detention facilities as being grossly inadequate. They reported widespread skin conditions, including scabies and lice, and other infectious conditions, in particular diarrhoea, as well as mental health conditions such as psychosis. Several of the interviewed survivors witnessed cellmates dying, usually as a result of a combination of untreated health conditions such as skin diseases and diarrhoea, which under normal circumstances are commonly preventable, treatable, and rarely result in fatalities. As Omar A stated: “From just one small cut on your little finger, you would get an infection. It would swell, and then spread to your entire body.” Jalal, a medical professional, said: “In the history of medicine, skin infections might have caused death at one point. But that was in the 18th century.”¹⁰⁸

Access to medical care, whether for diseases developed as a result of the detention conditions, chronic illnesses, or injuries sustained during interrogation, varied among the people who shared their experiences with Amnesty International. A few former detainees, such as Tarek, said they had been taken to military hospitals where they received some treatment before being returned to the branch.¹⁰⁹

Tarek broke his leg attempting to evade arrest and, after a number of hours, was taken to Aleppo Military Hospital, where he remained for 12 days and received surgery. Following this treatment, he was returned to the Air Force Intelligence branch in Aleppo to an overcrowded cell where he received no further medical support. From there, he was transferred to one of the facilities operated by Air Force Intelligence in the al-Mezzeh area of Damascus. He said: “The cell was very bad: it was dirty, everyone had scabies, there was no medication... Then my leg got worse; it started to swell, I had an infection. I was not able to eat; for four days I only had water.”

After these four days, Tarek was then transferred to Military Hospital 601 in al-Mezzeh, where he received treatment. He said: “They call it the death hospital... It's a scary place. The hospital is run by the security forces; the treatment is very bad. There was a pile of corpses next to my bed; it smelled very bad.” He was then returned to the same branch. He added: “Then the scabies went into the cast but I couldn't ask for help as I didn't want to go back to the hospital, so I removed the cast myself with my hands.”¹¹⁰

While the treatment available in military hospitals is beyond the scope of this report, other survivors and a doctor who defected from working in military hospitals have told Amnesty international that they routinely witnessed torture and other ill-treatment taking place in these hospitals. As a result, they said, many of those who may have had the option of being transferred to hospital chose to remain in the detention facility without medical care.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Amnesty International, *Fair trial manual – Second edition* (Index: POL 30/002/2014), Chapter 10.

¹⁰⁶ UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules).

¹⁰⁷ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *2nd General Report on the CPT's activities covering the period 1 January to 31 December 1991, 1992*, available at www.cpt.coe.int/en/annual/rep-02.htm

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Amnesty International has previously documented such violations in government-operated hospitals: see Amnesty International, *Health crisis: Syrian government targets the wounded and health workers* (Index: MDE 24/059/2011).

¹¹⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 24 February 2016.

¹¹¹ “Atlas” (name has been changed), a doctor who worked at Tishreen Military Hospital from 2011 until early 2013 when he defected and left the country, told Amnesty International that he regularly observed members of the security forces torturing and otherwise ill-treating prisoners who had been brought for treatment to the hospital, as well as in other military hospitals where he had worked. He recalled: “The Air Force Intelligence staff used to strike the prisoners who were chained to the hospital beds with long iron sticks. They put cigarettes out

Others, such as Noman, only received some basic medical treatment, generally carried out with rudimentary supplies by fellow prisoners.¹¹² Noman is an actor from Damascus. In March 2013, he was asked to report to Military Intelligence Branch 215 “for a coffee”. He did not believe himself to be at risk and anticipated that, as a well-known actor, he would be treated respectfully. Instead, he remained at this branch for a month and was repeatedly interrogated about participating in peaceful activities against the government. Shortly after his arrest, he injured his leg on a sewage hole in the corridor between the bathroom and his cell. He requested medical supplies and water to clean the wound that was covered in sewage but the guards refused this and sent him back to his cell. He told Amnesty International:

“After one week, I realized the wound had become infected. My leg had swollen up to about double in size, then it turned black. I was afraid to ask for the doctor. Even the doctor from among the detainees was hitting people. Then I got a fever. There was another detainee who was a nurse. He said that the wound would need to be opened, otherwise I would get gangrene. He had a razor... He managed to empty the two toilets for a short while. He and another detainee took me there and gave me a towel to put in my mouth. I bit on it. They burned the razor with a lighter, then they cut open the wound from two sides. All the dirty blood came out. Then they brought a shirt and ripped it into pieces to tie up my leg.

“I was released after 18 days there. After my release, I had to have three operations on my leg to remove all the bad tissue. They took everything and just left the bone. I had to have a skin graft.”¹¹³

Other prisoners, including those with chronic illnesses such as Jamaal T, who was undergoing treatment for bladder cancer prior to his arrest, received no treatment at all during their detention.¹¹⁴

Majd is an accountant from Aleppo. He was working as a photographer with the local council in one of the opposition-held areas when he was arrested by Political Security in Aleppo in September 2013. He remained there for 10 months before being moved to the Political Security branch in Tartous. He described his experience:

“There was an 18-year-old Syrian Palestinian boy in the cell with us. He had some kind of liver problem; around 15 detainees had it there. They gave them paracetamol, which is what they gave us for everything... One morning he fell over and started bleeding from the rectum. We knocked on the door for the doctor but he didn’t come. They said he would come in 15 minutes. We knocked from 7am until 11am. The boy kept bleeding. The doctor didn’t come. We kept knocking. The guard only insulted us. The guards saw the blood but they did nothing.

“At 11am, they told us we had to bring him to treatment and clean the blood. We had to force him to stand so we could take him. When he stood up, we realized that his flesh was coming out of his rectum... They took him out of the cell but we saw that after just a few metres he dropped on the floor and he died.”¹¹⁵

The Mandela Rules specify, among other provisions around health care, that “prisoners should enjoy the same standards of health care that are available in the community” (Rule 24), that health care should be provided by “sufficient qualified personnel acting in full clinical independence” (Rule 25) and the health care personnel “shall have daily access to all sick prisoners, all prisoners who complain of

on their skin in front of me. They hit them when they were lying on the ground... If we tried to intervene, or just give the prisoners good medical care, that would raise a red flag with them about us and they would interrogate us.” Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 May 2016. Abu Asad Allah, who was arrested in February 2014, was taken to the National Hospital in Hama after being interrogated at a local General Intelligence branch for 18 days. He said: “In the hospital, I was chained to the bed. There were always guards in the room, and they would beat me there, with their [wooden] batons. Every day, the guard would stand over my bed and he would kick me in the stomach. I had the oxygen mask on, and still he would do this... I spent two months there, and they would kick or beat me at least twice a week.” Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

¹¹² Amnesty International spoke with six formerly detained medical professionals for this report: two doctors, one nurse, one psychologist, one medical instructor and one physiotherapist. All confirmed that they were requested by the guards in the facilities that they were held in to provide medical support for their fellow detainees. For example, Bashar, a paediatrician, said: “The guards did a sweep of the cells and gathered one medical professional from each cell... and told us: ‘You will be in charge of treating people.’ Then they gave each of us some iodine [an antiseptic], some gauze and a bottle of Pepsi. After that, it was my job to notify the guards if anything happened. But we always lacked the medical supplies. I had to clean wounds with cloth and water. People were about to lose hands or feet because of small injuries, that could become very dangerous due to the lack of treatment. Sometimes I could see the bone when I looked at their wounds.” Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 24 January 2016.

¹¹³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

¹¹⁴ The UN Commission of Inquiry also found that the “non-existent or inadequate medical assistance offered [made] otherwise treatable conditions fatal”. See UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

physical or mental health issues or injury and any prisoner to whom their attention is specially directed" (Rule 31).

The UN Human Rights Committee, the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council have also emphasized the importance of prompt and regular access to doctors for prisoners and detainees.¹¹⁶

The inadequate access to medical care in Syrian security forces' detention facilities, which often includes deliberate denial of – as well as punishment for asking for – medical treatment, violates the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.

SCABIES, LICE AND OTHER SKIN CONDITIONS

As a result of the conditions in the cells, in particular the close human contact and the lack of adequate access to sanitary facilities, the majority of former detainees interviewed reported that skin conditions, including scabies, lice and abscesses, which result from bacterial infections of minor skin wounds, were widespread. Scabies is caused by a parasite and generally manifests itself through a spotty rash on the skin that can turn into blisters or, when scratched, sores or abscesses and the skin becomes extremely itchy.¹¹⁷ All former detainees who witnessed or suffered from such conditions reported that they were not provided with medical treatment. Some interviewees reported that they were occasionally allowed to wash their hair with washing-up liquid in a futile attempt to get rid of lice. Jalal [interview 49] said about his experience: "Just imagine, you are in a place, and there are people around you, and you are all naked, covered in filth... Your privacy is destroyed, your dignity is destroyed, and eventually [...] you become less human. These details do not get attention because this is not 'torture' – but it is devastating."

Bashar is a paediatrician from Idlib. He was working in Latakia when he was arrested for the first time in July 2012 by local Military Intelligence agents. He was questioned about attending demonstrations and providing medical supplies to field hospitals, likely as a result of reports made against him by one of the other hospital staff members. After two weeks in the custody of Military Intelligence in Latakia, he was transferred to Military Intelligence Branch 291 in Damascus. He was released approximately five months later but was then arrested again in April 2013 when members of the Military Intelligence arrested several of his friends.

He described the situation at Military Intelligence Branch 235 in Damascus where he was held:

"The real torture was the life there, and the circumstances of living... Scabies was worse there, and it got worse and worse... parasites cause scabies... In the last month that I was there, scabies became very common. It's normally harmless. You need a cream and a solution and you use that all over and you're fine, but they didn't give us the treatment... In this branch about 90% of the detainees had it. It becomes a serious problem when there is no treatment. This is one of my worst memories; it feels like something is eating your body. The more you scratch, the worse it gets. When you scratch, it becomes inflamed. At one point, I asked my friends to bind my hands to stop me from scratching..."

"But there were other skin conditions, too... Because people couldn't wash properly, their skin stopped working properly. They formed what basically looked like giant pimples on different parts of their bodies. I had one on my shoulder. Some are the size of a fingertip, others the size of a palm. They were filled with pus and this had to be extracted. In every cell, there was an expert on 'squeezing'. It was so painful. I don't even know what the word for this is, I had never seen anything like it before. You cannot believe the amount of fluids that came out of these..."¹¹⁸

Omar A is an Arabic teacher and Master's degree student from Aleppo who attended peaceful demonstrations. He believes that he was arrested because an informer reported him and his fellow students to the security forces. In July 2011, four men in civilian clothing grabbed him and forced him

¹¹⁶ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment 20, available at www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrcom20.htm; UN General Assembly, Resolution 65/205, available at www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/65/205; UN Human Rights Council Resolution 13/19, available at www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/RES/13/19

¹¹⁷ NHS, 'Scabies – Causes', available at www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Scabies/Pages/Causes.aspx

¹¹⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 24 January 2016.

into a car. He was detained at various branches across Syria in Aleppo, Damascus and Homs before his release the following year.

He said of the lice:

“There were lice everywhere – on your body, on your hair – just everywhere. My hair was down to my shoulders, and it was full of lice. They were huge, definitely visible. My head was burning and itching, always. When I came out of prison, it took two months to get rid of the lice... I've never seen anything like this kind of lice anywhere. I remember there was one time that they gave us a special shampoo for lice, and I rubbed it in my hair, and 50 or 60 lice fell down in front of me.”¹¹⁹

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Several of the survivors who spoke to Amnesty International about their experiences for this report described psychological symptoms that they observed either in themselves or in fellow prisoners. Amnesty International shared their testimonies with Professor Derrick Pounder, a forensic specialist, who suggested that the symptoms were in keeping with psychoses and anxiety disorders. Psychosis is described as “a mental health problem that causes people to perceive or interpret things differently from those around them... Psychosis can also be triggered by traumatic experience, stress, or physical conditions.”¹²⁰

“Omar B”¹²¹ was studying in his home town of Deyr al-Zour at the time of his arrest. He had helped to organize peaceful protests and on 1 September 2011 was arrested by Air Force Intelligence agents at such a protest. He was initially questioned about the key for his motorcycle, which they believed was a remote detonator for a bomb, and about a case of mistaken identity. He was released in January the following year. He said he was traumatized after being repeatedly tortured during interrogation for 36 days:

“After the 36 days, I developed a psychological illness. I started shouting and shivering. I didn't feel like I was in the real world. I lost control. I was so scared of being tortured again. They took me to a psychiatrist in the same place. He told me that he had nothing to do with the army but I didn't trust him. I started shaking. He gave me an injection. He came to visit me in the cell the next morning. He asked me to tell him something, but just I shivered and shook. He turned to the guards and said: ‘He is going to die anyway. He is useless to us. Let his family take care of him.’”

“Omar B” was detained again in 2012, predominantly in Military Intelligence Branch 235, where a fellow detainee was brought back to the group cell dead after being taken out of the cell by the guards. “Omar B” said:

“They kept the body with us in the cell for three days. Because of the smell, we couldn't eat, we all started vomiting. I started shivering and shaking again. I didn't know what I was doing. We felt so bad. You can't imagine what it's like to have a friend eating with you each day and then suddenly he's not there any more. We felt powerless, worthless in society.”¹²²

Umm Omar, a humanitarian worker from Aleppo, described experiencing similar symptoms during her detention at the local Air Force Intelligence branch in April 2014:

“There were only three of us left: me, [‘Mouna’] and [‘Rasha’].¹²³ We became very close. [‘Rasha’] was taken out to interrogation, and the interrogator said that she would get sentenced to death if I didn't confess... That evening when it was time for prayer, we were all facing the wall to get ready to pray, but I heard a noise and turned around, and I saw that [‘Rasha’] had used her hijab to hang herself by the wall... We kept knocking on the door for the guards to come and help... After 15 minutes, they came and beat me with the batons and insulted

¹¹⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 10 December 2015.

¹²⁰ NHS Choices, ‘Psychosis’, available at www.nhs.uk/conditions/Psychosis/Pages/Introduction.aspx.

Human Rights Watch also documented widespread “extreme mental anguish contributing to death”. See: Human Rights Watch, *If the dead could speak*.

¹²¹ Name has been changed.

¹²² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 23 January 2016.

¹²³ Both names have been changed.

me, because knocking on the door, for whatever reason, was unacceptable. They took her outside, I don't know what happened to her...

"At that point, I separated myself from reality. After they took ['Rasha'], I lost my mind. I spoke to myself, and I shouted at God, I banged my head against the wall. I screamed at God – 'Why are you doing this to us? You're supposed to have mercy.' Something changed in me then, I changed into someone else."

"I think this separation from reality was experienced by many of the detainees, it's the result of being treated like we were less than an animal."¹²⁴

7.4 INADEQUATE ACCESS TO FOOD, WATER AND SHELTER

The majority of former detainees interviewed for this report described not receiving enough food, and several said that they only had limited access to drinking water. The lack of access to water was described as especially dangerous during the hotter summer months, when temperatures rose in the overcrowded group cells, often located underground, and their fellow detainees died as a result of dehydration or heat stroke.

Bayan described conditions in the General Intelligence branch in Aleppo, where she was held between June and October 2014:

"We received food twice per day, sometimes they were more generous. Breakfast was a small, dirty pot of jam and one loaf of bread. Lunch or dinner was boiled rice or bulgur. When they brought the food, they left it outside the cell deliberately so that all the insects went onto it before they brought it to us."¹²⁵

"Ziad"¹²⁶ graduated in medicine and is from Aleppo. He was charged with organizing demonstrations and attempting to recruit people to fight in non-state armed groups. He was briefly detained three times prior to his final arrest in November 2012, when he spent four months in various branches of the security forces in Aleppo and Damascus. He described his time at Military Intelligence Branch 235 in Damascus:

"One day the ventilation just stopped working. I can't describe to you what it feels like to suffocate. Previously the ventilation had stopped working for around an hour and during that hour I felt like my lungs were going to explode. This time it broke down for a whole day. During that day seven out of the nine of us died.

"We all slept on top of each other on the floor and, as the day went on without ventilation, I began to lose consciousness. I began to hear my children's voices. I had no idea other people were dying; everyone was very quiet. I don't think the guards realized that the ventilation had stopped working, because the next day they came in and saw that none of us were moving. They began to kick us to see who was alive and who wasn't. They told me and the other survivor to stand up against the wall, and that is when I realized that on that day seven people had died, that I had slept next to seven bodies. They told us to leave the cell. That's when I saw the rest of the bodies in the corridor, around 25 other bodies. So I guess our cell was not the only one that lost ventilation that day."¹²⁷

Most survivors said that their cells were generally empty of any furniture and that prisoners slept on the floor, often in shifts due to overcrowding (see above). Some received blankets, generally dirty. Said, for example, said: "When I was given the blanket on the first day, I shook it out and the guard said: 'What are you doing? You're waking the bugs!'"¹²⁸ Others had to share blankets with their cellmates.

Testimony by the survivors indicates that most were held in darkness. Some had access to a limited light source, either through a small window in their door that could be opened and closed, or through a window to the outside, if the cell was not underground. Most did not leave their cell unless they were

¹²⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

¹²⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

¹²⁶ Name has been changed.

¹²⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 1 March 2016.

¹²⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

taken to interrogation or to the bathroom at specific times of the day, if the cell did not have a bathroom. They did not have access to recreational activities, exercise or open air.

The Mandela Rules require that prisoners be provided with well-prepared, nutritional food and have access to drinking water whenever they require (Rule 22). They also specify that accommodation for prisoners shall be appropriate to climate, including the lighting, heating and ventilation (Rule 13). Authorities should also ensure that prisoners have adequate clothing that is cleaned and kept in good condition (Rule 19) and that they are provided with a separate bed and clean bedding (Rule 21).

7.5 INADEQUATE ACCESS TO SANITARY FACILITIES

The majority of witnesses interviewed for this report told Amnesty International that, if there was no toilet in their cell, they only had access to communal toilets at specific times of the day, usually two or three times daily for a very limited time, often just a few minutes or seconds. If they spent more than the allowed time, they would face beatings or humiliation by the guards. The toilets were routinely described as filthy. Dina said, for example: “There was sewage, blood, dirt and water.”¹²⁹

Abu Anas described his experience at the local Air Force Intelligence branch:

“The cell had no toilet, no water. They allowed us to use a bathroom nearby three times a day after meals; we had about 60 seconds each time. Once I took longer than that. By that time I had a beard already, and the guard forced me to take my excrement from the toilet and cover my face with it.”¹³⁰

The persons interviewed said that there were no considerations for people who were sick or disabled. They, too, only had access to toilets at specific times regardless of their needs. As a result, several of the former detainees described fashioning makeshift toilets in their cells.

Lama was working with a civil society organization in Homs when she was arrested. The organization initially organized peaceful demonstrations but began providing medical support to civilians living in hard-to-reach areas as the crisis progressed. Her husband had been arrested in October 2014, and she was detained two months later, in December, by Military Intelligence in Tartous. She was later transferred to Military Intelligence Branch 235 in Damascus before being released in January 2015. She explained:

“A lot of us in the cell [at Military Intelligence Branch 235] were sick, and we had to go to the bathroom a lot. One older woman needed to go every 30 minutes. So we made a toilet out of a bucket. We had to keep it in the middle of the room.”¹³¹

Access to showers and washing facilities was described as even more restricted, with several of the people interviewed describing being unable to shower for weeks, even months. When they were able to shower, there was generally little or no access to sanitary products such as soap. Hamoudeh, who was held at the Political Security branch in al-Mezzeh in 2015, said:

“They made us ‘bathe’ once a week only. ‘Bathing’ was really hard. You have to empty the cell and put all the prisoners in one corner. They have to get naked. And then you just pour water on them with a small dish. You only have this plastic bowl in the bathroom, for cleaning the toilet and flushing water and ‘baths’. So one by one we had to stand in the corner and have this very cold water poured on us from the bowl, two or three times. Then you went to the other corner to stand to dry. You can’t dry yourself, so you just stand and wait. Soap was the dream, we didn’t have any.”¹³²

The Mandela Rules specify that “the sanitary installations shall be adequate to enable every prisoner to comply with the needs of nature when necessary in a clean and decent manner” (Rule 15). Washing

¹²⁹ For information on detention conditions for women, please refer to Section 7.7 below. Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

¹³⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

¹³¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 10 December 2015.

¹³² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 16 April 2016.

facilities should be made available to prisoners at least once a week (Rule 16), and prisoners shall be provided with the necessary items to maintain personal hygiene (Rule 18).

7.6 DEGRADING AND HUMILIATING TREATMENT

All of the former prisoners interviewed described experiencing being treated in a degrading or humiliating manner, usually continuously throughout their detention and apparently as a form of further intimidation or punishment. Such treatment included random beatings, insults, forced nakedness, being forced to pretend to be animals and not being allowed to carry out religious activities. Hamoudeh stated that “the humiliation was the worst”¹³³ – a sentiment echoed by several others. At times, it amounted to torture.

Some former prisoners said that for them the uncertainty of the future, whether they would ever leave the branch and when their next interrogation or torture session would take place also felt degrading to them. Ahmad H described his experience at a Political Security branch in 2012:

“The guard was using a stick to guide me... just as you do for horses. But then he put the stick up my anus, not all the way up, but enough. So actually we are not even animals. We are not even toys. People respect toys more than the guards respected us. We are nothing to them. Nothing...”

“The guards would sometimes bring one of us out of the room, and make us jump up, or down, or roll around – just to have fun. Of course they would hit us too. But they almost never hit us with their hands. We were too filthy for them to touch. They would only touch us with the sticks. One time, I saw a man touch the guard while he was being beaten – he was wearing a blindfold, and he couldn’t see. The guard started beating the prisoner doubly, just because he touched him accidentally.

“But to me, the worst part was being slapped in the face. It breaks down all of your humanity and dignity when you know there is another human hitting you and looking directly at your face and enjoying your suffering. Even the blindfolds are designed to humiliate you. When you look into someone’s eyes, you feel you are equal to them. When you look at their shoes, you feel you are equal to their shoes. I think the guards put blindfolds on us because they couldn’t bear to look us in the eyes and treat us as they did... When they make us dirty, and smelly, and cover our eyes with the blindfold, we are no longer human.”¹³⁴

Several survivors reported being held in a cell with the corpse of a cellmate who had died. Some were made to help remove corpses from their cell.

Farhan is an IT professional from Homs. He was helping to organize peaceful demonstrations and provide humanitarian goods for civilians in hard-to-reach areas when he was arrested in March 2012. He was detained for a week at the local General Intelligence branch in Homs before being moved to Military Intelligence Branch 235 in Damascus. He was eventually released in November 2013. During the first week at the local General Intelligence branch, he explained:

“My cellmate died... He was resting on my leg, after he had been tortured... He was dead on my leg. He had two daughters, and he told me this right before he died. I knocked on the door to tell them I had a dead person in the cell. They said, ‘He’s not a person. He’s just a body, a corpse.’ It was a very small room – a solitary cell. He was there with me for three days. I will never forget the smell. He had holes all over his body. He wasn’t thin. He had kept his health, unlike a lot of the other prisoners... The skin and flesh just under his eye were missing. The guard came and said, ‘It’s obvious you still care about this body, so you can carry it.’ I had to carry the body down the hallway, and I reached what looked to be a mountain of bodies. There were six or seven bodies there, and a couple had military uniforms on, but most of them were in civilian clothes. I tripped when I got there, and fell into the bodies.”¹³⁵

The Mandela Rules state that “all prisoners shall be treated with respect to their inherent dignity and value as human beings. No prisoner shall be subjected to, and all prisoners shall be protected from, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, for which no circumstances

¹³³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 16 April 2016.

¹³⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

¹³⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

whatsoever may be invoked as justification.”¹³⁶ The Mandela Rules further specify that the remains of a prisoner who died in the custody of the authorities should be treated with respect and dignity (Rule 72).

7.7 DETENTION CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN

The women interviewed for this report said that they were held in the same detention facilities as men, although in separate cells. They told Amnesty International that almost all the guards and other personnel at the facilities were male. Only one of the women interviewed said that her “security check”, where she had to remove her clothes (see below), was carried out by a woman; all others were “checked” by men.

ACCESS TO SANITARY FACILITIES AND MEDICAL CARE

If there were no sanitary facilities in their cells, the women said that they were required to use the same facilities as the male detainees and male guards, including in some cases in the presence of male guards. Women with chronic illnesses or health problems did not have access to facilities suitable for their specific needs.

Umm Omar has a medical condition that causes her chronic hip and leg pain and limits her ability to walk. She recalled her time at the local Military Intelligence branch, one of the several places she was held at in 2014:

“I had problems with the toilet. It was a hole-in-the-ground toilet, but because of my legs I couldn't use such a toilet, even that was torture for me. Everyone had one to two minutes of time in the toilet, if it was longer than that, they would come in and drag you out... When I saw the bathroom, I decided not to eat. I couldn't use it and I would have needed help [from the male guards] to put my trousers back on, so I decided not to eat so that I wouldn't have to go to the bathroom.”¹³⁷

Two of the women said they received feminine hygiene products from the guards. Others were occasionally given the opportunity to purchase them, but most of the women who spoke to Amnesty International about their experience said they had no access to such products. Bayan, who was detained at the local General Intelligence branch in Aleppo in 2014, said: “During our periods, they gave us nothing. I heard they added chemicals to the water to prevent us getting our period but it still came. We had to cut our clothes and use that.”¹³⁸

Some of the women said they were given basic medicines such as painkillers or antihistamines from the guards, but all said that they had no regular access to a doctor or other health professional. No specialized care was provided for pregnant women or women with existing health conditions. For example, Maisa, a trained nurse, was required to attend to fellow detainees giving birth due to the lack of access to other medical professionals.

Maisa, who was arrested in March 2013 and detained in several facilities until her release in October of the same year, described this and other experiences at the Kafr Sousseh Branch of the Military Police:

“Generally, the doctor did not come and see [the women] or do medical checks. Sometimes they responded to begging and dangerous cases... Women were pregnant there. Some had been brought in to put pressure on their husbands to surrender. I met four pregnant women, two in the Palestine Branch [Military Intelligence Branch 235], one in Kafr Sousseh and one in 'Adra Prison. I helped with the delivery of two babies, because the guards refused to give them medical care... The woman in Kafr Sousseh was from the Philippines. I had to deliver the baby in the cell; there was no help. I had a medical kit with me when I was arrested, I asked the guards to bring this and they did. It took a few hours but both she and the baby were OK.”¹³⁹

¹³⁶ UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules), Rule 1.

¹³⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

¹³⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

¹³⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

The Mandela Rules specify that women detainees should be supervised by women staff (Rule 81) and the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) state that facilities housing women prisoners shall meet their “specific hygiene needs, including sanitary towels provided free of charge”. The same rules set out that women should be given access to health care services equivalent to those in the wider community (Rule 9). Both the Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules state that there should be suitable arrangements for pregnant women and nursing mothers, including prenatal and postnatal care (Rule 28 of the Mandela Rules and Rule 48 of the Bangkok Rules).¹⁴⁰ From the testimonies of women detainees, which correspond to findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry and other credible reports, it appears that these rules have been systematically flouted.

SEXUAL ASSAULT, HARRASSMENT AND HUMILIATING TREATMENT BY GUARDS

Under international law, any sexual conduct between detainees and persons in authority enforcing their detention are presumed to be criminal acts of rape or sexual violence, due to the inherently coercive nature of detention.¹⁴¹ All of the women reported either witnessing or being subjected to sexual harassment or assault by the guards. Maisa remembered one of the branches she was held in particular: “In Kafr Sousseh it was very bad... If the women wanted to communicate with their families, they had to get undressed in front of the guards and show them their bodies.”¹⁴²

Bayan described such treatment at the General Intelligence branch in Aleppo:

“There was one guard, he came early in the morning, between 2am and 5am. He would stand outside our cell, drink, and look at the girls... If he asked, the girls couldn't really say no; they had to go out with him. He took them out of the cell and then negotiated with them what they could have in exchange. Some girls accepted. If the girl didn't accept, he'd keep her in mind and take revenge on her later; he would beat her more than the others.

“He asked me to go out with him. He told me my mother was asking about me, she loved me. I had to go. He tried to offer me the possibility to communicate with my family if I touched him. I said no. He told me: ‘I will send you back and give you time to think.’ Then he asked for me again. He tried more this time. He touched my body inappropriately, and aggressively forced me to touch him. I started crying and shouting. My hands were tied. He tried to attack me. I refused, and he got angry. He sent me back. I knew he was angry. He came back to ask for me at lunch the next day. He hit me in the face and hit my head against the wall and I started bleeding... [A doctor later confirmed] I had lost 70% of my hearing in my left ear...

“After I ‘confessed’, I told them about the guard and what he was doing. The interrogator said: ‘If this story is a lie, you'll be dead.’ They asked the other girls. Some of them had his mobile phone number so they believed them. They took him and sent him to Damascus.”¹⁴³

Bayan was threatened after her release that, if she failed to provide information on members of her community, Bayan and her family would be arrested.

Several of the women interviewed said that they were accused of “sexual jihad” or *jihad al-nikah*, a common accusation against women by the Syrian authorities that they were providing sexual services to fighters in non-state armed groups. Guards made derogatory comments about them in this context. Umm Omar, for example, described an encounter with a guard at the Political Security in Aleppo: “He insulted me. He said: ‘Why would you do ‘sexual jihad’? Who would look at a cripple? Because the opposition are psychopaths, they might even accept a disabled woman for that.”¹⁴⁴

The Bangkok Rules require that women who report abuse should be given protection and their claims investigated (Rule 25) and they should be provided with full information about seeking judicial recourse (Rule 7). These rules further specify that in such cases the prison authorities should help women to

¹⁴⁰ UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution 3/65 on 6 October 2010, available at www.refworld.org/docid/4dccb0ae2.html

¹⁴¹ Amnesty International, *Rape and sexual violence: Human rights law and standards in the International Criminal Court* (Index: IOR 53/001/2011).

¹⁴² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2013.

¹⁴³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

obtain legal assistance and ensure that they have access to specialized psychological support (Rule 25). Amnesty International found that these rules are being completely disregarded by the Syrian authorities.

WOMEN WITH CHILDREN

Most of the women survivors interviewed for this report witnessed children in the detention facilities, some of whom were being held alongside their detained mothers. The children were also not allowed to leave the cells except at allocated times to use the bathroom if the cell did not have a bathroom. No arrangements were made for the special needs of children. For example, Lama, who was detained between 2014 and 2015, said:

“I was held on the ground floor of the Palestine Branch [of Military Intelligence]. The room was 3m by 4m, and it held 25 to 32 women... There were four children in the room, with their mothers. There was one woman with two daughters: one was two years old and another was three years old. There was another woman with a one-and-a-half-year-old and a four-year-old.

“The women were usually held because they were from a certain place that was aligned with the opposition, or because their husbands or brothers were in the FSA [Free Syrian Army]. I felt really awful to see the kids there. They were inside for 24 hours a day, and the food wasn't enough. It wasn't good for them. One time, one of the mothers was beaten on her hands until they were so swollen, and when she came back, her son saw her hands, and he was so worried about it.”¹⁴⁵

Luna made similar observations at the General Intelligence branch in al-Khatib in 2014, where she was detained in a cell that was roughly 2m by 3m:

“There were about 21 adult women, some of them with their children. There were usually between five and six children in the cell. While I was there, the children were between three years and 12 years old. They were in this small cell all day long, they had nowhere to go. There were three pregnant women as well.”¹⁴⁶

The Bangkok Rules specify that “women with caretaking responsibilities for children shall be permitted to make arrangements for those children” (Rule 2). Furthermore, prison staff should be trained in health care and child development (Rule 33) and “particular efforts shall be made to provide appropriate programmes for pregnant women, nursing mothers and women with children in prison” (Rule 42). Amnesty International believes that the treatment of children in these branches violates Syria's obligations as a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and is contrary to the rules set out in international human rights standards, including the Bangkok Rules.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 10 December 2015.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 10 May 2016. The UN Commission of Inquiry has documented children as young as seven years old dying in the custody of the Syrian authorities. See: UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

8. SAYDNAYA MILITARY PRISON

“Anyone who is left in that prison is dead, I am sure of it.”

Ibrahim¹⁴⁷

Saydnaya Military Prison is located around 30km north of Damascus. The prison is under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Defence and operated by the Military Police, though staff from the various intelligence services are also reported to work there. The prison became notorious for torture and other ill-treatment, excessive use of force by guards and enforced disappearances following unrest inside the prison in 2008.¹⁴⁸

Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria in 2011, the prison has become the final destination for peaceful opponents of the authorities¹⁴⁹ as well as military personnel suspected of engaging in opposition activities, such as considering defecting or sharing news on the popular uprisings. Detainees are generally transferred to this facility after they have spent months, or even years, in the branches of the various intelligence agencies. Such transfers often take place following a flagrantly unfair trial before a Military Field Court. Others arrive at the prison without having been before a judge and without knowing the alleged charges against them or the length of their sentence.

For this report, Amnesty International interviewed 17 men who had been detained at Saydnaya Military Prison between March 2011 and December 2015.¹⁵⁰ Twelve were civilians and five were enlisted in different roles in the Syrian military at the time of their arrest.

All reported systematic daily beatings, grossly inhuman detention conditions and degrading treatment, leading to detainee deaths on a daily basis. The survivors said that no interrogations took place at Saydnaya. Detainees are tortured and otherwise ill-treated not to obtain information, but seemingly as a way to systematically and relentlessly degrade, punish and humiliate them.

Some of the interviewees reported being allowed to receive family visits at Saydnaya; however, these were always accompanied by extensive beatings so survivors said that they dreaded these visits. Others remained detained in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance. Prisoners at Saydnaya do not have access to a lawyer. In several cases, relatives of a prisoner were incorrectly told by government officials that the prisoner had died.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 26 April 2016.

¹⁴⁸ For more information, see for example: Amnesty International, ‘Your son is not here’: Disappearances from Syria’s Saydnaya Military Prison (Index: MDE 24/012/2010).

¹⁴⁹ For example, peaceful activist Mohamed Bachir Arab was reported to have been seen at Saydnaya; as was peaceful citizen journalist Ali Mahmoud al-Othman. For more information, see: Amnesty International: Further information: Enforced disappearance of Syrian activist: Mohamed Bachir Arab (Index: MDE 24/066/2012); Shooting the messenger: Journalists targeted by all sides in Syria (Index: MDE 24/014/2013).

¹⁵⁰ Experts consulted by Amnesty International indicate that only male prisoners are detained at Saydnaya Military Prison.

8.1 MILITARY FIELD COURT PROCEEDINGS

Many of those detained in Saydnaya Military Prison have been tried and sentenced by Military Field Courts. These courts were established in Syria through Legislative Decree no. 109 of 1968. According to Article 1 of the Decree, they have jurisdiction over crimes committed “during wartime or military operations” and are generally operated by military personnel (Article 3). They are not required to operate within existing legislation (Article 5) and, once a sentence is issued, there is no possibility of appeal (Article 6), though the President or Minister of Defence may change the sentence (Article 8). Lawyers with experience of this system confirmed that defendants are not allowed access to a lawyer during trial, and proceedings take place in secret, so that it is impossible for family members, lawyers, and often even the detainees themselves to follow the proceedings or learn of the outcome of the trial.

All of those interviewed for this report who had been tried by Military Field Courts said that their “trial” took place in the headquarters of the Military Police in al-Qaboun. They included both former military personnel and civilians. They further explained that proceedings generally lasted just a few minutes and were based on the “confessions” that had been obtained from them under torture in the security branches.¹⁵¹

Shappal is a peaceful activist who was campaigning for equality in law for the Kurdish people in Syria at the time of his arrest.¹⁵² He lived in Qamishly with his wife, children and his extended family. He was detained in a variety of branches between September 2011 and May 2013, including the Air Force Intelligence branches in Qamishly, Deir al-Zour and al-Mezzeh, Damascus, before he was sent to Saydnaya after a trial before the Military Field Court:

“I arrived in the field court on 4 September 2012... We arrived at the Military Police in al-Qaboun – they didn’t tell us where we were going, but we learned that through a soldier. They called my name. I stood in front of three judges. They were wearing civilian clothes... They told me to tell the truth about what I had done. I said: ‘I don’t have anything to hide – I was just calling for democracy and freedom.’ They didn’t let me continue. They threw me out of the room... They didn’t tell us the judgement of the court. But after I was released [in May 2013], I got my document from the prison, and I found out that they [had sentenced] me to 15 years in prison.”¹⁵³

8.2 ‘WELCOME PARTY’ BEATINGS

All of the interviewees who spoke to Amnesty International spoke of a so-called “welcome party” upon arrival at Saydnaya Military Prison, similar to the severe beatings that frequently take place upon arrival in the branches of the security forces. Several reported watching other prisoners being beaten to death in this context. During this period, the prisoners are generally blindfolded and are often required to lie face-down with their feet raised before being beaten all over their bodies. Prisoners are generally required to give up their personal belongings, including their clothes.

Omar S was a 17-year-old high-school student when he was arrested in November 2012 in Banyas after he had taken part in demonstrations there. He was detained at various branches across Syria, including the Military Intelligence branches in Banyas and Tartous, and eventually at Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus, where he remained for almost two years and was subsequently sent to Saydnaya, where he was held until his release in June 2015. His family had been told that he had died while being held in Saydnaya. He described his arrival at Saydnaya:

“The ‘welcome’ is very well known among Saydnaya prisoners and was worse than I ever expected; it was even worse than all the torture I went through in [Military Intelligence] Branch 215 combined. You get beaten badly, mostly on the head or the face, with instruments that I have never seen before. They used everything from metal

¹⁵¹ For additional information, see UN Human Rights Council, *Out of sight, out of mind*.

¹⁵² For additional information on the situation of the Kurdish people in Syria prior to the current crisis, see Amnesty International, *Syria: Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic one year after the March 2004 events* (Index: MDE 24/002/2005). See also Human Rights Watch, *Group denial: Repression of Kurdish political and cultural rights in Syria*, 2009, available at www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/26/group-denial/repression-kurdish-political-and-cultural-rights-syria

¹⁵³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 January 2016.

rods that are 12mm or 6mm thick, fly swatters, hands, legs... In Branch 215 the torture and beatings were to make us “confess”. In Saydnaya it felt like the purpose was death, some form of natural selection – to get rid of the weak as soon as they arrive...

“They were asking all of us if we were sick or not... I thought to myself I would tell them about [an existing health problem] and they will treat me well. They first asked my friend and he said, ‘Yes, I have breathing problems – I have asthma.’ They started beating him until he died, right there in front of me. When my turn came, I told them I was completely alright and I had no problems with my health... After the ‘welcome’ at Saydnaya I was bleeding very heavily from my head and eyebrows, as most of the beatings were directed at the head.”¹⁵⁴

8.3 UNDERGROUND CELLS

The majority of former prisoners interviewed described being taken into small underground cells following their initial arrival at Saydnaya Military Prison. Despite these smaller cells being originally designed for solitary confinement, they are generally used to accommodate groups of detainees. Several of the interviewees said that upon first entering these cells, as well as at other times, such as when they heard a guard approaching, all prisoners were made to squeeze into a small bathroom area within the cell, usually naked or wearing underwear only, apparently as a form of humiliation. Interviewees generally described being insulted and subjected to inhuman, degrading and humiliating treatment on a daily basis.

Jamal A lived in Damascus prior to his arrest. He was helping civilians who had been displaced by the fighting with monetary and humanitarian support. As a result, he was accused of talking to the international media and co-ordinating terrorist activities. He was arrested in February 2012 and held in different branches in Damascus before being taken to a Military Field Court in October 2012. The day after his “trial”, he was taken to Saydnaya, where he remained until January 2014. He told Amnesty International:

“When we first arrived, they put us all in the shower [area of the cell], on top of each other. We were naked of course. My penis was touching [a fellow detainee’s] back. I got cramp and had to move my leg, and my friend took the space that I made. Then I accidentally put my foot down on his penis. He screamed. For this, they were beating us with a steel bar on the front of the palms. I had had an operation on my hand earlier, and we told them [but] they just concentrated on that spot, and beat it harder. The surgery meant that I had 10 times the pain.”¹⁵⁵

Former detainees reported being held in damp or flooded conditions and often in extremely cold temperatures. Some reported that the floor in their cells was under 2cm to 5cm of water. With no daylight, and often no light whatsoever, in the underground cells prisoners are held in perpetual darkness. Access to food and water is restricted. Those interviewed for this report described being held in these cells from a few days up to nine months. Salam said:

“They start you out like this to break your will, and they use the underground cells as a punishment and a threat. [One of the guards told us:] ‘If you don’t behave above ground, we can punish you and leave you there forever by yourself.’”

Salam is a lawyer from Aleppo. Prior to his arrest, he was involved in the organization of peaceful demonstrations in Aleppo. He was arrested in September 2011 and held in various branches of security forces before being taken to Saydnaya in January 2012. He said he remained there until his release in June 2014:

“When they took me inside the prison, I could smell the torture. It’s a particular smell of humidity, blood and sweat; it’s the torture smell. They took me three floors underground. There were seven of us after the beatings. We were taken into our cell. It was about 2.5m by 3m. There was a big wall at the end of the room with a hole. There is no shower, just a toilet. It’s dirty and wet; water is leaking from the roof of the cell. It’s totally dark; there is no light; you can’t even see the other people in the same room with you.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 April 2016.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 27 February 2016.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

All interviewees said that they were routinely beaten by the guards while held in these cells, apparently either as a punishment when they broke the “rules” of the prison (see below) or in order to humiliate and intimidate them. Omar S, the high-school student from Banyas, and Shappal, the peaceful activist for Kurdish rights from Qamishly, both spoke about such beatings. Omar S said:

“The system was that every day, in the morning, the guard would walk down and ask if anyone had any bodies. Each cell had an assigned *shaweesh* [detainee in charge of the cell as decided by the guards]. This man would normally tell the guard... One day... the head of the cell next to us said, ‘There are 12 bodies in here.’ This was provocative; the guard knows that each cell only has 12 men... The guard got angry... Each cell door has a sliding window where they would normally bring in food or water... He asked the man to put his head in the window. He then went on to close and open the metal slide against the head and beat it with metal rods. The man died during the beating and his body was collected the next day.”¹⁵⁷

Shappal described his experience:

“They brought the food, but it was very little. They spent two hours beating us and saying ‘[President] Bashar [al-Assad] is your God’. They did the same for the detainees in the other solitary cells – we could hear them coming to us, cell by cell, and going down the row after us. Of course the other solitary [underground] cells were next to each other in a row, but the sound of beating was so loud that it could reach the sky.”¹⁵⁸

INADEQUATE SHELTER AND ACCESS TO FOOD AND WATER

Most of the survivors described being very cold in the underground cells, in particular during the winter months, as they were generally held naked or in underwear only, and not all prisoners were issued blankets.

Maan was an army commander stationed in Homs when he was arrested for talking about the popular uprising to other soldiers. He told Amnesty International that he was falsely accused of trying to recruit soldiers to leave the army and join armed groups. He was arrested in November 2011 and held in several Military Intelligence branches until he was transferred to Saydnaya in February 2012. He said: “It was very cold. We had seen snow outside. It was around 0°C. In the cells we were either in underpants or nude... For us it was seven people in the cell. We shared one blanket”.¹⁵⁹

The interviewees from Saydnaya all said that they were not given enough food while held in the underground cells and for some the access to water was also restricted. Jamal A and “Wael”¹⁶⁰, who were held in the same cell described being denied water:

“They stopped giving us water for seven or eight days. They just cut the water completely. People in other cells died, and we were very close to our deaths. On the eighth day, someone started moaning ‘water’. He started saying it normally and then he got louder and louder. There were 35 cells [underground], and it spread from one cell to another: ‘Water, water, water’. The guard heard us, and he said, ‘For one month, I will not give you water.’”

Wael added:

“During the crisis of water, we were patient at the beginning... By the fourth day, we were all lying around... I was thinking only about water – waterfalls, rivers, tap water, sinks. I could only think about water. We couldn’t even cry because we were afraid to lose the liquid. I said to Jamal [A], ‘If they don’t bring the water today, I will drink from the toilet.’ He said not to worry – and if I did it, we would all do it together.”

Jamal A said:

“But then we heard the sound of the water barrels being unloaded outside. They gave us a bowl of water, finally. It had a crack so the water splashed out onto the ground. We pounced to the ground and started licking it up like cats.”

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 April 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 January 2016.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

¹⁶⁰ Name has been changed.

Wael concluded:

“The water in the bowl was the first water after four days, and it allowed us to survive, but in reality, it only made us thirstier. It was like falling down from a high building, and being caught, and then being shoved off again from a lower floor. After a few mouthfuls of water, we were in even more pain. We felt the dryness and the roughness of our throats like we hadn’t before... When the water finally came out of the hose, we started crying. We cried as much as the water that came. We felt as happy that day as the day that we were released, honestly.”¹⁶¹

SAYDNAYA PRISON RULES

1. ABSOLUTE SILENCE MUST BE MAINTAINED

All former detainees said that it was forbidden to make a sound, even when being beaten by the guards. Ahmad F for example described one of such experiences:

“The guard said sounds were forbidden. He beat [a fellow detainee] six more times with the rubber belt [often one that had served as an engine part and had later been attached to a stick], and each time, he couldn’t help but yell. On the seventh time, he didn’t make a sound, and the guard said, ‘I need you like this.’ He said that when we followed the rules, we wouldn’t be beaten. That was a lie.”¹⁶²

Jamal A added:

“All speaking was forbidden – even a whisper was forbidden – so we were whispering even quieter than a whisper. The guards would take off their shoes and try to surprise us, to catch us whispering or talking. They even said that if we breathed too loudly, we would be punished.”¹⁶³

2. GUARDS MUST NOT BE LOOKED AT

Former detainees were instructed that they were not allowed to look at the faces of the guards. Bassel for example explained: “They told us to put our faces on the ground. The guard said: ‘If I see any open eyes, the anger of God would be more merciful than me.’ I felt we had entered a slaughterhouse.”¹⁶⁴

Qayis described one of his experiences: “After 12 days, they took us... upstairs. One of the prisoners accidentally looked at the guard, and he was beaten to death, right there in front of me.”¹⁶⁵ Salam added: “The guards tried not to talk to each other, they just made gestures. They used no names. They all called each other ‘Abdul’.”¹⁶⁶

3. POSITIONS MUST BE ADOPTED WHEN GUARDS ARRIVE

To avoid seeing the faces of the guards, detainees generally were not blindfolded; instead, they had to assume a certain position in their cell as soon as they heard a guard approaching.

Ahmad F explained:

“When the guard came, we had to run to the wall and put our hands over our eyes. When you heard the main door to the hallway open, you had to run to the wall and kneel. If you were going to get a punishment, you had to lie on your stomach, and put your feet up for beating.”¹⁶⁷

Jamal A described an innovative technique used in his cell as an early warning system to avoid beatings by the guards for not being in position in time:

“Whenever we heard [the guard] at the main door... we were supposed to be at the wall already. So we started using some songbirds outside as a signal. The birds would come to the window, in the hallway outside. If they

¹⁶¹ Joint interview with Amnesty International researchers on 27 February 2016.

¹⁶² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 26 February 2016.

¹⁶³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 27 February 2016.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 28 April 2016.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 28 April 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 28 April 2016.

Deleted: ¶

heard a noise, they would suddenly all fly away, and if we heard this sound of the birds flying away, we knew to run to the wall. Sometimes the guard would creep up and try to surprise us, but in this way we could outsmart him...

"We thought to ourselves that these birds were breaking the rule of al-Assad – they could come in to Saydnaya and see us. In fact they were much better than the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] or the UN!"¹⁶⁸

4. TRANSFER BETWEEN CELLS MUST BE CONDUCTED IN THE 'TRAIN'

Omar S described the process that is usually followed when prisoners are transferred between sections of Saydnaya Military Prison:

"I was moved from the cell which was underground to a cell on the third floor. To get to these new cells we had to go through what was known as the 'train of death'. This was basically where we were all completely naked and we moved through the corridors and the stairs by holding the waist of the man in front of us with our heads bowed down. Along the way guards beat us as much as they could – as always focusing on the head. They used water pipes, both rubber and metal, electric rods etc. A lot of people would faint. Of course if you fainted you would likely die as you tended to fall out of the train and continue getting beaten. The only way you could live through this was to keep moving and never ever let go of the man in front of you, never fall out of the train and get left behind. Holding on to the person in front of me was like holding on to my life. I gripped on with my hands and with my teeth. Even when I fell or started bleeding I never let go of my grip."¹⁶⁹

5. FOOD MUST NOT BE TOUCHED UNLESS AUTHORIZED BY GUARDS

After the guards bring food into the cells, the prisoners are not allowed to eat until they receive the signal from the guards, which can take hours from the time that the food is brought in. Shappal described the situation: "They used to torture us with the food. When they brought it, they would often not let us eat it until the night. They would bring it at 8am or 9am into the wing, and we would have to wait all day to eat it."¹⁷⁰

6. BLANKETS MUST ONLY BE USED AT NIGHT TIME

Those prisoners who were provided with blankets were told that they were not allowed to use them during the daytime, regardless of how cold it was in the cell. Maan described the routine:

"We had one blanket that we could either use to cover ourselves or to sleep on. Some really lucky ones had two. At 7am the guard came and told everyone to wake up. You had to roll up the blanket and then gather them altogether in the middle of the cell."¹⁷¹

Abu Alhassan described the predicament similarly:

"When they brought us blankets, we were really happy. But they put them in a corner and didn't let us use them. By this point, we started feeling that we are not human. We started believing that. I was freezing, and I would look at the blanket in the corner, but I couldn't take it. If I took it, I would be beaten, or even killed."¹⁷²

Anas added:

"Most people tried to keep the same three blankets for each night, because they didn't want to get other people's lice or bacteria from the scabies. I made an agreement with three friends, so we used three blankets under us, and we each had a pillow, and the rest we used to stay warm."¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 27 February 2016.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 April 2016.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 January 2016.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 February 2016.

¹⁷² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 25 April 2016.

¹⁷³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 25 February 2016.

8.4 ABOVE-GROUND CELLS

Following their time underground, former prisoners described being transferred in the “train” (see above) into “group cells” – larger cells usually holding more people located in the floors above the ground. Prisoners said they usually remained in these cells until their transfer to another prison, release or death. Interviewees said that these cells had indirect access to daylight, but they often remained very cold in the winter. Witnesses also described being denied sufficient quantities of food while detained in these cells, daily beating routines, and continuously being degraded and humiliated by the guards. While detained in these cells, prisoners did not have adequate access to medical care. As a result, prisoners regularly died.

DAILY BEATINGS

All survivors described being beaten on a daily basis by the guards. Several survivors observed other detainees being beaten to death in this context. Salam, a lawyer from Aleppo, described both his daily experience as well as a specific incident that he witnessed:

“Upstairs [in the above-ground cells] it was easier but there were different problems. The torture there was systematic, organized. You were not allowed to talk at all in those rooms; it was totally silent. It was a deathly silence. Years in silence... [The guards] entered each room and chose some people in each room. They beat them inside the room...”

“Generally we were beaten twice a day when the food came, another time when the cell was checked, and then between one and 10 additional times at random...”

“There was one specific incident – a detainee from Daraya was a Kung Fu trainer. He trained the others in his cell as there was nothing else to do. The guards found out and went into the cell and beat everyone for a long time. They beat the trainer and five others to death straight away, and then continued on the other 14. They all died within a week. We saw the blood coming out of the cell...”

“They beat all those men in that cell very badly. They used different instruments – bars, sticks. When the guards came initially, it was about 30 of them. It was very rare to see that many guards and an officer. [Their room] was very close to our cell, so we could hear everything.

“They brought the [first] six bodies out and hung them in the *shabeh* position. Then they brought the other 14 [living detainees] and hung them in the *shabeh* position, too. They continued to beat the 14. The six dead bodies were taken away... The other 14 were brought into our cell.

“Their limbs were not right. We couldn’t help them. The doctor came and looked at them, beat them, and left. He was a lieutenant... These things happened so much we felt nothing. I just thought that I might be next; my time was coming... We felt reborn when we survived...”

“There were two 17-year-olds [in my cell]. They died; their bodies couldn’t endure this. More than 10 people died who were more than 50 years old. Out of the detainees in my cell that I had personal relationships with, 15 of them died in my lap.”¹⁷⁴

INHUMAN, DEGRADING AND HUMILIATING TREATMENT

According to the survivors interviewed for this report, any interaction with the prisoners could be used by guards to humiliate and degrade them. This included the food distribution and the daily round to collect the bodies of those who had died during the previous 24 hours. Prisoners also described being ill-treated after guards noticed them observing religious rituals, such as praying or fasting during Ramadan. Cold weather also presented an opportunity to ill-treat prisoners.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

Ahmad F is a beekeeper from Latakia. He attended two peaceful demonstrations after hearing about government violations that had taken place in Homs. He was arrested in March 2012 and held in several branches before he was transferred to Saydnaya Military Prison. He was released in 2015.

He described the food distribution in his cell:

"There was one guard... and he threw the food at us and on the ground. He made us take off our clothes, and then roll around on the food. Then he asked us, 'Are you strong enough to not eat that food, to throw it away?' No. We weren't. After we had rolled in it, and it was full of the dirt from the ground and the pus from our bodies, we still scooped it up, and we ate it. We even took a T-shirt and used it as a rag to soak up some of the liquid, and then we wrung it out in our mouths. We couldn't lose one taste of the food."

Ahmad F witnessed a fellow prisoner being beaten as a result of being perceived to have been praying:

"They saw a man praying – I'm not sure if he was or not. They came for him with four or five guards carrying a rubber belt [often one that had served as an engine part and had later been attached to a stick]. Then they brought us all out to be beaten. We were each hit 10 times with the rubber belt. I can't describe the pain. This kind of beating, it wasn't to kill us, or even really to hurt us – it was to make us afraid."¹⁷⁵

Anas is from Latakia. He was arrested in March 2012 after attending a demonstration in Latakia calling for political freedoms, and held in various Military Intelligence branches across Syria before being brought to the Military Field Court in al-Qaboun in February 2012. Shortly after that, he was transferred to Saydnaya. He told Amnesty International:

"Winter time was the worst. They used to punish us with cold water. It was so cold that someone in a nearby cell died from a heart attack... On 15 December 2013, we faced the worst punishment. At 8pm, they ordered us to take off our clothes, and the chief [detainee] of the cell had to bring water and pour it on us. The water went everywhere, all over our bodies and our blankets and clothes. For three days, nobody could get dry. Some just took off their clothes because they were so wet, and that only made them colder."¹⁷⁶

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST PRISONERS

Several of the survivors described witnessing sexual violence while detained in Saydnaya Military Prison. Omar S said:

"There is a guard who is very famous for this kind of thing. Because of our situation – we look very bad, and we smell bad – so the guards wouldn't usually make any sexual advances on us. But still, there was one time that the guard stripped all of us. And he chose two of us, one of us huge, and the other very small. He told the two to come to him. He asked them to turn in a circle, to show him their bodies. Then he ordered the bigger one to rape the smaller one. Because of the torture, and the situation, he couldn't, even if he had tried. The guard told him he had to do it or he would die."¹⁷⁷

INADEQUATE ACCESS TO MEDICAL CARE

All of the former prisoners interviewed for this report said they had very limited or no access to medical care while detained; this was no different in Saydnaya Military Prison. While there were medical staff present in the prison, some survivors reported that they did not receive any treatment; others said that asking for medical attention resulted in additional beating. Some said they were prevented by the guards from attracting the attention of the medical professionals. Most survivors witnessed cellmates dying as result of being unable to obtain medical assistance.

Abu Alhassan is a physiotherapist from one of the Damascus suburbs. He did not participate in any anti-government activities and does not know why he was arrested. He was detained by Military Intelligence

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 26 February 2016.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 April 2016.

agents in February 2012 and held in different facilities across Syria until February 2014, when he was transferred to Saydnaya. He was released in June 2014.

He described one instance in particular where, due to the lack of medical care, prisoners themselves attempted to save their injured cellmate with improvised medical treatment:

“They were beating one person, and they kicked him in the temple. He fell down. After the guard left, we found him sitting crookedly, with a pool of blood in front of him and an open wound on his head, just above his eye... But of course we had no supplies. We had a plastic bottle in the cell, so we used the sticker on the bottle – the label... Then I took his T-shirt, and I wrapped it around his head. [After about two weeks] it had healed OK, thank God. We were laughing – I said to him: ‘You should smile. You will remember me all my life when you look in the mirror. You will remember how I fixed you up with a label from a plastic bottle.’ In the prison, we were all of us doctors.”¹⁷⁸

Former prisoners in Saydnaya described illnesses and conditions similar to those experienced by detainees in branches of the security forces: widespread skin diseases, including scabies, as well as other problems caused by very poor hygiene such as infections, abscesses and lice.

Ahmad F, the beekeeper from Latakia, said:

“The scabies would start in the crotch or on the stomach, and then it would spread to under the arms. You can’t stop scratching for one minute... The doctor could have brought the medicine easily, but he insisted that all of the prisoners become infected, as a mode of torture.

“Your skin becomes very thin, and you make more and more wounds from scratching. Wherever you make a wound, you get more infections. In just one day, you can make a new wound that would become full of white pus. When you wake up, your clothes stick to your body wherever you were touching the floor. So your clothes are stuck to you with the glue of the pus, and if you try to separate your clothes from your body, you rip open the wound and you become even more infected.”¹⁷⁹

Salam, the lawyer from Aleppo, described a period in early 2013, when the deaths of prisoners at Saydnaya increased:

“It was especially bad... There were more beatings and there was a wave of infections. From our wing, on our floor, five or six people died each day. Out of the 30 people in each cell, perhaps two were healthy. Before the doctor would come and ask: ‘Who’s sick?’ Now he just asked: ‘Who’s dead? Bring them out!’

“The doctor and his staff were well prepared. They knew there were a lot of infections so they wore protective clothing and they took care not to touch anyone. They would ask the person responsible for each cell to bring out the bodies and put them into a cart. Then they piled them up in the corner near the door. We could see the pile. We started to realize that those guards moving the bodies got bored, they stopped obeying orders, they started taking their time because there were so many bodies.”¹⁸⁰

INADEQUATE ACCESS TO FOOD AND INADEQUATE SHELTER

As was the case for those held in the underground cells, survivors of the above-ground cells also frequently reported not having enough food, often over long periods of time or the entire period they were held at Saydnaya.

As a result of the lack of food, Jamal A and “Wael” described how a system developed in their cell in order to support each other. “Wael” said:

“It would take a novel to explain the starvation in Saydnaya. After we finished eating, we would search around on the floor for just a piece of rice, or a grain of bulgur. We were like chickens. Every once in a while, they would bring oranges, and we would eat every morsel – the skin, the leaves, everything. Of course we ate the pits of the

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 25 April 2016.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 26 February 2016.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

olives. In fact we used to divide them into two or three pieces. They would never have any waste from the food to take away. We would eat everything they gave us...

"After a while, we created a system... [It] was a new kind of trade. We realized that people were dying, and we had to share food. I am a trader from Damascus, so I was setting the prices. The currency was food or clothing. Each day, the people in our cell would come to me with a piece of bread, or a spoon of rice, or jam, and ask me, 'What's the price today?'..."

"It all started with one guy... He told me he had lost the hope that he would ever leave. He said, 'I'm not angry – I am not thinking about my wife or my kids – I am just starving. I am thinking only of food.' I sat there next to him, and I tried to figure out how to help him. We were in a real battle of survival. If I gave you my food, then I might die. And if you gave me your food, then you could die.

"I ended up giving him my piece of bread that day, and half of my portion of rice. This was where the trade started, because I needed to make an exchange. I said that the price of my half piece of bread was a whole piece of bread, but he could pay it in instalments, over the course of four days. So there was some interest on the loan.

"We were all starving and miserable, but this activity helped us survive. It meant that we could spread out the food, depending on who was suffering the most, and it made our minds active. We were always planning something, fighting back, being human. Before, our brains were only thinking: eat, eat, eat, eat. After, we were thinking of co-operating, working together. We even started trading food for clothing, for the people who were very cold."¹⁸¹

Most survivors also reported being extremely cold while held in the above-ground cells. Abu Alhassan described the cold in his cell:

"The first 10-20 days, the weather was very cold. We had to sit on top of each other to keep warm – we would take turns putting our feet under each other's legs."¹⁸²

8.5 ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE AND FAMILY VISITS

Some of the survivors described being allowed infrequent family visits. If such visits took place, they were generally held in the presence of guards and detainees had to follow rules on what they were allowed to say to their relatives. Former prisoners also described being beaten on the way to, as well as on the way back from, their visits.

Jamal A described the procedures during visits:

"People would be called for visits on Tuesdays and Sundays. They would call us out of the cells and force us to run in a 'train', being beaten all the way. Then we were taken to a waiting room on the first floor; there were some rooms where we were kept. There would be some dead bodies in the cell with us. We would have to wait three to four hours. There would be anywhere from two to 13 corpses in that room."¹⁸³

Anas who was held in Saydnaya in 2014 added:

"I remember that the first time I spoke aloud in the prison was when my sister visited, after three months. When I saw her, I was still whispering. The guard poked me in the back with his baton and said 'Speak!' The guard told me what to say when I saw her. We had five minutes to talk, and one time I started to tell the truth of what was going on, and he kicked me with his boot, under the window. Once I left the room, the guards started beating me with the green pipes. My family brought a lot of things for me – a T-shirt and underwear, and even a towel. But I never saw those things again."¹⁸⁴

Several interviewees said that, while detained at Saydnaya, they were held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance: they were not allowed any contact with the outside world and their family was

¹⁸¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 27 February 2016.

¹⁸² Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 25 April 2016.

¹⁸³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 27 February 2016.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 25 February 2016.

given no, or false, information about their fate and whereabouts. This was the case for Shappal and Omar S.

Shappal told Amnesty International:

“My family didn’t know about me... My brother went to Damascus through a middleman. They had got information that I was in Saydnaya, and they got official permission to visit. In Saydnaya, they told my brother that I wasn’t there and I had died. When my family heard that, they built a shrine for me.”¹⁸⁵

Omar S said:

“The government told [my family] that I had died... Other detainees who were released from the prison – they saw their friends and their relatives and found out that their families had made a shrine for them a year before, because they were given their death certificate. Their family thought they had died. The authorities were sending certificates of death for the families (‘he died of a heart attack’, etc.), and families started noticing that the date of death was even before the visit. So why they are doing that? You should understand that the records of the whole detention are fake... There are a lot of names with death certificates. The head of the prison, he can play with you – he can sell you, he can take a bribe, or he can kill you.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 January 2016.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 22 April 2016.

9. DEATHS IN CUSTODY

“[The security forces] made us write fake death records, to say that the person had died of a heart attack, or sudden heart failure, or anything other than torture... so they can say in front of the international community, ‘We do not kill civilians.’”

“Atlas”, medical doctor who previously worked in several military hospitals¹⁸⁷

As a result of the violations documented above, including the widespread use of torture and other ill-treatment and appalling detention conditions, deaths in custody were described by the interviewees for this report as a common occurrence across the various facilities operated by the Syrian security forces and Saydnaya Military Prison. Most interviewees described witnessing at least one, if not several, such deaths.

The exact number of deaths of detainees in these facilities is not known because, as described above, the vast majority of prisoners held by the security forces are detained in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance, meaning that the Syrian government either fails to acknowledge their detention altogether or refuses to provide information about their fate and whereabouts to their families and lawyers. The Syrian Network for Human Rights, a Syrian NGO, has documented the names of 65,116 individuals who were subjected to enforced disappearance by the Syrian authorities between March 2011 and August 2015 and remained missing as of 30 August 2015. The vast majority, 58,148 of them, have been recorded as civilians.¹⁸⁸ Many of the relatives who contacted Amnesty International have been waiting for years to find out what happened to their loved ones following their arrest by government forces.¹⁸⁹

When information is provided to families, it is often not clear whether it is accurate. As mentioned above, some of the interviewees for this report stated that their families had been told that they had been killed while they were alive and in detention. Other family members told Amnesty International that they had received a death certificate, sometimes months after the death had allegedly taken place, but were never able to identify the body of their relatives, find out where they had been buried or how they

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 May 2016.

¹⁸⁸ For additional information, including on methodology, refer to: Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Forced disappearance in Syria: Gone without a trace*, 2015, available at www.sn4hr.org/blog/2015/08/30/11397/

¹⁸⁹ For more information on enforced disappearances and the search for truth by the relatives of those detained, see: Amnesty International, *‘Between prison and the grave’: Enforced disappearances in Syria* (Index: MDE 24/2579/2015).

had died. When the death certificate did provide a cause of death, it almost always claimed it was a natural cause such as cardiac arrest.¹⁹⁰

Majd, who witnessed a death in custody, apparently due to lack of medical treatment while held in a Political Security-operated facility in Tartous, said:

"[After the victim's death] the guards came back and asked all the detainees to confirm that the guards had provided first aid minutes after he started bleeding so that they could write in their report that they tried to save his life. We had to clean all the blood in the cell. A friend later told me that they forced his parents to sign a death certificate that said he had been shot by terrorists on the way home after he was released."¹⁹¹

The Syrian authorities also continue to deny international monitoring groups such as the UN Commission of Inquiry access to their territory as well as to their detention and death in custody records, thus making it impossible for organizations including Amnesty International to review official statistics.

Nevertheless, several Syrian documentation groups have managed to assemble lists of confirmed deaths in custody through their local research teams following up on information as it becomes available, which they use to continuously update their data, thus ensuring that their records are as up-to-date as possible within the limitations placed on them. The limitations on their work include operating in an environment of armed conflict, as well as the reluctance of many family members to publicly speak about their detained and disappeared relatives out of fear of further retribution by the government.¹⁹²

For this report, Amnesty International partnered with the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), an independent NGO that applies science to the analysis of human rights violations around the world.¹⁹³ HRDAG worked with four Syrian documentation organizations: the Syrian Centre for Statistics and Research, the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies, the Syrian Network for Human Rights and the Violations Documentation Center in Syria. Based on the datasets collected from these organizations, HRDAG, "using a statistical method called multiple systems estimation (MSE), calculated that an estimated total of 17,723 victims¹⁹⁴, both documented and undocumented were killed in detention" between 15 March 2011 and 31 December 2015.¹⁹⁵

However, as a result of the difficulties mentioned above and HRDAG's "strict definition of killings that occurred while the victim was in detention" as well as other data classification restrictions, both HRDAG and Amnesty International consider this number to be a conservative estimate, with the real number likely to be much higher. Amnesty International fears that when, if ever, information on the more than 65,000 persons believed to have subjected to enforced disappearance by the Syrian authorities is revealed,¹⁹⁶ the number of confirmed deaths in custody would substantially increase.

¹⁹⁰ Similar patterns were also observed by Human Rights Watch; see Human Rights Watch, *If the dead could speak*. "Atlas", a doctor who previously worked in various military hospitals before he fled Syria in 2013 told Amnesty International: "[The security forces] would bring the dead prisoners to the hospital, and they made us write fake death records, to say that the person had died of a heart attack, or sudden heart failure, or anything other than torture. So for every detainee that died in their intelligence centres, the government has a formal document that justifies their death, so they can say in front of the international community, 'We do not kill civilians'." Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 May 2016.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 19 February 2016.

¹⁹² For one such group see for example: Violations Documentation Center in Syria, *About VDC*, available at www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/about

¹⁹³ HRDAG is a non-profit project of Community Partners® (www.communitypartners.org/).

¹⁹⁴ 95% credible interval (13,409, 18,713) – for additional information, please refer to Human Rights Data Analysis Group, *Technical memo for Amnesty International report on deaths in detention*, August 2016, available at hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/HRDAG-AI-memo.pdf

¹⁹⁵ For additional information on the methodology applied by HRDAG, see Human Rights Data Analysis Group, *Technical memo for Amnesty International report on deaths in detention*, August 2016, available at hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/HRDAG-AI-memo.pdf

¹⁹⁶ Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Forced disappearance in Syria: Gone without a trace*, 2015, available at www.sn4hr.org/blog/2015/08/30/11397/

10. RETURN TO LIFE

“This experience changed my life. I lost my family and my children.”

“Maha”

All of the survivors interviewed for this report said that the trauma they experienced during their detention fundamentally impacted their lives and the lives of their families and loved ones. Most continue to face difficulties, in particular with their health, both psychological and physical, long after their release, though some also say that the experience has made them stronger.

Lama, a peaceful activist from Homs, said:

“When I was released, it was very hard. I had two difficult months. I had physical problems – soreness, stomach problems. My shoulders need a lot of physical therapy, because they hit them during the investigations.

“But I also felt afraid, every day. Even in Turkey, I am afraid of the police. Actually I had problems with breathing because of this. I couldn’t get enough breath. I was so scared that I couldn’t breathe normally. Every detainee needs counselling. Now I am seeing the positive side of what I went through. I am not quite as afraid of the police cars now.”¹⁹⁷

Most detainees interviewed for this report also said that they required extensive medical attention following their release. The ongoing health problems they described include nerve damage, back and joint pain, exhaustion, skin conditions and psychological problems.

Samer told Amnesty International he was subjected to, among other forms of torture and other ill-treatment, concentrated beatings on his genitalia, which resulted in one of his testicles being ruptured. He said:

“Being with my family again was very strange. It was as if I had a cancer, and then someone told me I was healed. Just because they tell me this doesn’t make it true... I will never overcome it. I lost my ability to have children in the prison. I will never be able to have a family... Also my back has a lot of problems – a disc in it slipped, and I have had two surgical operations to overcome the problems... but I can’t afford the third operation. I can’t take the time off of work and leave my wife without support.”¹⁹⁸

Hani is a peaceful activist and social researcher from Damascus who was detained in various branches of security forces before eventually being transferred to ‘Adra Prison, where he was held between February 2012 and July 2015. He pointed out that not all of his experiences in detention were negative:

“[In detention] I used a chicken bone as a pen and a dark shirt as a board for reading and writing. I would scrub the fabric against the wall and put some sand on it to make it dirty, then I would rub the bone against the wall to shape it as a ‘pen’. [I wrote on the ‘board’] and, when I put on the shirt, the letters and words took shape.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 10 December 2015.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 13 December 2015.

"I am giving you this example to tell you that we were looking for any educational or recreational tools that would help us to stay alive and give us a bit of hope. We would always share our pain with each other. We were like a family."¹⁹⁹

Saad, a student from Aleppo, said:

"[After I was released], I sat on a chair and drank clean water for the first time. I ate a meat kebab. Then I called my mother..."

"I went to the hospital to make sure my feet were OK and everything was fine. But my fever continued and I felt weak. I couldn't climb stairs; I had to sit down a lot. Then the doctor discovered internal bleeding in my right lung. A blood vessel had burst [as a result of the beatings in detention]. It pushed blood into my lungs. I had to have four chest operations and spent 15 days in the hospital. I have scars all over my chest. I couldn't breathe properly for four months and had to spend four months in bed..."

"I then escaped to the liberated areas [referring to an area no longer under the control of the Syrian authorities]. I couldn't stay in touch with my friends to avoid putting them at risk..."

"I lost two years of my life. My body is disgusting. The doctor said that it's amazing that I survived, a burst blood vessel can kill in less than 10 days. Only when I went to the liberated areas did I stop feeling afraid. Only then I felt that no one can arrest me, no one can kill me."²⁰⁰

Several of the other interviewees also said that, following their release, they had to flee to areas outside of the control of the Syrian authorities due to fear of being rearrested. They described being unable to contact their families and friends as they feared this could place them at risk of also being targeted by the Syrian authorities. Umm Omar, who now works with primary school children and injured civilians, said:

"My mother died when my siblings and I were young, so I was responsible for raising my younger brothers and sisters. I lived with my youngest sister at the time of my arrest. I had known that I was wanted [by the authorities], but my youngest sister was still at university and she needed me, so I decided to stay and continued working..."

"After I was released, I was supposed to be free, but I wasn't normal. Their voices were still in my head. One night I decided to move into the opposition-held areas... I didn't know how to leave my sister, but my friends said, 'If someone complains again, that will be the end of you.' So I decided to go... My father drove me to the checkpoint. He didn't say anything the entire drive. I asked him to pray for me, he was crying... I felt like I was leaving Syria... I was all alone. I was entering a barrel bomb area, but I had no choice... I have not seen my family since. They are still in the government area; they have their lives there. My youngest sister got married; she was so excited. I could not be at the wedding."²⁰¹

WOMEN SURVIVORS

Aside from the psychological and medical problems resulting from their detention as described above, three of the women who spoke to Amnesty International for this report said that, after their release, their families are no longer in contact with them, partly as a result of discriminatory social attitudes towards women who were detained and are thus assumed to have been raped in prison.²⁰²

Jalal, a male psychiatrist who was himself detained and is now working informally with other torture survivors from Syria, said:

"When women come out of the prisons in Syria, they are treated [by society] as if they have been raped. This is humiliating for them, and it can ruin their lives. So instead of being treated as women with dignity, a man will say something like, 'I don't mind marrying you'."²⁰³

"Souad"²⁰⁴ is a Turkey-based Syrian women's rights campaigner and works with women detention survivors to help them integrate back into their lives. She said:

"What can I say other than I hope God can help all Syrian women. The women leave detention just to face another war at home. They are attacked by everyone: their parents, their husbands, their children, their

neighbours. If the woman was married then she may certainly be faced with divorce after her release; at least that is what I have seen. Even the relationship between mother and child changes; children often feel distant from their mothers, or angry at their mothers for being detained, usually because they have been subjected to bullying or taunts about their mother's detention and the fact that 'she has probably been raped by now'... Almost all of the women (that I work with) have serious lack of trust; they are very angry and they have lost hope that the men who did this to them would ever be punished. This is one of the reasons a lot of these women, many of whom were arrested for their human rights work and peaceful activism, have lost hope in human rights organizations and human rights documentation."

"Maha" a mother of five, told Amnesty International that, following her release, her husband divorced her and refused her access to their eldest four children. She feared that she remained a possible target for the authorities and made the difficult decision to flee the country, effectively depriving herself of access to her youngest child.

"Laila" said:

"After my release, my parents abandoned me. They said I was no longer welcome in my family... I was sick and scared so I took my things and went to Ghouta – it wasn't besieged then. I got medical treatment there, and free medication."²⁰⁵

Mervat, a mother of two, lost her husband during a government air strike prior to her arrest. During her time in detention, her children remained with her late husband's family. She said:

"My family was pro-al-Assad, so they didn't ask after me... Even my family said, 'It's your mistake'... My kids are with my in-laws now. I have a boy who is 13 years old and a daughter who is five years old. They have the right, because I was detained so often... I am afraid to talk with [my children], or even call them, because after I did, [the authorities] came to my house and detained my sister for three days."²⁰⁶

ACCESS TO TREATMENT FOR TORTURE SURVIVORS

The majority of people interviewed for this report required medical treatment following their release. Those that leave Syria typically stop in one of five countries²⁰⁷: Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq or Egypt – all of which have primary medical care available. However, five years on with over 4.8 million refugees from Syria in these five countries, their public infrastructures have been placed under enormous strain. As a result, access to health services, even for primary health care, for refugees from Syria is becoming increasingly difficult due to funding shortfalls in the humanitarian response and increased barriers to accessing public services.²⁰⁸

Access to psychological treatment for torture survivors from Syria appears to be even more limited in these main countries hosting Syrian refugees. Based on a 2013 study by the World Health Organization and other specialized medical organizations on the mental health and psychosocial support needs of displaced Syrians in Jordan, 13% of the participating 1,811 families from Syria reported having received

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 17 February 2016.

²⁰⁰ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 24 February 2016.

²⁰¹ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 18 February 2016.

²⁰² The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network found that several of the women interviewed as part of their research were stigmatized by their community or even their family due to the assumption that they had been subjected to rape or other sexual violence while they were detained, affecting their ability to resume their lives after their release.

²⁰³ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 12 December 2015.

²⁰⁴ Name has been changed.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 23 February 2016.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Amnesty International researchers on 2 July 2015.

²⁰⁷ The majority of Syrian refugees live in three of the main host countries with over 2.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, over 1 million in Lebanon, and over 650,000 in Jordan. For a breakdown, see: UNHCR, *Syrian Refugee Response: Inter-agency information sharing portal*, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

²⁰⁸ For additional information see for example: Amnesty International, *Jordan: Living on the margins – Syrian refugees in Jordan struggle to access health care* (Index MDE 16/3628/2016) or Amnesty International, *Lebanon: Agonizing choices: Syrian refugees in need of health care in Lebanon* (Index MDE 18/001/2014).

access to these kinds of services provided by international mental health service providers and local NGOs. The study recommended the strengthening of psychosocial services and outreach.²⁰⁹

In Turkey, the independent medical humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Syrian organizations have told Amnesty International that access to mental health services there is very limited, with only a small number of local NGOs with limited scope and capacity providing such care. A MSF representative told Amnesty International:

“The specialized needs of [torture] survivors are compounded because of the trauma of forced displacement. Comprehensive rehabilitation, especially for transient populations with such a culturally stigmatized issue, remains a big gap in places like Turkey. Average treatment periods are generally long, access to such groups is very difficult, and specialized services are nearly completely absent. In the Syrian context in particular, a lot of individuals are affected by post-traumatic stress disorder and from mental illnesses that they don't want to recognize or don't want to report. There is a prevalent sense among such survivors that seeking care is betraying the people that have stayed behind. There is an acute need for raising awareness and promoting sensitivity to the needs of victims, especially among civil society and health care providers. Uncertainty about their future and socio-economic pressures on refugees are another big hurdle to rehabilitation which can only be addressed in the long run through legislative reform.”²¹⁰

Similarly in Lebanon support for torture survivors is limited and relies heavily on NGOs and the private sector.²¹¹ Prior to the crisis in Syria and the refugee response in Lebanon, mental health services were not provided in public hospitals. While the government has subsequently developed a National Mental Health Strategy²¹², it is yet to be put fully into practice and the capacity of medical staff to respond to mental health needs remains low.²¹³ Even when services are available, an NGO treating survivors of torture cited a number of challenges which prevent refugees from Syria from seeking care, including fear of arrest at check points on the way to the treatment centres due to lack of official residency permits. Other reasons for not seeking treatment include the lack of adequate financial assistance and shelter and the lack of early detection of torture survivors.²¹⁴

While a comprehensive assessment of access to torture rehabilitation is beyond the scope of this report, Amnesty International is calling on the international community to provide international co-operation and assistance to the main host countries to fulfil the right to health, including through prioritization of the removal of financial and other barriers to accessing health services, in particular for torture survivors. The international community must also ensure that funding requirements for health care and other financial needs in relation to the refugee response are fully met in the host countries; and significantly increase the number of resettlement and humanitarian admission places offered, in addition to expanding alternative pathways to admission over and above annual resettlement quotas.

²⁰⁹ World Health Organization and International Medical Corps in collaboration with the Jordanian Ministry of Health and Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network, *Assessment of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Needs of Displaced Syrians in Jordan*, 2013, available at www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=6650; see also International Medical Corps and Sisterhood is Global Institute Jordan, *Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) needs assessment of displaced Syrians and host communities in Jordan*, 2015, available at www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=10165, and Center for Victims of Torture, *Reclaiming hope, dignity and respect: Syrian and Iraqi torture survivors in Jordan*, 2015, available at www.cvt.org/sites/cvt.org/files/attachments/u11/downloads/ReclaimingHope_01042016.pdf

²¹⁰ Interview with Talha Jalal, Field Advocacy Manager for Médecins Sans Frontières Operational Centre Barcelona-Athens, 15 July 2016.

²¹¹ Amnesty International interview with UNHCR in Lebanon, 18 July 2016.

²¹² The National Mental Health Strategy of Lebanon, issued by the Ministry of Public Health, is available at www.bit.ly/2ayvveV

²¹³ Amnesty International interview with a mental health provider in Lebanon (name withheld), 1 August 2016.

²¹⁴ Amnesty International interview with a mental health provider in Lebanon (name withheld), 1 August 2016.

11. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 65 people who described their experiences to Amnesty International in the research for this report are just a tiny fraction of those who have survived similar horrors in Syria. Evidence collected by Amnesty International since the start of the crisis in Syria in 2011, as well as monitoring bodies such as the UN Commission of Inquiry, indicates that the numbers affected in this way run into the tens of thousands and that torture and other ill-treatment are a routine occurrence in government detention facilities.

According to the estimate presented in this report, tens of thousands were not lucky enough to survive the torture, inhuman detention conditions, lack of access to medical care and other ill-treatment inflicted on them. Previous research by Amnesty International has shown how tens of thousands of others have been subjected to enforced disappearance following arrest by Syrian government forces.

In Amnesty International's assessment, the patterns of torture and other ill-treatment, leading in many cases to death in custody, and of enforced disappearance have been perpetrated as part of an attack against the civilian population, pursuant to a state policy, that has been widespread, as well as systematic, and therefore amount to crimes against humanity.

Those who have survived their ordeals in detention have seen their lives impacted forever. Many of them have become part of the over 11 million people from Syria who have been displaced either internally or have fled the country altogether in search for safety.²¹⁵

Despite extensive documentation and evidence gathering into the crimes carried out by the Syrian authorities in their detention facilities, they continue to torture and otherwise ill-treat prisoners unabated. While not committed on the same scale, torture and other ill-treatment perpetrated by non-state armed groups also remains a serious concern, as documented recently by Amnesty International.²¹⁶

With little progress on accountability for these violations at the international level, the international peace talks on Syria, while stalled at the current time, offer, at the very least, a forum for influential actors on the world stage to address these abuses and take meaningful measures to begin to address them. Ultimately they should offer some hope that the abuses can be stopped and that the survivors and the families of those killed may one day see truth, justice and reparations emerge.

As the Syrian authorities show no inclination to put a stop to the culture of impunity enjoyed by the security forces and the systematic violations they are carrying out, it is imperative that, both in the context of the peace talks and outside them, the international community, and in particular the members of the International Syria Support Group and the UN Security Council, urgently prioritize the ongoing scandal of detention abuses in Syria and take up Amnesty International's recommendations below.

²¹⁵ For more information, see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'About the crisis', 2016, available at www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis

²¹⁶ See for example Amnesty International, 'Torture was my punishment': Abductions, torture and summary killings under armed group rule in Aleppo and Idlib, Syria (Index: MDE 24/4227/2016)

TO THE SYRIAN AUTHORITIES

The Syrian government is fully aware of the actions it needs to take to stop the crimes against humanity, including systematic torture and other ill-treatment, being carried out by its security forces. Amnesty International has called on the Syrian government repeatedly to undertake the following:

- End enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions and make clear to all government forces and militias that such violations will not be tolerated;
- Ensure that all persons deprived of their liberty are protected from torture and other ill-treatment and are treated humanely in accordance with international standards, including the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules) and the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules);
- End the use of unfair trials and the practice of trying civilians in military courts, abolish Military Field Courts and reform the Anti-Terrorism Court in line with international fair trial standards in law and in practice;
- Pending full abolition of the death penalty, halt the implementation of any death sentences and ensure that in proceedings related to offences where this punishment might be imposed the most rigorous international standards for fair trial are respected;
- Grant independent international monitors, such as the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, unhindered access to all persons deprived of their liberty and allow them to carry out unannounced inspection visits to all detention facilities to investigate and monitor conditions;
- Ensure that all those detained are registered, have access to a lawyer, can challenge the legality of their detention before an independent court, are provided access to medical care, are held in recognized places of detention and are allowed regular visits by their families;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, persons imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their human rights, or because of their identity;
- Inform families of the fate, whereabouts and legal status of all persons in their custody and respond to all outstanding requests;
- Ensure that all reports of torture and other ill-treatment are investigated, that those suspected of responsibility are prosecuted in civilian courts in proceedings that conform to international fair trial standards and that victims receive full reparation;
- Provide full co-operation and unimpeded access to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, to investigate all alleged crimes under international law and violations and abuses of international human rights law and international humanitarian law;
- Become a party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance;
- Accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and issue a declaration accepting the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction since 1 July 2002.

TO MEMBER STATES OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYRIA SUPPORT GROUP AND THE UN SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA

In light of their role in the negotiations between the conflicting parties in Syria, members of the International Syria Support Group and the UN Special Envoy for Syria must play a more prominent role in addressing the widespread, as well as systematic, use of torture in Syria. Amnesty International urges these states, as well as the Special Envoy to do the following:

- Prioritize the issue of torture and other ill-treatment in discussions with the Syrian authorities and other parties relevant to the situation in Syria;
- Call on the Syrian government to immediately guarantee that detainees will be protected from torture and other ill-treatment, to ensure they have unrestricted access to their family and lawyers, to reveal the whereabouts of all detainees who have been subjected to enforced disappearance and to publish the names of all those detained by Syrian government forces;
- Call on all parties to provide immediate and unhindered access for recognized international detention monitors to all persons deprived of their liberty, without prior notification;
- Call on all parties to the conflict to immediately and unconditionally release all those who are currently arbitrarily detained as a result of their peaceful activism, promotion and protection of human rights, and humanitarian and media work.

TO THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

In the apparent absence of measures being taken by the Syrian authorities to tackle the practice of enforced disappearance, the UN Security Council should follow up on the condemnation it expressed in resolution 2139 of February 2014 by taking further action as a matter of urgency. In particular, Amnesty International urges it to do the following:

- Fully acknowledge and condemn the massive and systematic use of torture and other ill-treatment being carried out by the Syrian government;
- Ensure that all parties to the conflict in Syria effectively implement the human rights and humanitarian provisions of Security Council resolution 2139, including by ending the practice of torture and other ill-treatment; and impose targeted sanctions, including asset freezes, on Syrian officials responsible for torture, enforced disappearances and other crimes under international law;
- Demand prompt and unfettered access to Syria for the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, humanitarian and human rights organizations and international journalists;
- Refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

States supporting the Syrian government, such as Russia and Iran, have generally failed to speak out against its practice of torture and other ill-treatment. They should, as a minimum, press the Syrian government to carry out the measures listed above.

Other states in the international community have condemned the Syrian government's systematic use of torture and other ill-treatment, as well as its practice of mass arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial executions. In addition to using their influence to push for action at the level of the UN Security Council, they should take measures such as the following to work towards accountability for those responsible for torture and other ill-treatment in Syria:

- Accept a shared responsibility to investigate and prosecute torture, enforced disappearances and other crimes under international law committed in Syria, in particular by seeking to exercise universal jurisdiction to bring suspected perpetrators to justice;
- Integrate screening mechanisms within the national asylum system to identify survivors of torture among refugees and asylum-seekers and ensure that they receive the medical and psychological treatment, as well as the social support, necessary for their rehabilitation;
- Support and build the capacity of Syrian human rights organizations that are documenting violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in the Syrian conflict to gather and share objective and impartial information, and encourage the UN and other international actors to ensure that such support and training is made available to them.

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“IT BREAKS THE HUMAN”

TORTURE, DISEASE AND DEATH IN SYRIA’S PRISONS

The experiences faced by detainees in Syria’s detention system are often lethal. An estimated 17,723 people were killed in custody across Syria between 2011 and 2015, with the real number likely to be even higher. Of the 65 former detainees interviewed by Amnesty International for this report, most had witnessed at least one death in custody. All had been tortured and/or otherwise ill-treated.

This report charts the journey of detainees through what the UN Commission of Inquiry, among others, considers to be Syria’s most lethal detention facilities, including Saydnaya Military Prison and the detention centres operated by Syria’s four intelligence services – Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Political Security and General Intelligence.

Based on the evidence presented in this report, as well as prior research by Amnesty International and the documentation of credible national and international monitoring groups, Amnesty International considers that the torture and other ill-treatment of detainees carried out by the Syrian government since 2011 has been perpetrated as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population, pursuant to a state policy, and therefore amounts to a crime against humanity.

This report calls on the international community to pressure the Syrian authorities to abide by their international obligations and end the use of torture and other ill-treatment, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances, and prevent further deaths in custody.

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