

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

|                                    |                                                 |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>                  | <b>341</b>                                      |
| Land:                              | Syrien                                          |
| Kilde:                             | Human Rights Watch.                             |
| Titel:                             | Syria: Detention and Abuse of Female Activists. |
| Udgivet:                           | 24. juni 2013                                   |
| Optaget på<br>baggrundsmaterialet: | 10. september 2013                              |

[EN](#) | [DE](#)

- **Source:**  
HRW - Human Rights Watch
- **Title:**  
Syria: Detention and Abuse of Female Activists
- **Publication date:**  
24 June 2013
- **ecoi.net summary:** Military and pro-government forces known as *shabiha* have arbitrarily detained female opposition activists and female relatives and neighbours of pro-opposition activists and fighters, and in a number of cases, subjected them to torture and sexual abuse [ID 250906]
- **Countries:**  
Syrian Arab Republic
- **Original link** <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/24/syria-detention-and-abuse-female-activists>

**Recommended citation:**

HRW - Human Rights Watch: Syria: Detention and Abuse of Female Activists, 24 June 2013 (available at ecoi.net)

[http://www.ecoi.net/local\\_link/250906/361806\\_en.html](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/250906/361806_en.html) (accessed 04 September 2013)



## Syria: Detention and Abuse of Female Activists

Women Detail Torture and Abuse by Government in New Testimonies

June 24, 2013

(New York) – [Syrian](#) military and pro-government forces known as *shabiha* have arbitrarily detained female opposition activists as well as female relatives and neighbors of pro-opposition activists and fighters, and in a number of cases, subjected them to torture and sexual abuse.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 10 Syrian women who were detained, either due to their own engagement in activities related to government opposition, or that of their family members. Eight were themselves activists who had been detained, all of whom said that security forces and *shabiha* had abused or tortured them in detention. The abuse included electric shocks, keeping them in stress positions, and using metal rods, wires and nightsticks to beat and torture them. The eight women had attended peaceful demonstrations, created posters for opposition groups, provided humanitarian aid and medical care to those affected by the conflict, transported defectors from the Syrian military, and assisted displaced Syrians. All said security forces detained them at checkpoints or during home raids, and held them for periods lasting up to nearly 14 months between February 2012 and April 2013. In two cases, the women said their captors raped them while they were detained at the Military Intelligence Branch in Tartous, and the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Mezze, Damascus.

Human Rights Watch also interviewed two women who were detained, and five who were physically abused, by government forces simply because of the suspected association of their relatives or neighbors with pro-opposition forces.

Human Rights Watch has not received information about opposition forces detaining and mistreating female government supporters or relatives of those associated with government forces.

“Beyond the daily gun battles, women have been a powerful voice in the opposition in villages and towns across Syria,” said [Liesl Gerntholtz](#), women’s rights director at Human Rights Watch. “In response, the Syrian government is punishing women for delivering humanitarian assistance, participating in protests, and supporting the opposition by subjecting them to detention, torture, and sexual assault.”

All 10 of the former detainees interviewed were arrested and detained arbitrarily, Human Rights Watch said. Eight of the women were held solely for activities related to their support of government opposition, including participating in peaceful protests, providing humanitarian assistance, and aiding Syrian army defectors and wounded opposition fighters. In two cases, women were detained solely due to their relatives’ activities in opposition to the government. Former detainees said that security forces conducting the arrests did not identify themselves, provide legal justification for arrests, inform the women of the charges against them, or tell them where they were being taken. One former detainee was held for about three months in pretrial detention, violating both international legal standards and legislation passed by the Syrian government, in April 2011, that

limits detention without judicial review to 60 days.

The women reported torture in the following detention facilities: the Military Intelligence Branch in Tartous, the Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus, the Military Intelligence Branch in Daraa, and Adra central prison in Damascus. Human Rights Watch has previously [documented](#) the government's use of torture in 27 detention centers throughout Syria, including in these facilities.

Fatmeh (all names have been changed to protect interviewees), a 35-year-old activist who helped transport Syrian army defectors from Homs to Daraa, told Human Rights Watch that she was tortured every day during a 15-day stretch in detention at Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus, in March 2012:

One day it would be by electricity, the next by *shabeh* [being hung from the ceiling by one's wrists with feet dangling or barely touch the ground]. The torture marks are still present. I would lose consciousness with the electricity... [T]hey were hitting me on my lower legs below my thighs and on my back. They tortured me until my body started bruising ... Two men took me and carried me to the toilet because I couldn't walk.

Fatmeh was released in March 2013, after nearly 14 months' detention.

All eight women activists interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that security forces detained them because of their pro-opposition activities. They said that security forces interrogated them about their own involvement with pro-opposition groups, and asked them for names, locations, and activities of friends, relatives, and other suspected opposition supporters. Nasrin, 25, was detained in Daraa in February 2012, while helping to transport a Syrian army defector. She told Human Rights Watch that her interrogators asked about the identity of a Free Syrian Army leader in her village, and promised her release in exchange for his name.

Six of the women said that the authorities charged them with "terrorism" or "terrorist activities," but released them after months in detention without adequate due process – including judges who refused to examine their case files based on instruction from security divisions, and who remanded them to prison for extended periods of time without instruction or ruling.

"National Security has looked over your file and we can't do anything," a judge in Damascus said to one of the women. "No one is allowed to see your file. You can't be released by a judge."

A legal counselor in Damascus told Human Rights Watch that she is currently assisting 15 female detainees held at Adra central prison, following their transfer from security branches in governorates including Idlib, Daraa, and Damascus:

Most of the women have been arrested during the revolution because of their own activities – demonstrating, providing humanitarian assistance or medical assistance, even [for just] being active on the Internet or Facebook ... They are being charged with helping or working with an armed group, as terrorists – but it is not true.

She said that her clients have reported that some 150 women are currently held at Adra, a number corroborated by two former detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch. Based on her work with female detainees since the start of the Syrian uprisings, the legal counselor believes that the majority of these women are being detained for political participation and activities in support of opposition groups. The Violations Documentation Center in Syria [estimates](#) that the Syrian government detained more than 5,400 women between March 2011 and April 2013; they estimate that 766 women and 34 girls under age 18 remain in government detention facilities. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 24 female detainees have been [tortured to death](#) since March 2011. Human Rights Watch is unable to independently verify the number of female detainees or those who have died in detention, because of denial of access to detention facilities in Syria.

Two of the former detainees reported to Human Rights Watch that security forces and prison guards raped and sexually abused them while in detention. Amal, 19, told Human Rights Watch that she was raped on two different occasions: first by an investigator and two officers in October 2012, at the Military Intelligence Branch in Tartous, and a second time by two officers in the Military Intelligence Branch 235 (Palestine Branch) in Damascus, in November 2012. Maysa, 30, told Human Rights Watch about being beaten, threatened with torture, and raped on two separate occasions in June 2012, by a security officer while she was detained in the Investigation Branch at Air Force Intelligence in Mezza, Damascus. After the first rape, Maysa reported the attack to a commanding officer who was interrogating her. The officer slapped the attacker in front of Maysa after she identified him as the perpetrator of the rape, but did not remove him from his post. Maysa told Human Rights Watch that the attacker raped her again the following evening. On two other occasions, in July 2012, a prison guard at the same branch forced Maysa to perform oral sex on him. Brigadier General Abdul Salam Fajr Mahmoud is the director of the Investigation Branch at this facility.

Human Rights Watch has previously identified the locations, agencies responsible, torture methods, and, in many cases, commanders who were in charge of the 27 detention facilities run by Syrian intelligence agencies where the organization has documented torture. Human Rights Watch has documented systematic patterns that point to a state policy of torture and ill-treatment, and therefore constitute a crime against humanity. Human Rights Watch has also [previously documented](#) the use of sexual violence by Syrian security forces against male and female detainees in more than 20 incidents. The degree to which sexual violence is used in detention remains unclear, due to lack of access to detention facilities by human rights monitors and the reticence of many victims to come forward for fear of stigma or reprisals.

Human Rights Watch does not have evidence that high-ranking officers commanded their troops to commit sexual violence in detention, or that sexual violence is widespread and systematic in government detention facilities. However, information received by Human Rights Watch indicates that commanding officers in most cases took no action to investigate or punish those committing acts of sexual violence, or to prevent them from committing such acts. This was despite the assaults taking place in circumstances in which commanding officers knew or should have known the crimes were occurring. In the one case documented by Human Rights Watch where officers appeared to punish a perpetrator through physical violence – the case of Maysa – these actions were inadequate in protecting the detainee from abuse. In no case is there evidence to suggest that perpetrators were prosecuted for their crimes.

Human Rights Watch calls for the immediate release of all nonviolent activists and detainees held arbitrarily, including those detained for opposition activity or suspected activity of relatives. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly called on the United Nations Security Council to demand that Syrian authorities grant unrestricted access to all detention facilities for international monitors, including the Commission of Inquiry mandated by the UN Human Rights Council. Internationally recognized, trained human rights monitors must be permitted and equipped to investigate arbitrary detention, torture, and sexual abuse of both men and women. Human Rights Watch reiterates its call to the UN Security Council to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and urges other countries to join the calls for accountability by supporting a referral to the ICC as the forum most capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting those bearing the greatest responsibility for abuses in Syria.

Human Rights Watch continues to call on international nongovernmental organizations, humanitarian assistance providers, the United Nations, and local organizations to develop, expand, and improve access to medical, psychological, social, and legal assistance to Syrian female victims of torture, including sexual assault, inside and outside of the country.

“Torture and attacks against female activists have gone on for more than two years, and the Syrian authorities continue to turn a blind eye,” Gerntholtz said. “The Syrian government must immediately stop abusing female activists and put in measures to protect them. Those who have committed these crimes must be held accountable.”

#### **Arbitrary Detention, Torture, Physical Abuse of Female Activists and Other Detainees: Interviews and Testimonies**

Human Rights Watch spoke to eight female activists who reported torture or physical abuse during detention in the Military Intelligence Branch in Tartous, the Military Intelligence Branch in Daraa, the Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus, the Air Force Intelligence (AFI) Branch in Mezze, Damascus, and Adra central prison.

*Shabiha* detained Amal, 19, from her home in Tartous governorate in October 2012, after she participated in peaceful demonstrations, and held her for about three months in facilities in Tartous, Homs, and Damascus governorates. She was questioned extensively about her knowledge of opposition supporters and ultimately accused of terrorism. She told Human Rights Watch that at the Military Intelligence Branch in Tartous, she was hung from the ceiling by her wrists with her feet barely touching the ground (a form of torture known as *shabah*). She said she was forced to remain like this for six hours, during which time two security officers would periodically hit her with sticks or wires. She also said that one of her interrogators used electricity to torture her:

[He] took me into my room, put me on a chair and tied me to it. He brought a blade and started cutting me on my wrist, to make the electric shock with blood. He took the sheath off the wire and put it on my wounded wrist [where he had cut my wrist]. He cut my hand, there was a little bit of blood, and he put the wire in there. He turned on the electricity for two or three minutes ... He did three shocks. When he sees someone under torture he is laughing, happy.

Fatmeh, 35, who was detained in Damascus for assisting the transport of army defectors and encouraging protests, told Human Rights Watch about torture by electric shock in Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus:

I would sit in the chair with my hands tied up, my legs tied at the bottom. They would put electricity on the chair I'm sitting on. They put a charge on the chair so it was shaking. I would pass out. It was a metal chair and the electricity would come through the chair.

Additionally, Fatmeh said that when she did not respond to demands for information about Free Syrian Army members, their weapons supplies, and their strategy, her interrogators beat her until she passed out.

Suraya, a 31-year-old detained in Daraa in February 2012 for assisting Syrian army defectors and encouraging protests, had broken her leg in an accident before the protests began. She told Human Rights Watch that a lieutenant at the Military Intelligence Branch in Daraa used her injury to torture her: “[He] knew it was not healed yet. If I answered a question in a way he didn't like, he would kick me there in my leg ... My leg needs surgery. The doctor here [in Jordan] said they broke the bone and made it into small pieces.” Suraya walks with a visible limp.

Nasrin, 25, experienced similar abuse during 11 months of detention at Adra central prison between April 2012 and March 2013. Nasrin had been detained in Deraa after participating in protests and helping to transport wounded opposition fighters and defectors. She told Human Rights Watch that an Adra prison lieutenant would deny the detainees access to the semi-outdoor area just outside their cell, in which they were permitted to go for fresh air:

When we asked to go out he beat us. He beat me on my foot. A nurse told me there was something broken inside my leg [from the beating]. He used his army boots and would kick me with the heels of his boots.

Six women interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they had witnessed or heard security forces torturing other prisoners, both male and female, while they were detained. One former detainee said that security forces at Military Intelligence Branch 215 removed her blindfold and forced her to watch them shoot and kill two male friends and fellow detainees. She told Human Rights Watch that the two men were non-Syrians who had worked with her at protests during the early days of the uprisings.

Female detainees said that they had witnessed security forces using electric shock, car tires, chairs, leather ropes, and strip-searches to abuse other detainees. Such abuses were reported in the Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus, Military Intelligence Branch 235 (Palestine Branch) in Damascus, the Political Security Branch in Salamiyah, the Military Security Branch in Hama, and the Military Intelligence Branch in Daraa.

Nisreen, 25, told Human Rights Watch that she was arrested in Daraa in February 2012, and held for more than a year. She said that at the beginning of the revolution, the security forces would not shoot at women; she became part of a “front line” of women who served as protection for male protesters. In addition, she later assisted in transporting injured opposition fighters and Syrian military defectors. Nisreen saw and heard the torture of male detainees while she was held at Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus:

[O]ur room was next door to the room where they were questioning men. All night I would hear them torturing and questioning them, from 12 noon until morning. When a man's blood was all over the floor, the same one who was tortured had to clean the floor. We could hear the voices saying, “Clean the floor, dog. Wash this, dog.” There was a small space in our door and we could see them cleaning the ground outside our room. They would torture them with electricity and throw water on them – we could hear it all. The place was very small and you could hear all around you.

Four former detainees said that judges repeatedly refused to review their cases when they were brought before the court. Fatmeh, 30, was brought before the terrorism court in Damascus, which was established after the start of the Syrian uprisings, three times during more than five months of detention at Adra prison. She told Human Rights Watch about her second appearance before in the court:

The judge saw the file and said, “National Security has looked over your file and we can't do anything. No one is allowed to see your file. You can't be released by a judge.” He said my sentence would be execution. My lawyer said, “I cannot do anything. There is nothing I can do except keep checking on you.”

When Fatmeh and other women detained at Adra prison for opposition activity later demanded that their case files be reviewed by a judge, she said that they were put in solitary confinement and denied food and visitation rights.

Three former detainees never appeared before a judge, nor had any formal charges brought against them. All of the former detainees told Human Rights Watch that they were released only in exchange for bribes, the surrender of a family member, or the relinquishing of prisoners held by the opposition.

### **Sexual Abuse and Harassment in Detention**

Two female activists told Human Rights Watch that they were raped in detention. Amal, 19, said that one of her interrogators and two security officers raped her when she was detained at the Military Intelligence Branch in Tartous:

[The interrogator] came in in shorts, an undershirt and brought two others ... He came closer to me and that's when the whole thing started. [The rape] lasted for maybe a half hour or more. He dressed and went out. I was on the floor. The next person came. It was a half hour more. The second one said to everyone outside, "Come and see." [With] the third one, the door was open. It was in front of whoever was in the corridor ... I could try to resist the first one and the second one, but not the third one. I looked down and saw a lot of blood. I felt dizzy. I was crawling to my pants and blouse. A doctor showed up in the room ... He took me to the bathroom and said, "Clean yourself."

Information received by Human Rights Watch indicates that no action was taken to investigate the incident or penalize the perpetrators.

Air Force Intelligence (AFI) officers detained Maysa, 30, in June 2012 at her home and took her to the AFI Branch in Mezze, Damascus. She had been providing humanitarian assistance to internally displaced Syrians while studying at university. She told Human Rights Watch that she was raped by an AFI security officer during her 140 days of detention:

When he came in he told me, "If the FSA had detained you they would have raped you, but here I will be the only one who will have sex with you." He took off his clothes. I screamed ... Then he approached me and turned me around facing the wall. He took off his underwear and raped me from behind. After he finished he threatened me and said, "If you say something don't blame [it] on anyone but yourself." ... I did not know if I wanted to scream or cry or both.

Maysa reported the rape and identified her attacker to an interrogator in the prison, who slapped the security officer as punishment, and told Maysa to alert him if the officer approached her again. The next day, however, she said that the officer came to her cell and raped her a second time. After this, Maysa told Human Rights Watch that she suffered a nervous breakdown and beat her head on the steel bars of her cell until she fainted. When she came to, a second interrogator again asked her to identify her attacker again, which she did. The perpetrator denied the assault and, to incite anger towards him, Maysa accused him of being a Free Syrian Army officer. When she did this, the interrogator beat the offending officer.

Later in her detention, another security officer sexually assaulted Maysa while she was in solitary confinement in July 2012. She told Human Rights Watch that he took care to bring her to a bathroom that was not monitored by security cameras, so that he could assault her:

I was washing my hands when he approached me and said that he can help me get out [of detention] and that he has very good connections ... He started touching me everywhere. Then he pushed me downwards ... He removed his pants but not all the way. Then he put his penis in my mouth. He was not afraid. He was doing it with confidence. I was afraid to scream because he threatened to torture me. He ejaculated on my face. He made me do this twice during the 24 days [that I was in solitary confinement] ... After that day, he passed every day by my cell to see me. He repeatedly told me, "If you talk you will regret it, you don't know who you are dealing with."

Three former detainees told Human Rights Watch that security forces and prison guards sexually harassed them during detention, ranging from groping to verbal abuse. The abuse reportedly took place in the Military Intelligence Branch in Daraa, the General Intelligence Directorate Al-Khattib Branch in Damascus, and Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus.

Hadiya, 20, was detained for approximately two months in June 2012, because of her activism and that of her family members. She had been providing aid to war-affected families, and was arrested while participating in a demonstration in Damascus. She told Human Rights Watch that she was sexually harassed by police officers while in solitary confinement in the Al-Khattib Branch in Damascus. "Two of them tried to touch me through the hole in the door. They told me to get naked because it is very hot and [so] they can watch ... The jailer said, 'If you let me sleep with you I'll let you out.'" Human Rights Watch has previously documented the use of torture in

the Al-Khattib Branch, including beatings, beatings with objects, electrocution, beatings on the soles of the feet (*falaqa*), and placing detainees in stress positions.

Fatmeh, 35, said she was sexually assaulted in Military Intelligence Branch 215 in Damascus by her interrogators and guards: "I was blindfolded, sitting on the ground. They used to come and put their hand on me and say foul language. They would put their hands on my breasts." Human Rights Watch has also previously documented the use of torture in Military Intelligence Branch 215 through the use of beatings, beatings with objects, and *shabeh*.

#### **Arbitrary Detention and Abuse of Non-Activist Women During Search Operations**

Rasha, 31, was arrested during a household search in Hama in August 2011, by men she identified as military police. She suffers from kidney disease and underwent a kidney transplant in 2007; she became ill while in detention in Hama as she was not permitted access to her daily regimen of medications. Rasha told Human Rights Watch that she was tortured by government forces during her 18-day detention in the Hama Military Security Branch:

They took me alone. It was because of my husband – they were searching for him. He was wanted for demonstrating ... They were hitting me with a stick, with metal, with wood. I told them about my kidney medications that I needed. They hit me more. They said they would stop if I said where my husband was. They burned me with a hot iron. They were hitting me everywhere, especially on my kidney area.

She was released only after military police located and detained her husband in Hama. As Rasha attested, "I wasn't targeted anymore after I got out of prison because my husband was in prison." While in detention, Rasha said she was held in a small room with 30 to 35 other young women who had all been detained because a family member was wanted for support of the opposition.

Halima, a 20-year-old pregnant mother of two from Homs, told Human Rights Watch that government forces targeted her because of her cousins, who she said are members of the Free Syrian Army. Five men in military uniform, whom she identified as *shabiha*, came to her house in March 2012 after visiting her uncle's home nearby:

They came to my house at the same time because my name is the same as my cousins' ... They took me and put me in a big room for two days. I don't know where it was. They blindfolded me and took me in a car ... They asked questions about my cousins – where did they go? I told them I didn't know.

After three days of questioning, Halima said that a female *shabiha* member working with her captors took pity on her and helped her to escape. Fearing further persecution, she and her family left immediately for Damascus and then Jordan.

Human Rights Watch also documented five cases of abuse of women by military forces during targeted searches or attempted arrests of male relatives who government forces had identified as opposition supporters. Interviewees said that these abuses occurred in Damascus, Daraa, Homs, and Idlib governorates between September 2011 and August 2012.

Shayma, 20, told Human Rights Watch that she suffered a head injury when government forces raided her home in Daraa in August 2012. She said that they were looking for her husband and brothers, whom she identified as Free Syrian Army supporters:

I was sitting at home alone. Security forces came in ... They wanted my husband but he had already left. They wanted my brothers and wanted me to tell them where they were. I said I didn't know. They started beating me. I kept telling them I didn't know. They brought metal rods and were hitting me on the head, then on the back. They started whipping me ... After the first hit on my head I started to lose my balance and I couldn't see clearly. I passed out ... The next thing I remember I woke up surrounded by neighbors.

Shayma and her mother told Human Rights Watch that she experiences ongoing effects of the injury, including memory loss, confusion, and fatigue.

Men and children have also been targeted by government forces for abuse and arrest due to alleged opposition support by their relatives or associates. However, women are at particularly high risk of abuse during searches for male opposition combatants and supporters, as women's social and familial roles often tie them to the home when men have fled to avoid persecution or left to join armed groups.

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