

"My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor"

How the Syrian Government Targets Health Workers for Arrest, Detention, and Torture

Executive Summary

December 2019





The torture and humiliation began shortly after arrest. The health workers were subjected to prolonged beatings and forced stress positions, including hanging by the arms for hours on end. Syrian guards and interrogators burned them with cigarettes, electrocuted them, sexually assaulted them, and inflicted severe psychological torture, including staging mock executions.

“Every cell of my body writhed from the pain. You feel like you can’t stop shrieking. The shocks bounced me around the room. Even after it was over, the pain persisted as if I was still being electrocuted....

Another type of torture was wielding a green plastic pipe and making us count the blows while they beat us. They beat you while you count. One time I counted 85 blows.

On the second day, they put a rope around my neck and had me stand on the table. They called my brother and told him that they were going to hang me. They were pulling on the rope a little bit to make me scream.... Then, the soldier pulled the wooden table from under my legs. I thought I was going to die.... I lost consciousness. The mark from the rope lasted for two months after I was released.

They told me I was detained because I was supporting terrorists, that I was providing medical care to terrorists through the field hospital.”

Dr. Ibrahim, a pediatrician from Daraa*

Cover: Leila, a paramedic, was detained and tortured by Syrian security forces who accused her of providing medical assistance to combatants and supporting “terrorists.”

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“ You have a field hospital here! This is going to send you to your death.”

Ali, a pharmacist, quoting the soldier who arrested him after searching his vehicle at a checkpoint in Hama



*Ali, a pharmacist from Hama, was detained after Syrian soldiers found medical supplies in his vehicle.
Photo: Diego Cupolo for Physicians for Human Rights*

In 2011, the Syrian government cracked down with extreme violence on mass popular protests calling for sweeping economic and political reform after more than 50 years of dictatorship. The anti-government opposition responded to that repression by organizing both political and military resistance to the Syrian regime. By mid-2012, Syria was experiencing a full-fledged internal conflict. For the past eight years, the Syrian government and its allies have sought to systematically extinguish dissent through every means at their disposal, a strategy that has entailed massive human rights violations. The conflict has killed hundreds of thousands of civilians and displaced more than half of Syria's population internally and across the country's borders. The Syrian government has prosecuted the war by intentionally targeting civilian populations in restive areas and any perceived opposition supporters. It has imposed sieges on opposition-held areas, shelled and bombarded densely populated urban centers, and conducted a campaign of arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance of suspected insurgents and their supporters that has laid waste to much of the country and sparked an exodus of millions of Syrians seeking refuge in neighboring countries and beyond.

The Syrian government and its allies have also systematically targeted health facilities and health workers as part of a wider strategy of war aimed at breaking civilian populations and

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forcing them into submission. Since the beginning of the conflict, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has documented 583 attacks on health facilities; the Syrian government and its allies have carried out more than 90 percent of these attacks. Through their purposeful assault on health, the Syrian government and its allies have systematically denied access to medical care in areas outside of their immediate control and actively persecuted health workers who, in adherence to their professional ethics, courageously provide such care to the sick and wounded, including opposition supporters. The Syrian government has blatantly disregarded special protections afforded to medical units and personnel under international humanitarian law and has branded health workers – who provide nondiscriminatory health care in line with their legal and ethical obligations – as enemies of the state.

While much documentation and data have been presented to policymakers and the public regarding the relentless bombing and destruction of health facilities, less is known about the experiences and suffering of health personnel who have been targeted for their medical work during the conflict. For this report, PHR clinician researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and brief structured psychological assessments between June and August 2019 with 21 formerly detained Syrian health care workers, of whom two were women and 19 were men. These included people working in a wide range of health sectors: physicians (seven), nurses (five), pharmacists (four), medical volunteers (three), paramedics (one), and psychiatrists (one). While other parties to the conflict – including non-state armed groups – have perpetrated

* All names changed for security reasons.

Read the full report at: phr.org/Syria-detention

“ I was working in the emergency ward ... [when] I was pulled back ... [and] slammed against a wall. I was handcuffed, blindfolded, and quickly loaded into a vehicle.... The entire medical staff was arrested on that day.”

Hassan, a nurse from Homs

crimes, including arbitrary detention, this report focuses on detentions carried out by the Syrian government, in order to provide further insight into its strategy of systematically targeting health infrastructure and personnel throughout the conflict. While more data may be necessary to generalize knowledge about the targeting of Syrian health care workers since the start of the conflict in 2011, this report illustrates how the Syrian government has effectively criminalized the provision of nondiscriminatory care to all, regardless of political affiliation.

PHR research focused on the following key issues: to what extent, if at all, were health workers targeted for detention and ill-treatment due to their provision of nondiscriminatory health care and other efforts to support the provision of care? What were their experiences in detention and what types of ill-treatment, if any, were they subjected to? What was the impact of the detention and ill-treatment of health workers on their decision to leave Syria, their willingness to practice in their field, and their desire to potentially return to Syria?

The study reveals that the majority of the formerly detained health workers interviewed by PHR were arrested by Syrian government forces specifically because of their status as health care providers, and their real or perceived involvement in the provision of health services to opposition members and sympathizers. Through examination of health workers' experiences in detention, the report shows the link between their involvement in the provision of nondiscriminatory health care and their arrest, imprisonment, and ill-treatment in detention. Although the interviewees' detention experiences differed, their accounts point consistently to the Syrian government's system of detention, interrogation, and torture of those providing health care, or supporting access to health care, for perceived opponents. The health workers whose experiences PHR has documented are among the many who continue to provide and enable health care, despite the associated risks. This report details the price they paid for doing so, while recognizing that they are among those fortunate enough to have survived Syrian government detention facilities.

In most cases documented in this study, Syrian security forces inflicted torture on detainees as an integral part of the interrogation process. Interviewees reported that Syrian security forces regularly beat, humiliated, and subjected them to stress positions. In some cases, they were burned, shocked with electricity, and sexually assaulted. Interviewees described an interrogation process aimed to force “confessions” to activities considered treasonous under the Syrian Counter-terrorism Law 19 (2012), as well as to gather information on other health workers and health care activities. In many cases, interrogations centered on the interviewees' involvement in medical work. Syrian government interrogators and torturers accused many

of the former detainees of working in or establishing field hospitals, providing medical treatment and material support to “terrorists,” and other acts considered to be subversive. Many of the interviewees who appeared in Syrian courts were confronted with confessions extracted under torture and reported that they were accused by judges of having been involved in providing or supporting medical care to “terrorists.”

Several interviewees reported long-term health consequences due to lack of access to medical care in detention after torture. In all cases, the interviewees were subjected to inhumane living conditions within detention: overcrowding; lack of sanitation; lack of access to food, water, toilets, and medical care; and lack of ventilation. The conditions described may also constitute ill-treatment and, in some cases, torture. The lack of medical care prompted some of the interviewees to provide health services to others in detention, even as they witnessed the deadly consequences of torture, abuse, and poor conditions, and often felt powerless in the face of disease and injury.

This study's findings indicate that the government of Syria has targeted health workers for arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture for the ostensible “crime” of honoring their professional codes of ethics, which require them to provide care to the sick and wounded without discrimination. Syrian security forces have purposefully conflated provision of medical care to civilians who live in opposition-controlled areas and to those whom they consider direct opponents with “terrorism.” They have subjected health care workers to brutal and unlawful punishment, resulting in severe trauma, and, in some cases, permanent disability. Additionally, removing these health workers from areas in which patients are desperately in need of lifesaving care may have resulted in large numbers of preventable illnesses and fatalities.



Dr. Ibrahim, a pediatrician from Daraa, was brutally tortured by Syrian security forces who accused him of supporting “terrorists” through his field hospital.

Photo: Diego Cupolo for Physicians for Human Rights

Based on voluminous documentation of the Syrian government's violent targeting of the health sector and its systematic use of detention and torture to suppress perceived dissent, Physicians for Human Rights finds that the Syrian government has violated both national and international laws as well as basic medical ethics and the obligation to care for the sick and wounded without discrimination in all circumstances. PHR calls upon the Syrian government to respect the rights and dignity of all Syrian citizens and particularly the health workers on whom the country's civilian population desperately relies.

" You [doctors] are far more dangerous than terrorists. We kill them, you bring them back."

Dr. Loay, a physician, quoting his interrogator at al-Mazzeah Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus

Tortured for Saving Lives

The Experiences of Health Workers in the Syrian Conflict

This table summarizes the experiences of health workers detained by the Syrian government. Following their release, several health workers were also detained by non-state armed groups.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Governorate of origin	Profession	Year of arrest	Arrest Location				Treatment in detention			
						Home	Work	Checkpoint	Government building	Torture	Sexual violence*	Number of detention locations	Approximate detention duration (days)
Youssef	M	38	Idlib	Physician	2011	—	●	—	—	●	●	5	365
Mohannad	M	39	Idlib	Pharmacist	2011	—	—	●	—	●	—	1	7
Majd	M	38	Idlib	Nurse	2011	●	—	—	—	●	—	3	152
Ahmad	M	45	Hama	Physician	2011	—	●	—	—	●	—	4	487
Ziad	M	43	Rural Damascus	Psychiatrist	2011	●	—	—	—	●	—	3	70
Hadi	M	34	Daraa	Physician	2012	—	—	●	—	●	—	6	183
Loay	M	32	Damascus	Physician	2012	—	●	—	—	●	—	2	426
Wessam	M	29	Rural Damascus	Volunteer	2012	—	—	—	●	●	●	6	1,035
Ali	M	39	Hama	Pharmacist	2012	—	—	●	—	●	—	1	5 hours
Leila	F	48	Damascus	Paramedic	2012	—	●	—	—	●	—	2	167
Hassan	M	32	Homs	Nurse	2012	—	●	—	—	●	—	6	365
Amin	M	48	Homs	Nurse	2012	—	●	—	—	●	—	5	2,374
Ibrahim	M	34	Daraa	Physician	2013	—	—	●	—	●	●	1	5
Hazem	M	28	Aleppo	Nurse	2013	—	●	—	—	●	—	3	1,202
Tareq	M	44	Aleppo	Volunteer	2013	●	—	—	—	●	●	5	1,623
Nadia	F	37	Hama	Nurse	2013	—	●	—	—	●	—	2	10
Samer	M	33	Damascus	Pharmacist	2014	—	●	—	—	●	—	3	525
Jamal	M	28	Aleppo	Physician	2014	—	—	—	●	●	—	3	108
Hussam	M	32	Rural Damascus	Physician	2014	—	—	●	—	●	—	5	1,460
Omar	M	32	Rural Damascus	Volunteer	2015	—	—	—	●	●	—	6	487
Tamer	M	42	Deir ez Zor	Pharmacist	2017	—	●	—	—	●	—	1	7

*Sexual violence refers to a variety of acts which include penetration and electrocution or burning of the genitals.

Recommendations

To the Syrian Government and Affiliated Forces, and All Parties to the Conflict:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all arbitrarily or unlawfully detained individuals from official and unofficial detention sites, starting with the most vulnerable, including children, women, the elderly, and the disabled.
- Take immediate and systemic measures to prevent the torture and ill-treatment of detainees and ensure that allegations of abuse are investigated and abusers held accountable.
- Disclose the locations of all official and unofficial detention sites and provide comprehensive lists of all those held in those sites.
- Disclose information to families on the location and status of detained and abducted relatives, notifying them of the circumstances of death and location of burial when applicable.
- End the use of “exceptional” courts, including military field tribunals and the Counter-terrorism Court. Suspend all sentences passed through these courts and guarantee fair trials for the accused under UN supervision.
- Allow unconditional access to all places of detention, official and unofficial, by designated international bodies and humanitarian organizations.
- Improve detention conditions in compliance with international standards, including through ensuring detainee contact with families, access to medical care, and sufficient water and food, as well as preventing torture, ill-treatment, and sexual violence.
- Respect health services and protect medical personnel, patients, facilities, and transport from attack or interference.

To the Russian Federation:

(As the main supporter of the Syrian government and a party to the conflict in Syria)

- Use influence to press the Syrian government to implement the above-listed recommendations, focusing on the unconditional release of those arbitrarily detained, disclosing information to families on the fate and whereabouts of detained relatives, and granting access by international monitors to detention sites.
- Support UN Security Council measures to accelerate the release of the arbitrarily detained, including medical personnel, in accordance with resolutions 2139 and 2254.

To the United Nations Security Council:

- Address non-implementation of prior UN Security Council resolutions by adopting a stand-alone resolution on the situation of detainees and missing persons, setting out in detail the steps that the government of Syria is required to take under international law.
- Enforce accountability by referring the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.
- Adopt targeted sanctions against persons, agencies, and groups credibly suspected of being responsible for or complicit in conduct leading to arbitrary arrests, custodial deaths, torture, and enforced disappearances.
- Encourage all parties to the conflict to abide by UNSC resolutions 2139, 2254, 2268, and 2474 and draw specific attention to the targeting of medical personnel.

To the UN Special Envoy for Syria:

- Ensure that discussions of human rights and international humanitarian law violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and attacks on health, are prominent within the political process.
- Re-insert the issue of detainees, abductees, and the missing under the framework of the Geneva peace process and push the Astana Guarantors to widen the scope of the Working Group on Detainees and Abductees beyond its current focus on low-level one-to-one prisoner exchange and into a scalable release of civilian prisoners.

To UN Member States:

- Refrain from forcibly returning Syrian refugees to their country of origin, given the ongoing risks of targeting, detention, abduction, enforced disappearance, torture, and ill-treatment.
- Strengthen targeted sanctions against Syrian officials credibly implicated in the ongoing serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.
- Exercise international and domestic law, including universal jurisdiction principles, to investigate and prosecute Syrian military and civilian officials responsible for carrying out war crimes and crimes against humanity against detainees in Syria. Ensure cooperation among states, including sharing of evidence bilaterally, where possible, with national prosecutors who are pursuing these cases in domestic courts.



Physicians for
Human Rights

For more than 30 years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has used science and the uniquely credible voices of medical professionals to document and call attention to severe human rights violations around the world. PHR, which shared in the Nobel Peace Prize for its work to end the scourge of landmines, uses its investigations and expertise to advocate for persecuted health workers and facilities under attack, prevent torture, document mass atrocities, and hold those who violate human rights accountable.

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