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Syria: New report finds systemic and widespread torture and ill-treatment in detention

People caught up in the massive wave of arrests in the wake of the Syrian uprising have been thrust into a nightmarish world of systemic torture, a new report by Amnesty International says today.

The scale of torture and other ill-treatment in Syria has risen to a level not witnessed for years and is reminiscent of the dark era of the 1970s and 1980s.

Released a day before the one-year anniversary of the start of mass protests in Syria, ['I wanted to die': Syria's torture survivors speak out](#) documents 31 methods of torture or other ill-treatment by security forces, army and pro-government armed shabiha gangs, described by witnesses or victims to Amnesty International researchers in Jordan in February 2012.

"The experience for the many people caught up in the massive wave of arrests over the last year is now very similar to that of detainees under former President Hafez al-Assad - a nightmarish world of systemic torture," said Ann Harrison, Interim Deputy Director for Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"The testimonies we have heard give disturbing insights into a system of detention and interrogation which, a year after protests began, appears intended primarily to degrade, humiliate and terrify its victims into silence."

Patterns of torture

Amnesty International said that torture and other ill-treatment of detainees generally followed a set pattern.

Many victims said beating began on arrest, then they were beaten severely - including with sticks, rifle butts, whips and fists, braided cables - on arrival at detention centres, a practice sometimes called the 'haflet al-istiqlal' or 'reception'.

Newly-held detainees are usually stripped to their underpants and are sometimes left for up to 24 hours outside.

Interrogation

But the testimonies given to Amnesty International indicate that detainees are at most risk when being interrogated.

Several survivors told of their experience of the *dulab* (tyre), where the victim is forced into a vehicle tyre - often hoisted up - and beaten, including sometimes with cables or sticks.

Amnesty International said it had observed an increase in the reported use of *shabeh* - where the victim is suspended, from a raised hook, handle or door frame, or by manacled wrists, so that the feet hang just above the ground or so the tips of toes touch the floor. The individual is then often beaten.

Eighteen-year-old "Karim", a student from al-Taybeh in Dera'a governorate, told Amnesty International that his interrogators used pincers to remove flesh from his legs when he was being held at an Air Force Intelligence branch in Dera'a in December 2011.

Electric shock torture appears to be widely used in interrogations. Former detainees described three methods: dousing the victim or cell floor with water, then electro-shocking the victim through the water; the "electric chair", where electrodes are connected to parts of the body; and the use of electric prods.

Gender-based torture and other crimes of sexual violence appear to have become more common in the last year. "Tareq" told Amnesty International that during his interrogation at the Military Intelligence Branch in Kafr Sousseh, Damascus in July 2011 he was forced to watch the rape of another prisoner called "Khalid":

"They pulled down his trousers. He had an injury on his upper left leg. Then the official raped him up against the wall. Khalid just cried during it, beating his head on the wall."

Crimes against humanity

Amnesty International said that the testimonies of torture survivors presented yet more evidence of crimes against humanity in Syria.

The organization has repeatedly called for the situation in Syria to be referred to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) but political factors have so far prevented this happening, with Russia and China twice blocking weakened UN Security Council draft resolutions that made no reference to the ICC.

In light of the failure to secure an ICC referral, Amnesty International said it wanted to see the UN Human Rights Council extend the mandate of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria and reinforce its capacity to monitor, document and report, with a view to eventual prosecutions of those responsible for crimes under international law and other gross violations of human rights.

The organization also said it wanted to see the international community accepting its shared responsibility to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity in their national courts - in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty - and called for the formation of joint international investigation and prosecution teams to improve the chances of arrest.

"We continue to believe that the ICC represents the best option of securing real accountability for those responsible for the grave crimes that have been committed against people in Syria," said Ann Harrison.

"But while politics makes that prospect difficult in the short term, Syrians responsible for torture – including those in command - should be left in no doubt that they will face justice for crimes committed under their watch. It is therefore essential that the Commission of Inquiry is strengthened and allowed to continue its work."

Background

Amnesty International interviewed dozens of Syrians who fled the violence to Jordan, including 25 people who reported they had been tortured or otherwise ill-treated in detention before they fled across the border. The report includes the testimonies of 19 of these survivors. More than half of the cases featured are from Dera'a governorate, where protesters were first killed in March 2011. The remainder of the cases are from the governorates of Damascus, Rif Dimashq, Hama, Homs, Latakia, al-Suwayda and Tartus.

Notes for editors

- **Spokespeople:** The Amnesty International researchers who carried out the research for this report in Jordan are both available for interview from London on this report: Neil Sammonds in English or Spanish; and Maha Abu Shama in English or Arabic.
- **Case studies:** Amnesty International can on request put media in touch with some of the survivors of torture featured in this report (Arabic language will in most cases be necessary).
- **Images:** Amnesty International can provide a small selection of images of injuries sustained by torture victims in Syria.
- **Map:** The new research on torture is presented on Amnesty International's [Eyes on Syria website](#), an interactive mapping platform that documents human rights violations in the context of the popular uprising.