

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Opposition Should Secure Security Force Facilities, Safeguard Potential Evidence

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(New York) Government security branches in Raqqa city hold documents and potential physical evidence indicating that detainees were arbitrarily detained and tortured there while the city was under government control. Human Rights Watch researchers visited the State Security and Military Intelligence facilities in Raqqa, now under the de facto control of local armed opposition groups, in late April 2013.

Local opposition leaders with the support of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and neutral international experts should safeguard potential evidence of torture and arbitrary detention in security forces centers in opposition-controlled areas, Human Rights Watch said.

The documents, prison cells, interrogation rooms, and torture devices we saw in the governments security facilities are consistent with the torture former detainees have described to us since the beginning of the uprising in [Syria](#), said [Nadim Houry](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. Those in control of Raqqa need to safeguard the materials in these facilities so the truth can be told and those responsible held accountable.

In the State Security facility, Human Rights Watch researchers observed on the ground floor and in the basement, rooms that appeared to be detention cells. Among the documents were what appeared to be lists of security force members who had worked there. Human Rights Watch researchers also saw a bsat al-reeh torture device in the facility, which former detainees have said has been used to immobilize and severely stretch or bend limbs.

Several former detainees held at other intelligence facilities in Syria have described to Human Rights Watch how security guards used bsat al-reeh torture devices in detention facilities across the country. They tie a detainee down to a flat board, sometimes in the shape of a cross, so that he is helpless to defend himself. In some cases, former detainees said guards stretched or pulled their limbs or folded the board in half so that their face touched their legs, causing pain and further immobilizing them.

Among the reams of documents and case files Human Rights Watch researchers saw in the Military Intelligence facility in Raqqa were some that appeared to list all of Raqqas college graduates, suggesting that they were of interest to the security branch by virtue of their college education. Researchers also observed three solitary confinement cells and one group detention cell in the right half of the first floor of the facility.

Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed five people formerly held by Military Intelligence in Raqqa, who said that security forces detained and interrogated them there. They said that the security services questioned them about lawful activities, such as participating in peaceful demonstrations, providing relief assistance to displaced families, defending detainees, and providing emergency assistance to injured demonstrators. They believed that they were detained for these lawful activities, making their detention arbitrary.

Four said that officers and guards in the facility tortured them. They identified Mohammed al-Ahmed, also known as Abu Jassem, as the person responsible for their interrogations, and in some cases, abuse. Raqqa residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that opposition fighters killed Abu Jassem during the battle for control of Raqqa, which came under opposition control during the first week of March.

In addition to the State Security and Military Intelligence branches, three other facilities in the city of Raqqa formerly managed by Criminal Security, Political Security, and Air Force Intelligence are now also controlled by armed opposition groups.

Human Rights Watch has repeatedly documented widespread violations by Syrian government security forces and officials, including enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary and incommunicado detentions of peaceful protesters, activists, humanitarian assistance providers, and doctors.

Based on information from former detainees and defectors, Human Rights Watch previously identified the locations, agencies responsible, torture methods, and, in many cases, the commanders who were in charge of 27 detention facilities run by Syrian intelligence agencies across the country where torture has been documented. The systematic patterns of ill-treatment and torture that Human Rights Watch has documented point to a state policy of torture and ill-treatment and therefore constitute a crime against humanity.

The de facto authorities in opposition held areas still face many challenges and competing priorities. Some are still subject to attack by Syrian government forces and are struggling to provide basic services to local populations. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to safeguard potential evidence in these and other former security force facilities that could be vital to future domestic and international accountability processes, Human Rights Watch said. This evidence could also help to clarify the role intelligence forces played in abuses in Syria.

Documents and material in these facilities could vanish or be destroyed if not promptly secured. Destruction or mishandling of these documents and material will weaken the possibility of bringing to justice those responsible for serious crimes. In addition, their loss could encumber future truth seeking processes and prevent the comprehensive documentation of crimes committed by the Syrian government. Truth commissions can be valuable complementary tools to criminal justice for preserving historical memory, clarifying events, and attributing political and institutional responsibilities.

The de facto authorities in Raqqa and local opposition leaders should coordinate the collection and storage of this potential evidence from security force branches now under their control, Human Rights Watch said. They should seek the support of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and neutral international experts, including those with expertise in collecting forensic evidence and in working before criminal tribunals.

The armed opposition groups that have taken control of these facilities should secure them while allowing civilian opposition leaders, with outside support, to organize the removal of materials and photographing of physical evidence that is not movable.

Authorities should also create a central repository in a secure and undisclosed location to receive and store this potential evidence until proper criminal investigations can be undertaken. If possible, copies of relevant materials should be made and stored in a separate location in case originals are destroyed or lost.

Human Rights Watch has repeatedly urged the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Other countries should join the mounting calls for accountability by supporting a referral to the ICC as the forum most capable of effectively prosecuting those bearing the greatest responsibility for abuses in Syria. On January 14, a letter was sent to the Security Council on behalf of 58 countries calling for an ICC referral. The Security Council has taken no action in response.

Learning the truth about the role intelligence services have played in spying on and terrorizing Syrians will enable them to guard against these abuses in the future, Houry said. But for Syrians to learn the truth once the conflict ends, it is vital even under the tough conditions of war to preserve the potential evidence of the security forces role.

Former Detainees Describe Torture in Raqqa

Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed five former detainees in person in Raqqa city. The interviews were conducted by Arabic-speaking researchers and wherever possible, were conducted in private. To protect witnesses, in four cases, the names of witnesses have been withheld. In the fifth case, the interviewee, a prominent attorney and the current head of the local civilian council asked to be identified by name.

Ahmed, a 24-year-old former college student from Raqqa, told Human Rights Watch that on April 7, 2012, Military Intelligence officers detained him and his brother at the Raqqa Military Intelligence Branch for their involvement in peaceful demonstrations. After his release, he joined an armed opposition group, and now is a fighter with an opposition battalion, Jabhat al-Wahda wal-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Front for Unity and Liberation), in Raqqa city.

He told Human Rights Watch that the intelligence officers held him there for five days before transferring him to the Military Intelligence facility in Deir al-Zor, directed by Jame` Jame`. Ahmed said that Military Intelligence officers and guards tortured him and

his brother at the Raqqa Military Intelligence Branch and that the sound of his brother screaming under torture tormented him. He said that Abu Jassem, the officer in charge of interrogations, beat him so that he would confess to participating in demonstrations and inform on other protesters:

The torture started in turns between my brother and me. They started torturing him with electricity for three, four hours, and then they threw him in a solitary cell. They wanted me to tell them who used to go out to demonstrate with me and they would make me hear my brothers screams. This was more [pressure] than the beating; they would force me to listen to him [being tortured].

Ahmed said that the guards tortured his brother with electricity in the room adjacent to the prison guards room. He said he also saw torture devices in Abu Jassem's office on the second floor, where he was interrogated. Ahmed said that Military Intelligence held his brother in one of three solitary cells on the ground floor of the facility while they held him in a nearby group cell.

Ahmed told Human Rights Watch that he confessed to attending demonstrations after Abu Jassem threatened to bring his mother to the detention facility:

He told me to confess to the demonstrations I participated in or he would bring my mother [to the branch]. I said, Whatever it is you want, I am with you. That's it I said, I will fingerprint a white piece of paper, and you write what you want.

On the fifth day, he said, prison guards transferred Ahmed and his brother to Deir al-Zor, where they held them for 15 days in the Military Intelligence facility, before taking them to a military police facility, then to a transit facility in Baloonah, Homs, and finally to the Military Intelligence Palestine Branch in Damascus. Security forces held them in the Palestine Branch for 20 days and from there took them to Qaboun, back to Baloonah, and eventually to Aleppo to try them before a military court. His final stop was the civilian prison in Raqqa, from which the authorities finally released him on June 8, 2012, following a court decision to sentence him to time served.

Ziad, born in 1964, said that security forces also detained him in the Military Intelligence Branch in Raqqa on April 12, 2012, where Abu Jassem interrogated him before they transferred him to Deir el Zour two days later. He told Human Rights Watch that Abu Jassem detained and beat him because he was providing relief assistance to displaced families from Homs in Raqqa and for his participation in demonstrations:

I work in relief assistance, so they detained me. I used to help families from Homs that were here [in Raqqa] displaced from Homs. I also went to demonstrations. There were lots of accusations against me, like that I was working with foreigners. They had the accusations ready to use against me, but without any evidence. Muhammad al-Ahmad, known as Abu Jassem, began interrogating me. He started by insulting me. Another official started beating me with his hands. You're an agent, a traitor, and insults like that. Then two more officials came in, one with an electric device and they beat me with it several times, with electricity.

He wanted me to confess to things that had nothing to do with me: that I got money for weapons, etc., which didn't happen. All I did was give relief to displaced families from Homs after the destruction there. [During the interrogation] they used the electric baton, slaps, and a stick; I think it was silicone [to beat me]. My body was marked for a long time.

Ziad told Human Rights Watch that after his first interrogation, Military Intelligence moved him between the group and solitary cells on the first floor of the branch, where he could hear the screams of other prisoners, including prisoners whom he believed were children.

From the branch in Raqqa, Military Intelligence took Ziad to the Military Intelligence facility in Deir el Zour, he said, where they held him for 14 days, then sent him to the Military Intelligence Palestine branch in Damascus. Altogether, he said government forces detained him for approximately three months before eventually releasing him on bail after he went before a military court in Aleppo.

Abdullah Khalil, a long time human rights defender and the current head of the opposition local civilian council in Raqqa governorate, also spoke to Human Rights Watch researchers about his time as a detainee in the Military Intelligence detention facility in Raqqa. He told Human Rights Watch that security officials detained him on May 1, 2011, and held him in the facility for one day before transporting him to Deir al-Zor. Abu Jassem was also in charge of him at Raqqa, he said, but because Khalil is a lawyer, his interrogators treated him better than the other detainees in the facility:

In the evening, two hours after I was detained, they started to interrogate me. During the interrogation, they would ask me, or would try and ask me, about my relationships with fighters, but this is not true, [I didn't have these relationships]. I worked on the civilian side, and would work from a human rights perspective, but these are the questions they would ask because I used to defend detainees. [During the interrogation], they didn't beat me but they threatened me by saying they would transfer me to Damascus or detain me for a very long time unless I confessed. They tortured and beat other detainees. They also took off my clothes completely. It was a humiliation tactic.

Khalil said that Syrian security force officers transferred him to 17 different security branches across the country throughout the course of his detention. He believes that while government forces did not beat him because of his position as a lawyer and connection to international organizations, they tried to torture him mentally by moving him repeatedly.

The government's charges against him included an accusation that he communicated with international human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, shared information with reporters, supported the revolution, defended prisoners, received financial support from outside of the country to do so, and encouraged people to kill security force and army members. The government released Khalil under a general amnesty.

Samih said that a Military Intelligence patrol in Raqqa city detained him on March 16, 2012, on his way to work. He told Human Rights Watch that Abu Jassem interrogated, beat, and held him in a solitary cell for one day before transferring him to the Criminal Security facility in Raqqa:

[When I got to the Military Intelligence Branch] they put me in a solitary cell. The solitary cell is 1.4 by 2.20 meters. You can see blood on the walls of the cell. The prison guard would come and open the window to the cell just to insult me. At 12 a.m. they took me up for

interrogation. I went up to Abu Jassem, who asked me, Why do you assist the wounded [demonstrators] these are terrorists.

The treatment [in the interrogation was bad] I was cuffed, blindfolded ... I was sitting on the floor [During this] first time there was one interrogator After the interrogation, they brought me down to the torture room; they were torturing two guys and said, Do you want to confess or do you want us to torture you like these two? [I could see] blood from bodies and legs. They were on the bsat el reeh I said, I have nothing to say [Then] I went up to Abu Jassem [again], and said, I used to help the wounded; these arent terrorists; these are oppressed people.. I was there for 24 hours and then they took me to Criminal Security.

Samih said that government forces detained him for 32 days before he paid them 10,000 Syrian pounds (US\$ 143) to get out of detention on bail. He never saw a judge.

Bilal, a 22-year-old college student from Raqqa city, told Human Rights Watch that Military Intelligence officers in Raqqa detained him in December 2011 because of his involvement in peaceful demonstrations and humanitarian relief work. He said they held him in the Raqqa branch for two days during which time they detained him in a solitary cell. Abu Jassem interrogated him, accused him of terrorism related charges, and beat him:

I went to Military Intelligence. My dad followed me there of course [after he learned I was detained from work]. The first person we sat with was Abu Jassem When we first sat with him, he said Tell your dad about the explosive devices that you have hidden. I couldnt believe that I was facing these accusations: explosives and weapons! He started with accusations that were bigger than me, that I had never heard of before.

I laughed at what he was saying; it was an innocent laugh. This was my last laugh in Military Intelligence [After this], they took me to the solitary cell. It was raining outside, cold, and I went in terrified I stayed about two hours in the solitary cell. Then I knocked on the door. I was cold. A guard opened, and I told him I want blankets to cover He brought water and threw it on me, and took off his belt and started beating me. After 30 minutes [of this beating], I wasnt cold anymore.

[After that] I stayed in the cell about five hours, and after five hours went up to see Abu Jassem [He] wanted me to confess to explosions and other accusations [But] the biggest thing I did from the beginning of the revolution until now was demonstrate and help people Eventually he got to the subject of my brother and I understood that these accusations were to scare me to confess quickly [and provide information about my brother] [Abu Jassem] didnt use electricity; here it was just slaps and beating, pushing around.

After two days, Bilal said, Military Intelligence transferred him to the Criminal Security branch in Raqqa where they held him for 10 days and tortured him. He said that Musa`b abu Rakbe was the director of this facility. He said they detained him for 28 days in total before releasing him.

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Suspicious Killings and Extrajudicial Executions by Egyptian Security Forces

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