

# Human Rights Watch

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

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/13/syria-tell-families-missing-fate-loved-ones>

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Today, eight Syrian civil society and international human rights organizations called on a number of UN Security Council member states to urgently address the widespread arbitrary detentions, kidnapping, torture and other ill-treatment, and enforced disappearances of tens of thousands of Syrians at the hands of the Syrian government, armed anti-government groups and the Islamic State.

Over the course of the crisis, Syrian civil society and international human rights organizations have extensively documented staggering levels of serious violations against people deprived of their liberty by all parties. Hundreds have died in detention of torture or ill-treatment; tens of thousands have been forcibly disappeared by the Syrian government; and many have gone missing after being abducted by armed anti-government groups or the Islamic State.

Government forces have subjected tens of thousands to arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearance and extrajudicial executions. In many cases these violations amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Syrian government targeted those who were perceived to oppose the government or considered as disloyal, including political activists, protestors, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, doctors and humanitarian aid workers. Government forces arbitrarily detained such people in household raids, at checkpoints, and in their workplaces, universities and homes. Local sources indicate that in areas re-taken by the government these practices are continuing.

Throughout their detention, authorities subjected many detainees to enforced disappearance. They subjected many to torture from the moment of their arrest and continued to torture them for days, weeks or months using various methods including beating, electric shocks, and the use of stress positions for prolonged periods of time. In addition, they denied detainees their basic needs, including food, water, medicine, medical care and sanitation, and kept them confined in overcrowded cells without access to fresh air or ventilation.

Armed anti-government groups have also committed serious violations of international humanitarian law, including abductions, torture and summary killings. According to several human rights organizations Hayet Tahrir al-Sham has detained hundreds of individuals in areas under their control, many because of their peaceful work documenting abuses or protesting the groups rule. They have also subjected some of those detained to torture and ill-treatment. Local sources in Afrin reported at least 110 abuses that appear to amount to instances of arbitrary detention, torture and abductions of civilians by pro-Turkey armed groups. Meanwhile the Islamic state has kidnapped thousands. The fate of most of those kidnapped remains unknown even after the defeat of the group.

The families of the disappeared are also considered victims of the crime of enforced disappearance. Women in particular, are affected by the disappearance of their male relatives at different levels. In addition to the emotional and psychological impact the disappearance will have on the family members, women, whether it be mothers or wives, lose the main breadwinner of the household; without an official document recognizing the disappearance, wives of the disappeared often cannot receive aid or other services as some humanitarian organizations prioritize widows; their resettlement cases are often rejected. They also find themselves in a legal limbo, unable to claim inheritance and property, re-marry or in some cases relocate their children, since Syrian law requires permission from the male guardian.

To date, the Syrian government authorities continue to detain and subject tens of thousands to enforced disappearance. Their families are rarely told where their loved ones are held or whether they are still alive. Starting May 2018, the Syrian government updated civil registries in several parts of the country, including the Damascus countryside, Hama, Aleppo, and Sweida governorates to show individuals known to have been previously detained and forcibly disappeared by the Syrian government authorities as dead. In some cases, families were provided with death certificates reflecting dates of death as far back as 2013 and indicating their cause of death as heart attack.

However, the government has not responded to requests by families of detainees to obtain information on the circumstances of the enforced disappearances or the causes of death, or to take possession of the remains of those who died. Many were too scared to request

additional information. As things stand, there is no way to verify the deaths without the government returning the remains to the families, and without the launch of an independent investigation into the cause and manner of death.

Despite the staggering evidence of violations and the continuing devastating impact these practices have had on Syria, very little progress has been made to release arbitrarily-held detainees, provide information on the whereabouts of the disappeared and missing, and hold the actors responsible for these violations accountable. Instead, government forces and anti-government armed groups continue to arrest and abduct individuals with impunity, while families ask questions but get no answers.

There has been an absence of a real and effective effort to resolve this issue, outside of limited prisoner exchanges that fail to capture the scale of the problem.

To that effect, we urged these states to consider the following recommendations that would end the suffering of the families of the disappeared and of the arbitrarily detained and provide them with access to justice:

**Signatory organizations:**

Amnesty International

Dawlaty

Dammeh

Families for Freedom

Human Rights Watch

Nophotozone

The Syria Campaign

Women Now

Bahrain Death Sentences Follow Torture, Sham Trials

Suspicious Killings and Extrajudicial Executions by Egyptian Security Forces

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