

Human Rights Watch

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

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/04/lebanon-year-no-answers-deaths-custody>

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Release Investigation into Why 4 Syrians Died

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(Beirut) [Lebanons](#) army should release the findings of its investigation into the deaths a year ago of four [Syrians](#) in custody, Human Rights Watch said today. Despite [evidence of torture](#), the military prosecutor announced on July 24, 2017, that an investigation showed the men had died of natural causes. The army has never released the full results of the investigation.

On July 4, 2017, the Lebanese army [issued a statement](#) saying that four Syrians had died in its custody following mass raids in Arsal, a restricted access area in northeast [Lebanon](#) where many Syrian [refugees](#) live. A doctor with expertise in documenting torture reviewed photos of three of the men provided by their family lawyers to Human Rights Watch, which showed widespread bruising and cuts. He said the injuries were consistent with inflicted trauma in the setting of physical torture and that any statement that the deaths of these individuals were due to natural causes is inconsistent with these photographs.

When four men die within days of arrest, and photos of their bodies show marks consistent with torture, the public deserves a full accounting of what happened, said [Lama Fakih](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. But a year after these deaths, we still do not have clear answers about why they died, or steps that the army has taken to ensure that this never happens again.

[Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#) have both publicly urged the military to release the results of its investigation. Human Rights Watch also made the request in a meeting with the army commander, Joseph Aoun, on July 24, 2017, and again raised the [issue in a letter to the army](#) on June 27, 2018, but has received no response. The army had previously told Human Rights Watch and [local media](#) that it would publish the findings of the investigation.

A group of UN experts [wrote](#) to the Lebanese government on October 3, 2017, requesting information about this case. The experts include the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and the special rapporteurs on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions; on the independence of judges and lawyers; and on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. The government of Lebanon responded on December 15, 2017, but the [response](#) is not yet public.

After the announcement of the deaths, Human Rights Watch spoke with a family member and a close acquaintance of two of the Syrians, who said that they had no known serious health conditions. Both said that the army gave no reason for the arrests and did not notify the families of the deaths.

Additional evidence supports the allegations of abuse and torture during the arrests in Arsal and subsequently at military detention facilities. A witness in Arsal told Human Rights Watch that he saw 34 of the men who were arrested after they were released and that they had marks on their hands, legs, and backs, and in one case, on a former detainees head. Human Rights Watch also spoke with five of the men the army arrested during the raid who were subsequently released. They said that army personnel beat and ill-treated them and other detainees in custody.

Under international law, Lebanon has an obligation to investigate deaths in custody and hold those responsible to account. Under the latest draft of the UN Human Rights Committees [General Comment No. 36](#) on the right to life, states parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including Lebanon, should make public the findings, conclusions and recommendations of an investigation into deaths in custody.

Lebanon has an obligation under international law to publish the results of the investigation when a detainee dies in custody. Loss of life in custody, especially when accompanied by reliable reports of an unnatural death, creates a presumption of arbitrary deprivation of life by state authorities, which can only be rebutted on the basis of a proper investigation that establishes the states compliance with its obligations under international law.

Human Rights Watch and local human rights organizations [have long documented](#) reports of torture and ill-treatment by Lebanon's security services, including the army. Impunity for violence is a recurring problem in Lebanon. Even when officials have [initiated investigations](#) into deaths, torture, or ill-treatment, the investigations have often not been concluded or the findings made public. Human Rights Watch has not been able to identify any case in which military personnel have been held to account for torture and ill-treatment of detainees.

If this investigation does in fact show that these men died of natural causes, it is in the army's own interest to make that public, Fakhri said. Calling for a public accounting into allegations of torture is not an attack on the Lebanese army, but about ensuring accountability and the rule of law.

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