

Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/news/the-syrian-government-systematically-arrests-detains-tortures-health-workers-physicians-for-human-rights/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The Syrian government has systematically targeted health professionals for arrest, detention, and torture, according to a new [investigation](#) published today by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR).

My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor is the first-ever [report](#) to document the purposeful, illegal, and brutal strategy by the Syrian government to commit these targeted atrocities against medical workers, effectively criminalizing their delivery of health care to the sick and wounded. PHR clinicians conducted in-depth interviews and structured psychological assessments of 21 formerly-detained Syrian health professionals, providing new insight into how the Syrian government has grotesquely punished health workers for carrying out their professional duties.

The searing testimonies of inhumane detention conditions and brutal torture techniques that we gathered from Syrian physicians, pharmacists, paramedics, and others shed new light on one of the most depraved aspects of Assads war on his own people, said [Michele Heisler, MD](#), medical director at Physicians for Human Rights and report co-author. All available evidence points consistently toward the Syrian governments systematic and strategic persecution of health workers.

In PHRs analysis, these assaults against health workers are a key component of the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian government. Building on abundant existing evidence of the Syrian governments [attacks](#) on the health sector and its widespread use of torture to intimidate populations and suppress perceived dissent, PHR finds that the Syrian government has violated both domestic and international laws. It has trampled on fundamental medical ethics and decimated the Syrian health system, causing widespread death and suffering over the eight-year conflict.

Parallel and ongoing [research](#) by Physicians for Human Rights points to how these violations fit into a broader pattern of Syrian government targeting of health care facilities and personnel. Since March 2011, PHR has documented the killings of at least 914 civilian medical personnel in Syria. Medical personnel killed while providing care have predominantly lost their lives during attacks upon medical facilities or while providing first aid in the field. PHR has also documented 588 attacks on 350 health facilities in Syria. The documentation attributes more than 90 percent of the documented attacks on health facilities and personnel to the Syrian government and its allies, including Russia.

From the circumstances surrounding their arrests to the nature of their interrogations, the torture inflicted on them, and court appearances, the health workers testimonies demonstrate how their provision of medical services was specifically invoked by Syrian authorities throughout their time in detention. The report details the arrests of many health professionals while they were working in hospitals or delivering medical supplies to facilities. Most sources PHR interviewed were accused by their torturers of providing medical care to terrorists.

Health professionals interviewed for this study reported that Syrian security forces regularly beat, humiliated, starved, and subjected them to stress positions and solitary confinement in one case for 14 months. Health workers reported to PHR that they were burned, shocked with electricity, sexually assaulted, and forced to witness torture and sexual assault of fellow detainees. PHR clinicians documented how the infliction of torture resulted in severe physical and psychological trauma and, in some cases, permanent disability. The report recognizes that the 21 health workers interviewed were among those fortunate enough to make it out of Syrian detention facilities alive. The health workers reported that they had witnessed the deaths of fellow medical workers in detention.

The Syrian governments widespread campaign of arrest, detention, and torture of health workers fits into a disturbing broader pattern, said [Rayan Koteiche](#), researcher at PHR and report co-author. Their scorched-earth strategy: bomb and destroy facilities. Punish anyone providing medical care in opposition areas. Torture health workers. Annihilate the health system.

The report also highlights the remarkable resilience and professional commitment of Syrian health workers. Even while confined in life-threatening prison conditions and subjected to torture, some of the health workers continued to provide what care and support they could to their fellow detainees. Upon their eventual release, the majority of the health workers PHR interviewed returned to work in the health or humanitarian fields, either elsewhere in Syria or in neighboring countries, sometimes at great personal risk.

The Syrian governments industrial-scale incarceration apparatus which has enabled the detention, interrogation, torture, extrajudicial execution, and disappearance of tens of thousands of civilians has been extensively documented by United Nations bodies and human rights monitors. The PHR report documents a new and underrecognized dimension of the Syrian governments immense catalog of war crimes the purposeful targeting of health workers for arrest, detention, and torture. Medical ethics requires health professionals to provide care without discrimination to all, regardless of political affiliation.

Physicians for Human Rights calls on all parties to the conflict, particularly the Syrian government and affiliated forces, to immediately and unconditionally release all arbitrarily or unlawfully detained individuals and allow unconditional access to detention sites in the country. The Syrian government must respect the rights and dignity of all Syrian citizens, including the health care workers on whom all Syrians rely, and must stop criminalizing health care, said [Susannah Sirkin](#), director of policy at PHR. United Nations member states, regional bodies, and the international community must hold the Syrian government accountable for its systematic persecution, detention, and torture of health care workers, which should shock the conscience of all humanity.

PHR further calls on national governments to support justice and accountability, including by exercising universal jurisdiction, to investigate and prosecute Syrian military and civilian officials responsible for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria. Such efforts in France, Germany, Norway and elsewhere are emerging signs of promise that the prevailing state of impunity for crimes in Syria will end.

The full report is available [here](#).

Selected quotes from Syrian health workers interviewed for [*My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor: How the Syrian Government Targets Health Workers for Arrest, Detention, and Torture*](#):

**Names changed to protect interviewees from reprisals.*

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Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is a New York-based advocacy organization that uses science and medicine to prevent mass atrocities and severe human rights violations. [Learn more here](#).

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