

Human Rights Watch

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

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Regarding Human Rights Abuses by Armed Opposition Members

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We are writing to express our concern about increasing evidence, as described below, of kidnappings, the use of torture, and executions by armed Syrian opposition members and strongly urge you to work to ensure that all opposition members refrain from engaging in these unlawful practices.

Human Rights Watch has repeatedly documented and condemned widespread violations by Syrian government security forces and officials, including disappearances, use of torture and forced televised confessions, arbitrary detentions, indiscriminate shelling of neighborhoods, and deaths in custody under torture. Now, in the face of evidence of human rights abuses by armed opposition members, Human Rights Watch calls on the leadership of leading opposition groups including the Syrian National Council (SNC) and its Military Bureau to condemn such practices by the armed opposition and to work to prevent such unlawful practices.

While the protest movement in Syria was overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011, since then Human Rights Watch has documented apparent crimes and other abuses committed by armed opposition elements. These crimes and abuses include the kidnapping and detention of security force members, individuals identified as members of government-supported militias (referred to locally as *shabeeha*), and individuals identified as government allies or supporters. They also include the use of torture and the execution of security force members and civilians. Some of the attacks targeting Shias and Alawites appear to be motivated by sectarianism.

Abuses of this nature, including torture, taking of hostages, and executions by armed opposition members, have also been documented by the UN-mandated Commission of Inquiry in its February 2012 report. In addition to concluding that armed members of the opposition have committed gross human rights abuses, the Commissions report also references and appends documentation received from the Syrian government indicating that armed opposition members have kidnapped, killed, and disappeared civilians and security force members and displaced civilians.

We recognize that the perpetrators of these abuses are not always easy to identify nor do they necessarily belong to an organized command structure that follows the orders of the SNC or other opposition groups. Some reports received by Human Rights Watch indicate that in addition to armed groups with political motivations, criminal gangs, sometimes operating in the name of the opposition, may be carrying out some of these crimes.

Following the creation of the SNC Military Bureau on March 1, 2012, to liaise with, unify, and supervise armed opposition groups including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Human Rights Watch calls on the Bureau to condemn and forbid these abuses in order to achieve its objective of ensuring members of the armed opposition comply with international humanitarian law and to meet its human rights obligations. Human Rights Watch also calls on members of the armed opposition that are not under the operational command of the SNC to desist from committing these rights abuses.

Kidnappings

A number of witnesses have told Human Rights Watch that non-state armed groups identifying themselves with the opposition have kidnapped both civilians and members of the security forces. Marwan, an Alawite resident of Karam el Zeitoun, Homs, told Human Rights Watch that on January 23 an armed gang entered his neighborhood and kidnapped his elderly parents from their home. He said,

When the armed gang went into the house, my father called me on the phone, but they grabbed the phone from him. I tried to call back and couldnt reach him, so I called a neighbor, who told me they took my father and mother, put them in a car, and went south. The head of the gang, known as *Abees*, called me the next day. He told me they had my parents and asked for money and weapons as ransom. He told me my father was okay and was with them. I said I would give him what he wanted, but that he had to let me hear my fathers voice. I spoke with him, and he noticed I was crying. He said: Dont cry. Dont be afraid. I am not afraid. This is what God has written. My father

had the Quran as his weapon. He said, Dont worry and dont listen to them. After that they cut the line. I tried calling back a number of times but the phone was closed. The next day I kept trying; *Abees* answered and was swearing. He said to stop calling, and that they had killed my parents. After that we saw a video on YouTube showing their dead bodies. We have not received the bodies back despite numerous pleas. They took them because they want money. Myself, I am a supporter of the government, but this is a sectarian crime, and it has to do with money. My father had nothing to do with the government.

Mazen, a Syrian activist, told Human Rights Watch that members of the Abu Issa group in Taftanaz, a village north of Saraqeb, Idlib, told him that they had kidnapped individuals who worked with the government and tortured three of them to death.

Samih, another Syrian activist who said he has worked closely with the FSA in Saraqeb, told Human Rights Watch that while he was there he saw residents of Saraqeb complain to the FSA on more than one occasion that the Al-Nur battalion, a Salafist group that is not part of the official FSA structure, was kidnapping civilians for ransom. He said, The people in Saraqeb were fed up with the battalion for doing this and that they asked the FSA to intervene and that Sometimes people would come to me when this happened and I would talk to members of the FSA on their behalf or I would direct them to local FSA leaders.

Samih also told Human Rights Watch that members of the FSA were kidnapping soldiers:

They would kidnap them and ask their parents to pay a ransom to let them go. One time, the FSA in Saraqeb kidnapped a colonel from the Presidential Guard. In return, the military kidnapped two children from Saraqeb. The children were 15 and 16 years old. I was working with the FSA members and local government officials to negotiate a trade. At one point, the family members of the two kids called me pleading that I speed up the negotiations as much as possible. They said that they got a call at home from the captors and that they could hear their kids being tortured. They told them their kids would be released when the FSA released the colonel. We were able to negotiate a trade for the colonel and the kids have now been released.

Mazen said he spoke to a member of the Syrian security forces who was kidnapped and detained by opposition fighters in Saraqeb. He said,

The detainee told me he was a First Assistant in the National Hospital in Aleppo... I asked the revolutionaries to bring him to me so I could speak to him. He said that opposition fighters had beaten him with electrical cables and on the head... and he was blindfolded. He said they let him speak to his parents...and that they asked them for money to release him.

The media coordinator for another FSA group operating in Homs, Al Farouq battalion, told Human Rights Watch that the battalion is not kidnapping soldiers but detaining them during military operations. He said,

We are not kidnapping soldiers. During an armed confrontation, soldiers surrounded by the FSA are surrendering themselves to the Al-Farouq battalion, so we are capturing and not kidnapping the soldiers. After capturing the soldiers, the FSA calls the government to negotiate the terms of their release but they refuse to negotiate simply because they dont care about the captured soldiers. The captives are placed in a room not a prison. The room has one door with a lock, but no windows. The Al-Farouq battalion is treating them very well.

In addition, Human Rights Watch is deeply concerned about the FSA kidnappings of Iranian nationals, some of whom the FSA has confirmed are civilians. On January 26 the FSA Al Farouq battalion [claimed responsibility](#) for capturing seven Iranian nationals, five of whom they allege are members of the Iranian armed forces. In an interview on February 22, 2012, with Human Rights Watch, the Al-Farouq battalion media coordinator explained that the other two individuals detained are civilians but that they were detained at the point of capture because a Persian speaker was unavailable to confirm this until later. When asked why the detainees identified as civilians had not yet been released, he would not comment.

In tandem with its announcement of their capture, the battalion released [video footage](#) of the five detainees that they identified as members of the Iranian armed forces. In the video, one of the captives, Sajjad Amirian, explains that the five were following orders from Syrian security forces to shoot at civilians. On January 27 Syrian state media, SANA, reported that Iran's MAPNA Group, an Iranian power company in Syria, said that the on camera statements were made under duress and untrue, and that the five individuals were in fact Iranian engineers. In [an interview](#) with Iranian state-owned Press TV, one of the detainees family members, Mehdi Sohrabi, spoke out against their detention, insisting that they are all engineers. The Islamic Republic News Agency reported that all seven men were released on February 10, but on February 15 indicated that the report was false and that the men remained in custody. The Al-Farouq battalion media coordinator told Human Rights Watch on March 16 that the seven detainees were still being held in Syria and that they were in good health.

According to media reports on February 1, members of the FSA also kidnapped 11 Iranian nationals traveling to Damascus on a pilgrimage tour, claiming that they had connections to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The FSA Abu el Fida battalion [announced their release](#) on February 6 following Turkish mediation efforts. An additional 11 Iranian pilgrims reportedly kidnapped on January 26 are still believed to be detained.

Torture

Human Rights Watch has reviewed at least 25 videos on YouTube in which Syrian security forces or their alleged supporters are filmed confessing to crimes under circumstances in which it appears that their statements were made under duress. At least 18 of these videos show footage of detained individuals who are bruised, bleeding, or show other signs of physical abuse.

In [one video](#), three individuals described by the accompanying text as *shabeeha* are asked what their names are, where they are from, their religion, and what they are doing in Tal Kalakh. In the video they are shown on their knees during this interrogation, their hands bound. The face of one is clearly badly bruised. They all identify themselves as Shia, from el Rabwie, Homs, and confess that they were killing peaceful protesters.

In [another video](#) bearing the emblem of the FSA Khaled Bin Al Walid battalion, an unnamed individual described by the accompanying

text as a *shabeeha* member is interrogated. He appears bound and his face is bruised. At the end of the video, he denies an allegation against him and the interrogator calls him a liar, tells the videographer to stop shooting, and directs someone off camera to bring him the electricity machine.

All individuals in the custody of the FSA and other opposition forces, including members of the Syrian security forces and *shabeeha*, should be treated humanely in accordance with international human rights standards.

Executions

Other video footage reviewed by Human Rights Watch and information received in interviews indicates that members of the FSA have executed individuals suspected of crimes against the opposition in their custody.

[One video](#), released on YouTube on February 4, shows an individual hung from a tree by his neck in front of several armed fighters. Commentary indicates that he is a *shabeeha* fighter captured and executed by the FSA Kafr Takharim battalion on January 22, 2012. In a [second video](#), which appears to have been released by the FSA Al Farouq battalion on YouTube, an individual identified as a member of Air Force Intelligence based in Homs is interrogated and confesses to shooting at protesters. The detainee's face is very badly beaten, cut, and bruised, and he appears disoriented. Written statements accompanying the video state that it was filmed before his execution, and the interrogator in the video, amidst curses, asks him for his final request before dying.

In a separate incident, the Al Farouq battalion media coordinator told Human Rights Watch about the execution of an Air Force Intelligence member. He said, The death of the member of the Air Force Intelligence was an act of revenge because the branch is responsible for horrific killings in Homs.

In light of these reports, we strongly urge you to publicly condemn kidnappings, the use of torture, and executions by armed Syrian opposition members and to work to ensure that all opposition members do not engage in these unlawful practices.

Sincerely,

Sarah Leah Whitson

Executive Director

Middle East & North Africa division

Cc:

Colonel Riad al-Asaad

Commander

Free Syrian Army

Dr. Burhan Ghalioun

President

Syrian National Council

General Mustafa al-Sheikh

Military Council

Summary Executions by Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas

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