

Human Rights Watch

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

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Authorities Should Halt Isolation Policy Immediately

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Interviews with recently released prisoners in Tunisia refute government denials that it is holding dozens of political prisoners in prolonged solitary confinement or isolation, some for over a decade.

The 39-page report, [Tunisia: Crushing the Person, Crushing a Movement](#), charges that the governments policy of isolation is driven not by legitimate penological concerns. Rather, this national policy seeks to punish and demoralize jailed leaders of the banned Nahdha (Renaissance) party, as part of government efforts to destroy the countrys Islamist movement.

The Tunisian government must end its policy of trying to crush political prisoners by throwing them into solitary confinement for years on end, said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. Tunisia should grant an amnesty to its political prisoners, but until that happens, the isolation policy must end.

Released Nahdha leaders said that prison officials never formally told them why they were being held in isolation, how long the isolation would last, or how to appeal the decision. The government forbids inmates in isolation from all contact with the rest of the prison population, even during their daily outdoor exercise period. These inmates are barred from all vocational, cultural and educational programs. Their communication with the outside world and access to books is also heavily restricted, and family visits are limited to a single, short weekly visit at most, usually through a separation barrier.

Not only does Tunisias practice of long-term isolation violate international norms on the treatment of prisoners, it also violates Tunisian law, which allows isolation as a form of punishment for up to 10 days only. Moreover, the policy also violates the prohibition against cruel and inhuman treatment or punishment and, in some cases, may rise to the level of torture. The long-term absence of normal social interaction and of reasonable mental stimulus threatens the mental health of inmates in enforced isolation, penologists say.

The only person you can speak to is the guard. But from time to time, the prison staff would decide not to address a single word to you, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for an entire week, said Ali Laaridh, a prisoner freed in November who described the measures Tunisian authorities sometimes took to intensify the inmates sense of isolation. You might ask for a medication, or to see a doctor, and they wouldnt even say Yes or No, or, We are looking at your request. It makes you despondent, ready to do something desperate, toward the guard, or toward yourself, just to prove you exist.

About 40 out of Tunisias 500 political prisoners are being held in long-term isolation, either in solitary confinement or in small-group isolation, in which two to four inmates share a cell or wing but are otherwise cut off from all contact with the rest of the prison population. Many have held hunger strikes to demand improved conditions and an end to the enforced segregation. On April 9, Nahdha journalist Hamadi Jebali, imprisoned since 1991, launched a hunger strike from his isolation cell in Sfax prison.

International penal standards dictate that solitary confinement should be imposed only for short periods, in an individualized fashion, under strict supervision (including by a physician) and only for legitimate penal reasons of discipline or preventive security. However, the released prisoners said that inmates in long-term isolation received no special medical supervision, and that the only explanations they received for their segregation were unofficial comments such as, "You can incite the other prisoners," or "The decision is beyond my authority." The released prisoners acknowledged that the material conditions of isolation cells have improved since the mid-1990s, even though the underlying policy of strict segregation remains in force.

All of the prisoners in prolonged isolation are Islamists, most of them leaders of the banned Nahdha party. After tolerating Nahdha in his first years of office, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali launched a crackdown against the party in 1990 that has continued to this day. The Tunisian government maintains nevertheless that Nahdha is an extremist movement that sought to establish a fundamentalist state. In 1992, it obtained convictions in military court of 265 Nahdha leaders and supporters for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government.

Many of today's prisoners in isolation are from that group.

However, human rights organizations that observed the proceedings condemned the 1992 trials as unfair and concluded that the charges of a coup plot had not been proven. The defendants in those trials were not convicted of carrying out any acts of violence. Since then, Nahdha has not been linked to any violent activities. Nor has evidence been released to suggest that, while in prison, the inmates currently held in long-term isolation engaged in behavior that would justify such an extreme measure against them.

One year ago today, Tunisian Minister of Justice and Human Rights Bchir Takkari announced that Tunisia might accept prison visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, negotiations between the government and that organization have yet to produce an agreement on access.

"Tunisia: Crushing the Person, Crushing a Movement" is available in English at:

<https://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/tunisia0405>

The report in Arabic is available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/arabic/reports/2005/tunisia0405>

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