



REPORT

‘No One Hears Us’: Torture of Women in Syria’s Dungeons

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TRT WORLD
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“We were raped first and then beaten until we fainted, at every interrogation” – Hajra, 28, detained in 2011ⁱ

“No matter how hard we resisted and tried to protect ourselves, they never stopped torturing, beating, insulting and, worst of all, raping us”- Bushra, 32, from Aleppo & detained in 2012.ⁱⁱ

“The prison guard would come to us sometimes and ask us ‘who is ready? Today I feel like it [sex]’, those of us who were unmarried or virgins would hide behind the married women because we would be terrified of being picked out.”- Saya, 32, from Aleppo & detained in 2014.ⁱⁱⁱ

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1. Introduction

"Who gives you more pleasure? Those in the Free Syrian Army or us? [said a Syrian soldier] We have struggled to get our voices heard [about the rapes]. To no avail. No one hears us" – Jehan, 25, from Hama.

"No one hears us", Jehan, a 25-year old woman from Hama, Syria told us while documenting her testimony. These words triggered TRT World Research Centre's investigation into the incessant rape and sexual violence endured by women in the eight years since the start of Syria's uprising.

Women across Syria have been subject to an engineered programme of torture under the custody of the Syrian regime. Torture, though, is nothing new in Syria; almost a norm for those Syrians whose families survived the onslaught previously seen in the 1980's when late President Hafez Al-Assad enforced the disappearance of some 17,000 civilians. In a disturbing parallel to his father, President Bashar Al-Assad is triggering his own wave of human rights abuses under his effective control.

How did this all begin? One element of it involved the actions of fifteen students who sprayed anti-regime graffiti on a wall in Deraa in March 2011, they were arrested and brutally tortured. The Syrian community walked the streets to protest against the regime immediately, demanding nothing short of the release of these children. But the Syrian forces began a systematic extermination campaign against the peaceful protesters.

In broader context, the popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, encouraged the Syrians to seek change amid President Assad's stale leadership which lasted for decades, without any prospect in domestic and political outlook. Women wilfully engaged in the peaceful

protests, which led Syria's National Army to enforce a heavy-handed crackdown. Women were targeted regardless if they participated in anti-regime protests. The regime's reaction showed that it would mercilessly neutralise the weakest of society, sending a message to the Syrian people that it would oust dissent at all costs.

Thousands of women since then disappeared in a network of prisons and secret makeshift detention centres in Syria. Over 13,500 women have been imprisoned and over 7000 approximately remain in Syria's prison enduring sexual abuse and systematic rape (Conscience Movement). Ordinary women endured the highest form of grotesque systematic torture, ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions in full secrecy.

But a dangerous dynamic has matured in Syria's conflict for women: Rape and sexual violence have become normalised as a stratagem of war. Similar cases of sexual violence as a stratagem of war has been documented widely in Myanmar, Bosnia, Kashmir, South Sudan and Afghanistan (TRT World Research Centre, Women of War).

The law on this is clear: sexual violence and rape in an armed conflict is a violation of International Law against men, women, combatants and non-combatants alike. The 1949 Geneva Conventions prohibited it back then, but some 70 years later militaries and associated forces are using it as a strategy in war. Women are thus paying the highest price via a physical, psychological and sociological experience in conflict, incurring a lifelong repercussion which goes relatively untreated.

Sexual violence as a stratagem in war was addressed just over a decade ago by the United Nations, which adopted the resolution (1820), a

first of its kind putting sexual violence in conflict zones on the agenda in 2008^{iv}. It held that rape and sexual violence can amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Fast forward to December 2016, the UN passed the Resolution 71/248 to establish an international mechanism to collect and analyse evidence of violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) - or the Laws of War - and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) in Syria. But the Syrian regime continues to abuse and torture those within their custody and remains a major human rights issue in Syria. The UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria concluded in 2016 that the Syrian regime implemented systematic torture against detainees in regime facilities leading to death in custody.^v

With a current dysfunctional justice system in Syria amid the civil conflict, survivors of torture and sexual violence in war have little hope of redress.

Most women, now living under the conditions of a refugee have not received the medical and psychological assistance they require for their care.

The human rights violations have attracted several organisations to monitor the abuses. Last year, the concerns gave birth to the 'Conscience Movement' in Turkey, Istanbul with world-wide organisational support to call for the end of unlawful detention and torture of women in Syria. The Conscience Movement primarily aims to draw attention to the plight of women imprisoned in Syria. The inception of the Movement symbolises the importance of paving the way for investigations to eventually enable the facilitation of releasing women in Syria who have unlawfully been detained.

Focus of this report

This report seeks to uncover cases of women tortured by President Assad's prisons across Syria and to raise the plight of those suffering silently without any due process, redress and access to justice. TRT World Research Centre acknowledges that all sides of the conflict have engaged in torture, ill-treatment and extrajudicial killings.

What will be seen is that women in Syrian society are in a double quagmire: First, women are subjected to grotesque torture and rape as a stratagem of war – the impact of which is unmeasurable with reverberating effects. Second, the survivors of torture and rape experience a negative sociological experience of being disowned by their own extended family, society and spouse – all in the name of honour shaped by Syria's culture, custom and society norms.

Incessant rape

Based on the testimonies documented by TRT World Research Centre, the organisation is concerned that these cases of systematic torture and sexual violence have resulted in unlawful extrajudicial killings, crimes against humanity and war crimes. The secrecy behind the prisons in Syria, and the restrictions on access to such prisons in addition to the refusal of the Syrian regime to explain a legal basis raises serious questions of the rights abuses taking place in Syria.

2. Methodology

The research for this report was conducted between February 2019 and March 2019 using primary fieldwork and secondary research. Researchers at TRT World Research Centre investigated and documented 14 testimonies of former female detainees who were tortured and detained in Syria between 2011 and 2016. In addition 6 other cases were on file, but consent was not provided to include in the report, though it informed the systematic nature of torture. For investigative casework gathering, a snowball methodology was adopted to acquire subjects for interview, which permitted a triangulation and verification process with local Syrian and Turkish organisations working to redress women tortured in Syria.

For this report, TRT World Research Centre reviewed material available on open source platforms, including collaboration with TRT World's Investigation Unit. In addition, a review process of publications by international organisations such as the UN, international human rights, humanitarian advocacy and monitoring groups in Turkey and Syria.

The names of the interviewees have been replaced with a pseudonym upon request by the interviewees. The rationale for anonymity is to protect the interviewees from any reprisals and ensure safety while coming forward to document their experience of torture. TRT World Research Centre obtains the names on file and took special care and attention to not trigger trauma of the interviewees.

Remuneration was not provided to the interviewees, apart from reasonable travel expenses to and from the discreet and designated interview location.

It is not the purpose of this report to document a comprehensive record of torture and abuse cases by the Syrian National Army. Human Rights organisations including Amnesty International^{vi}, Human Rights Watch^{vii} and the United Nations^{viii} have collectively recorded thousands of cases of sexual violence against women. TRT World Research Centre's researchers have come across several cases of men and boys who have been sexually abused by the Syrian National Army via fieldwork investigations, but the scope of this endeavour focuses on women primarily – a forgotten angle of the conflict.

Acknowledgements

TRT World Research Centre would like to thank all the Syrian women who agreed to be interviewed by our researchers. This act of bravery by torture and sexual abuse survivors permitted the uncovering of these human rights abuses and crimes by the Syrian regime. These steps will sow the seeds for any future litigation part of the transnational justice phase of the conflict. TRT World Research Centre consulted widely in preparing this report with humanitarian professionals working in the field, academics, lawyers and family members of abused women. We thank them all for their support, insight and thoughtful engagements.

TRT World Research Centre is indebted to three organisations who have worked tirelessly to cover the plight of Syrian women, and which have facilitated some contact with affected women, namely: IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, Conscience Movement, and The Syrian National Mission on Missing Persons and Detainees. We thank them for their collaboration. This report has been authored by Researcher Khalil Dewan with interview support from Assistant researcher Razzan Saffour.

3. Feature Testimonies

"Saya"

Saya^{ix}, 32, was detained in Aleppo by the Syrian National Army in 2014 for 100 days, with her sister Anaya, 29.

Both were captured from the streets of Aleppo and taken to a nearby prison facility. Beating immediately started from the moment they entered the facility, and then taken to the basement. "As they took us downstairs we saw guards whipping young boys, aged around 10 - 12, with a three-stringed whip. Every time they were whipped, their bodies were slashed. This terrified me, I peeked from the corner of my eye and thought to myself 'if this is how they torture children, how will they torture us?'"



"They put me and my sister in different cells, each cell had 7 women in it. The sight of the cells was beyond imagination. There were blankets covered entirely in blood. There were lice and rats everywhere. All the women had signs of torture - whether her eye was swollen, teeth broken or bleeding. One woman had her knee dislocated and was screaming in dire pain, black and swollen, sitting in the corner of the room. I felt like I was walking into a horror movie, I contained myself then suddenly lost it and began laughing hysterically, asking myself 'what's happening?'" I was then put into a cell.

"About an hour later I heard the guard shout out my sister's name. After an hour of my sister leaving with the guard and not hearing back, I started having heart palpitations.

"I began hearing screams, but it didn't come to my mind at first that this might be my sister being tortured. I tried to stop my ears to listen carefully, and at that point my cell-mates realised what was happening and began to distract me. After a while I heard my sister groaning in pain saying 'aah', and this had a serious psychological impact on me for not being able to protect my younger sister."

"The lice immediately began eating at my skin, so I began pulling my socks up really high to try and prevent them from reaching me. At this point a guard came into our cell and asked me what I was doing, I told him I was covering myself up, but he laughed and said don't cover - come with me. I asked if I was being released, and he proceeded with verbal abuse I had never experienced before in my life and said he was going to "teach me a lesson I won't forget". As we walked down to the room, there were fresh drops of blood on the floor. I didn't realise it was my sister's blood until they began torturing me.

He placed a blindfold over my eyes which was still drenched in the tears of my sister, and shackled my hands behind me in metal cuffs. There were three men, the first one began slapping and punching my face, one was kicking my back, and the last one was whipping my legs. All whilst cursing me. I couldn't see but could feel everything until I couldn't stand it anymore and fell onto my knees. They began interrogating me and asking me about my brothers, where they were and what they were doing. They carried on beating me for about 15 minutes until I felt myself being picked up and thrown up in the air and onto the floor again in such force that I couldn't even scream in agony any more - the last thing I felt was a kick in my back before I fainted. I spent 12 days in a coma, and even whilst I was in the hospital I was cuffed."

"The prison guard would come to us sometimes and ask us 'who is ready? Today I feel like it [rape]'; those of us who were unmarried or virgins would hide behind the married women because we would be terrified of being picked out."

"Every few weeks we [female detainees] would have collective torture sessions, where all of us would be gathered and taken out in front of the men's cells to be beaten together, in order to provoke the men. One of the men, shouted 'Allahu Akbar' or scream at them to stop in order to either beat him or kill him in place of the women."

"They transferred us from Aleppo to Damascus, and the nine hour drive was torture as the soldiers mentally prepared us for the worst. When I asked them if going to Damascus meant we will be released, one soldier responded with "do you think we will release you before making you pregnant?", this made me lose consciousness as I thought I had escaped rape."

Saya was then transferred to a prison in Damascus. "After the bodyguard reassured me that we will be leaving soon and that we will not be touched under his guardianship I thought I had his word, and went back to the cell to pray. I didn't know the cell had cameras, as soon I finished praying a head of the branch stormed in and asked who had dared to pray. When I confidently admitted, he dragged me to a room, picked me up and pinned me against the wall to the extent that I couldn't breathe, and threatened to strip me naked and whip me against the tree outside and 'make me an example to everyone'.



"Iman"

Iman^{}, 35, from Aleppo and a mother of three children, was arrested at a checkpoint by Syrian authorities in 2013 and taken to the Republican Guard Branch prison. Guards beat her severely using electric-shocks and raped her. Iman was told that she'd be charged with "supporting terrorism" and "belonging to the opposition". She was then transferred to the Political Security Branch prison in Damascus where she endured sexual abuse.*

She received 16 years imprisonment on terrorism charges, and 6 months for taking part in protests in 2011 without ever entering a court. After 8 months of enduring detention, she was released in a prisoner exchange agreement between the Syria's regime forces and an opposition armed group.

Iman was dumped on the border of Lebanon, where she made her way to Turkey and reunited with her children. Upon her return to society, she learnt that her extended family wanted her dead over "honour" – they believed her rape in prison brought upon shame.

"They placed me in a solitary confinement at first for about 10 days, but the first 3 days I was alone with several dead corpses. The cell was about eighty meters by two metre, with a small toilet which was constantly leaking. I was really cold and devastated, it was completely dark and I was crying looking for a blanket or something to cover myself with. I suddenly came across flesh and screamed in horror assuming that it were another live person in the cell, I began banging on the doors frantically for the guards to come and move me. I was told by a prisoner in the cell next to me to "be quiet! It could be you next!"

"Nobody spoke to me when I was in solitary confinement. I would bang on the doors and scream to them that I have confessions, wanting just to leave the cell for a few moments but nobody would respond. It was as if they wanted me to sit silently and feel completely hopeless, as I pondered over death being my own escape.

"They would only give me rotten salami to eat when I was in solitary confinement, mentally this made me feel like I was eating the flesh of the dead corpses beside me. I would refuse, it was all too much. I lost at least 15kgs during my first 10 days in prison."

"We knew day from night due to the different prison guards shifts. We were given numbers instead of names, and were referred to everything by our number, making us feel as if we weren't even human enough to have a name."

4. Arrest

Following the protests, the Syrian regime triggered a heavy-handed approach in arresting anyone it thought held an anti-regime sentiment. Women unfortunately were on the receiving end of a hyper sexualised approach which resulted in thousands of cases of harassment and rape. Arrests documented for this report predominately took place at checkpoints, on the street while on route to work, or as part of a military ground offensive and raids. Women were often arrested with insufficient questioning and put in military and security vehicles where the initial phase of the abuse would take place.

In the vehicles, Syrian soldiers would engage in groping women's breasts and touching their thighs while

making insulting comments (Human Rights Council, 2018).^{xi} These testimonies of pre-detention harassment and sexual abuse have been widely documented by international human rights organisations, including the United Nations.

Upon reaching the designated prison or makeshift facility, the female detainees would be searched by men – without any females present: forcing them to kneel down to allow security guards to search their body for any prohibited items. Much of the searching would quickly escalate to sexual harassment and abuse. From this point onward, women go through a process of being forcefully stripped naked.

5. 'Stripped Naked': A Precursor to Torture

Based on the testimonies gathered by the TRT World Research Centre, one of the main patterns documented in four of the testimonies was the process of stripping women naked.^{xii} This acted as a strategy to humiliate female detainees, and place fear in their hearts of what is to come next.

Bushra, a former detainee describes this part of her ordeal by the Syrian authorities:



“Bushra” – Stripped naked and interrogated

Bushra, 32, was dragged into a military vehicle in September 2012, shortly after her husband was detained by the Syrian National Military. Bushra was taken to an intelligence unit where Assad's military were waiting. Under the conditions of torture, Bushra's husband claimed that she was anti-regime and part of the opposition.

The army immediately stripped her naked, put a blindfold on and then began interrogating with violence. “No matter how hard we resisted and tried to protect ourselves, they never stopped torturing, beating, insulting and, worst of all, raping us”, Bushra said.

After being stripped naked, the soldiers began interrogating Bushra, asking whether she was part of any opposition armed groups or took part in any anti-regime protests. The regime personnel attempted to extract a confession from Bushra using physical violence and intimidation.

The Syrian National Army beat Bushra with plastic pipes until she lost consciousness. The soldiers wanted Bushra to confess to being part of the opposition, under duress.

“We could not even sleep due to the screams of the tortured. Many of our friends got pregnant because of the rapes. Some of them gave birth to 2-3 children. I attempted to commit suicide 4 times after that day”.

I received psychological support [in Turkey] but the fact that I am breathing does not mean that I am alive. I feel like a dead body that was dishonoured and lost its soul”.

Another testimony which displays that being stripped naked was normal procedure in Syria's prisons:

Nawal, 50, was detained for less than six months in 2011. She was taken to the National Security Unit in Aleppo where she was first stripped naked and then beaten severely. She was asked to confess to being part of the opposition. The interrogation officers made her sit inside an old car tyre naked, while being beaten with sticks and electrocuted. Nawal mentioned that young girls around the age of 14 were also besides elder women in the facility.

The same pattern is seen, again, with Hajra's testimony:

Hajra, 28, and a mother of three children was arrested over helping injured protesters in 2011. Alongside allegations that her husband took part in the protests and was anti-regime, they were both sent to prison together. There is no account of what happened to the children.

Hajra was subjected to violence and forced naked by the guard. Interrogations underwent every two days. “We were raped first and then beaten until we fainted at every interrogation”, Hajra said. “When I regained consciousness, I found myself naked on the floor with pain and scars”. 17 days after torture, she was rushed to hospital over excessive bleeding from her wounds. Three surgeries were performed on her, in addition to a major infection.

6. Systematic Torture

"I was raped in prison, and sexually abused in all ways imaginable every single day. They placed me in a tyre and beat me with plastic wires along with regular electrocutions during interrogation sessions". Hunada^{xiii}.

Through the testimonies of Syrian women, the TRT World Research Centre has determined that the Syrian National Army is implementing a systematic torture programme against Syrian women. Grotesque methods are in use to humiliate, degrade and torture women for alleged roles in peaceful protests or associating with opposition forces to the Syrian regime. Some women interviewed for this report were arrested for simply living in an opposition-controlled area – without any due process or transparency. Majority – if not all – detainees have at least been transferred between two prison facilities in Syria.

The prisons guards engaged in severe beatings and deprived women of sleep, by waking detainees up every three hours. The conditions were intentionally engineered to be uncomfortable. For instance, through the splashing of cold water on the floor every night, where women would be forced to lay down or stand for long periods of time. Subsequently the temperature of the cells would decrease, making it easy to catch a fever. Suicide was always on the minds of some detainees due to the severity of the torture and prison conditions.

The inadequate access to medicine, food and water drained the health and fitness of detainees, all of which occurred with regular rape. Detainees were only permitted to go to the toilet three times a day within 24 hours, and worse of all given ten seconds to relieve themselves. Under these conditions, some of the women were interrogated and forced to confess to supporting the opposition. Others were taken to military courts - while some were given charges in interrogation rooms - and charged, only to be brought back to prison and enter the torture programme again.

"Upon entering the [prison] branch, the officer asked us if we'd been detained before", Saya said. Syrian women were very highly likely to have been arrested – or at the very least questioned - at some point since March 2011. The network of prisons in Syria do not hold a centralised command and control. Thus, a survivor of torture could be released by one prison, and to only be re-arrested again by the Syrian authorities and enter another facility.

TRT World Research Centre has learned that there's also competition among the network of prisons on how many confessions can be extracted. It is unclear what the competition was over, though it was likely monetary in value. Subsequently, it is the civilians that continue to pay the price with their liberty – and in most cases their own life.

Iman's testimony cries of her experience in the Republican Guard Prison:

"After 10 days they took me out and started with the first round of interrogation which was primarily beatings all over my body and then forced in an old car tyre [the guards forced Iman to physically fold into a car tyre, her head was in-between her feet for long periods]. Other detainees tortured with the tyre returned with broken limbs".

"They tortured us for an entire week, every day for 2 hours by hanging us by the wall with our feet dangling with the passing insults. The more regular torture was beatings and sometimes electrocutions. They would whip us sometimes too. I was tortured most by beatings on my eyes.

"There were three cells for women, approximately 15 women in each. There were also cells in the dungeon, for the more 'dangerous women', who would be the wives of big activists or who were known to be more active in the revolution, or who refused to confess."

New Wave of Detainees

Female detainees feared the moment a fresh batch of detainees would enter prison. The primary reason for this was because the torture procedure would restart again for everyone as a cycle. Therefore, creating a free-for-all situation for survival. The systematic nature of the means and methods used, created this psychological mind set.

Iman continues her testimony, describing the daunting moment when new female detainees entered the facility:

"The physical and mental abuse was unprecedented in the Republican Guard Prison. Whenever a new wave of women would enter, the guards would extend the interrogation and torture all women in the section - and we would end up getting tortured again once and twice and thrice. For this reason, we didn't like it when new batch of women came, we prayed that no one else would be detained to spare us from the repetitive horror."

7. Rape As Strategem Of War

"Officers would come in to the cell and pick out a girl, if she returned after a few days we know she was taken to be raped. If she didn't return we know she was executed." Iman

Sexual abuse, torture and systematic rape was a recurring human rights violation across all of the testimonies gathered by TRT World Research Centre - majority of the testimonies documented for this report told of a combination of such abuses. There was a systematic culture of rape within the Syrian authorities running the prison and makeshift facilities - ranging from the Syrian National Army, prison guards and interrogators all associated with the prison network. Based on the testimonies, there is no denying that rape is being used as a weapon of war to extract confessions. But what will be seen, is that the Syrian authorities also abused power in such closed environments by conducting sexual abuse for personal pleasure.

This is further confirmed with the documented repulsive questions that was asked by the security guards. Jehan, a former detainee from Hama told researchers in her testimony that several security guards mockingly asked: *"Who gives you more pleasure? Those in the Free Syrian Army or us?"* These questions represent the attitude of the prison guards and the hostile environment women were detained. *"We have struggled to get out voices heard [about the rapes]. To no avail. No one hears us",* Jehan continued.

The most disturbing account of rape TRT World Research Centre came across not only destroyed the plight of the survivor's physical being, but also her psychosocial level which is likely to have a reverberating impact on her life. The following testimony demonstrates the grotesque extent that the Syrian forces engaged in the conduct of rape:

“Zahra” – Raped in front of her 14-month baby daughter several times

Zahra, 38, was sent to a prison in Damascus along with her 14-month old baby for a duration of one and half years. Sexual violence, psychological and physical abuse was inflicted against her. Zahra was raped on several occasions by prison guards in front of her 14-month baby. It became unbearable for her, and within ten months of her ordeal, Zahra's baby became severely ill.

The inhumane and degrading conditions of the prison resulted in her baby to fall severely ill and frantically react- crying throughout the day and night. “The violence, starvation and rape that I was exposed to became unbearable” Zahra said. “I was brought to Turkey right after my release due to my bleeding. I had 12 surgeries there because of my deteriorating health...”

The incidents represented by Zahra's testimony demonstrates how sexual violence is a tool of war – specifically used to weaken and dehumanise women and in this case in front of a 14-month baby daughter.

Khawla^{xiv}, 26, shared the following part of her experience emphasising the frequent rapes that took place in the prison:

“I was hanged from my hands from the ceiling, raped frequently, breasts and private parts poked, and forced to walk over blood as a form of psychological torture. There were some young females in the prison between the age of 14 and 15. I saw them getting raped, and at least two of them gave birth”.

Requests for sexual pleasure in return for acquittals

Rape in conflict is not only conducted in conflict zones as a stratagem of war, but also as a personal crime among the security forces for pleasure. In one testimony, two prison guard requested for sexual intercourse in return for an acquittal. The testimony demonstrates how the security guards of the prison system and makeshift facilities are abusing power against female detainees.

Nawal, 50, from Aleppo shared her experience on being asked to have sex by prison guards:

“Besides being tortured and sexually abused in prison, the guards here requested sex in return for an acquittal or at the very least to ease the suffering in prison”.

Nawal did not provide consent for sexual intercourse and was raped thereafter anyway. What this case demonstrates, is that the guards psychologically played with Nawal's mental state make her believe that she had a choice. But the reality was that she was always going to be raped as a stratagem of war. This directly amounts to the experience of psychological torture.

Nawal's testimony shows the pervasive environment women were detained in, without any recourse for justice. Nawal went on to be transferred to another prison after being raped.

8. Intelligence Gathering on Male Relatives

"They began interrogating me and asking me about my brothers, where they were and what they were doing".

Saya

The Syrian regime forces not only arrested women as a form of punishment for alleged involvement in anti-regime campaigns. But also detained women strategically to gather locational intelligence on male relatives and family members.

Iman shared the following part of her ordeal, which highly suggests that a detention policy against women exists as a strategy for this reason:

"I protected my husband as much as I could so that they wouldn't go after him and detain him too. I told them [the officers] that we were getting divorced because his brother was serving in Assad's army [therefore making her husband associated with a loyalist] and that I was anti-regime. I did this because I heard so many incidents where they would bring a man after his wife had been detained, and torture him almost [and sometimes to] death right in front of her, and vice versa. Or they would detain a woman to force her brothers to give themselves in."

Iman's case demonstrates how she was interrogated specifically to extract intelligence. Her testimony also shed light on more forceful torture of female detainee if they were related to an opposition armed group. "An army division leader would sometimes come into the prison searching for a wife, sister or relative of a fighter to kill in retaliation – this would happen when one of his men were killed in battle".

In another testimony, Saya explained that her interrogation was purely about the males in her family and their whereabouts:

"They began interrogating me and asking me about my brothers, where they were and what they were doing. They carried on beating me for about 15 minutes until I felt myself being picked up and thrown up in the air and onto the floor again in such force that I couldn't even scream in agony any more - the last thing I felt was a kick in my back before I fainted. I spent 12 days in a coma, and even whilst I was in the hospital I was cuffed."

Saya continued to explain that women would be gathered and taken in front of male detainee's cells for "torture sessions". The rationale was to provoke the male detainees, especially any relatives of the women being tortured. Women would be gathered naked in front of the cells and whipped severely. This would inflict a tremendous amount of psychological impact on the male detainees, who would protest by shouting at the guards with "Allahu Akbar" [God is Great] which would infuriate the prison guards and result in violence – and in some cases the killing of reactive detainees.

"Every few weeks we [female detainees] would have collective torture sessions, where all of us would be gathered and taken out in front of the men's cells to be beaten together, in order to provoke the men. One of the men, shouted 'Allahu Akbar' or scream at them to stop in order to either beat him or kill him in place of the women."

Shouting the religious slogan "Allahu Akbar" acted as a form of defiance for the detainees, permitting a form of disobedience versus the prison guards.

In another testimony, Amal a survivor of torture confirmed that systematic beatings and frequent rape were conducted against her once it was found out that her husband and brother were part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).^{xv} In one part of her testimony share said:

"They told me that they would kill me if I do not confess and answer their questions. They tied my hands back and hung me from the ceiling", Amal said. "When I was hanging, they repeatedly asked me the same questions and beat me: hitting my back, arms, belly and head with plastic pipes. They increased the intensity of the torture; I was sexually harassed and dishonoured".

9. Inhuman Treatment and Deprivation of Food, Water, Medicine

"Our dream at the time was just for a single clean blanket to enter our cell". Iman

Conditions of Prisons

Women would be forced to endure inhuman and degrading treatment which was heightened through the condition of the prison system itself. Majority of the former detainees complained of the conditions, and how it contributed to their human suffering.

Iman described her experience and conditions of her cell:

"The prison cell was cramped, filled with 15 women. We would alternate between standing and sleeping. Half would sleep and the other half would stand until they woke up, or we would pile on top of each other, depending on our situation each day.

The conditions were very bad, the walls were rotting and extremely damp, the floor wasn't covered with anything. I was detained during the colder winter months primarily and we would freeze with nothing to place under us. As for the [sleeping] blankets they would give us one or two blankets to share amongst all of us. They used to tell us 'warm yourselves with each other', and sure the prison was tiny and cramped, but sometimes it would get extremely cold - other times from all the torture we would get ill and need proper warmth and covering. Added to this, the blankets were always dirty and infested in lice and dirt. Our dream at the time was just for a single clean blanket to enter our cell."

"The lice and mice would eat either our own skin or our clothes, and we had no options to change or get new clothes unless one of the women were transferred to another prison and left her clothes behind. One of my friends had a rat bite her eye."

"They would torture us mentally by ensuring we see nothing clean, everything around us was rotten and dirty.

We knew day from night due to the different prison guards shifts. We were given numbers instead of names, and were referred to everything by our number, making us feel as if we weren't even human enough to have a name."

Iman's testimony primarily shows that women were forced to stand in cramped cells, which meant they had to take turns in sleeping while others would stand for the portion of the night. The detainees were not given access to clean water in their cells. In some cases, the prison guards would provide a small bowl each. However, that would be used for sanitation purposes. Thus, rendering the detainees without clean drinking water to drink. All the detainees complained of catching dreadful illnesses, coughs and severe sore throats as a result of not having adequate water to drink.

In the following testimony, Alia explains the inhuman treatment and the lack of access to water. Alia continues to mention that those who became pregnant in prison were not provided with the basic medical attention required during pregnancy.

"It is not possible to express what we have been through there. They didn't let us take a bath for 3 months. Now, infestations with lice started to occur. People were dying next to us because of torture".

In another testimony, Hunada^{xvi}, 50, from Daraa shared the following experience about her ordeal:

"I was dumped in a prison cell in 2012 with 65 other women with me – the space constraints were unbearable. 7 months passed, and I was sent to a military court. I was supposed to be charged with terrorism and supporting the opposition forces, but they also accused me of being a drug dealer, and spying for Mossad. They wanted to charge me with anything they could" Hunada said.

"The prison was filthy: dirt, lice and smell lingered every day in total darkness. I was starved for ages and given food every few days. The only food they gave was old bulgur infested with lice and bugs. I had no option but to eat it", Hunada concluded.

Sleep Deprivation

Sleep deprivation is a strategy to drain the energy levels of the detainees while continuing to attempt to extract confessions. A former detainee confirmed the practice of sleep deprivation in Syria:

Arwa^{xvii}, 38 and a mother of four children from Hama was stopped at a checkpoint in 2014 in Hama, and questioned on the whereabouts of her husband. Arwa's husband passed two years previously on his way from Idlib, but the Syrian National Army assumed he was part of the opposition. Arwa was then taken to a military facility and interrogated systematically starting at 6pm in the evening till early morning for three days. She was woken up every three hours when she was not in the interrogation room - as a means to deprive Arwa of sleep.

Arwa was humiliated in prison, without going into further detail. She explained that she was stripped naked and interrogated. As part of her ordeal, it ended in a conviction for being involved in arms smuggling for the opposition. Arwa mentioned that she saw boys as young as eight years old and young girls in their early teens being tortured in the same facility she was detained. Arwa was released in October 2015, where she travelled to Turkey.

Medicine

Alia mentioned that medicine was never given to those that requested it: "There were many pregnant women in prison with us. None of them were given medication, and all were trying to make their voice heard by screaming for this demand. Not only women but also men were tortured", Alia described.^{xviii}

Alia added that a four year old boy was constantly crying in the prison due to pains of illness, but not once did the prison guards seek to solve the child's issue.

The conditions of the prison facilities are designed to dehumanise detainees on a physical and psychological level: cramped cells, rat-filled underground torture chambers to regular water splashed on the floor to decrease temperature.

Detainees were provided food on an infrequent basis, with some detainees not given food or drink for weeks. Describing the condition of the prison, the following former detainee describes her ordeal of inhumane treatment, and deprivation of food and water. Jamila's testimony provides a snapshot of the physical torture endured in prison, including electric shocks, sexual abuse, and rape in cramped settings.

Jamila – Harassed, rearrested and convicted in a court without any due process or transparency.

Jamila, 32, from Aleppo and a mother of 3 children was detained following a raid conducted by the Syrian National Army in Hamdaniye where her family home was located. She was arrested along with her husband, but was released after 10 days. Jamila's husband was killed in prison. But three months later, Jamila was re-arrested and transferred to Adra Prison.

"It was not possible to turn from one side to another because there was no room. We were monitored 24/7 by surveillance cameras", Jamila said. "We were forbidden to pray and read Quran" but the women prayed secretly in the cells.

The conditions of the prison were inhumane as were the treatment of prisoners. "We found cut nails, bugs within the wheat they served. The prison was extremely dark and cold". The guards provided blankets that were stained with "blood of people killed during torture". Torture of women was routine according to Jamila "they took us to [the] torture room at certain hours and beat us with cables and then gave the electric shock. They tied our hands and hung us from the ceiling".

Jamila was raped and sexually abused in a specific room in the prison. Many women became pregnant, and were forced to give birth under harsh condition in their cell. Jamila was released from prison in 2016, and reunited with her three children who were being looked after by her mother in law. She currently resides in Turkey and is the breadwinner for her family.



10. Unfair Trials Without Representation

In a bid to curb dissent, the Syrian authorities began a mission to forcefully attain as many confessions to prove its citizen's revolt. However, these confessions took place under the context of torture and duress which is a full frontal assault on International Law and Human Rights Law standards. In one of TRT World's feature cases, Jamila was taken to a court and put on trial, and convicted of supporting the opposition forces against President Basher Al-Assad. Jamila then remained in prison for one-full year enduring torture and abuse in Adra Prison.

In another testimony documented by TRT World Research Centre, a former detainee was forced to confess in the context of being threatened with the torture of her teenage daughter. Although the former detainee self-professed that she was not physically tortured – the only case documented without physical torture on TRT World's case files – there was considerable psychological torture which continues to have a reverberating impact on the detainee's life.

Confessions under duress

Shayma shared the following description, as part of her ordeal with the Syrian authorities in prison:^{xix}

"I was the first woman to be arrested in Deraa. My house was raided, and my electronics [laptop / mobile phone] and car was taken away for investigation", Shayma said. "I was taken to the Political Security Branch and interrogated four times, and threatened with beatings. I was thrown in a cell with 30 other women and one four year old child. They all had signs of torture and fatigue on their faces".

"The interrogator told me my daughter is in the same prison as me for the past month – he made me believe she was being tortured!".

Consequently, Shayma felt forced to confess while believing that her daughter was being tortured. This demonstrates one tactic in which the guards in the Political Security Branch used to extract confessions.

11. Cultural Blowback Against Former Detainees

"I didn't know there were problems in our family. My uncles and their sons were waiting for me all over the city, not knowing where I would be released, believing that due to rape in prison, it would be shameful for me to keep living." Iman

Women are experiencing a double quagmire when entering a string of Syrian prisons and makeshift facilities scattered across Syria. First, women are subject to grotesque torture and rape as a weapon of war – the impact of which is unmeasurable, especially on a psychological level. Second, these same women experience a sociological experience of 'cultural blowback', whereby their own extended families and spouse reject them when attempting to re-join family over 'honour'.

Disowned for honour

The testimony of Iman, a feature case of TRT World Research Centre demonstrates the double quagmire that women are enduring as part of their torture ordeal.

Iman – disowned for 'honour'

"I didn't know there were problems in our family. I have nine uncles, and they all stood against my father by telling him that 'if the regime didn't kill Iman, we will - she is our honour and shame". My brother got in touch with the side that was conducting my [prisoner] exchange and ensured that I didn't get released inside Syria - only on the border in Lebanon, and sent to the airport, so that my uncles don't get to me first and kill me. My uncles and their sons were waiting for me all over the city, not knowing where I would be released, believing that due to rape in prison, it would be shameful for me to keep living."

"I stayed with my brother in Turkey, and didn't see my children for an entire year after many negotiations with my husband. My husband declared that I was still his wife legally - and only because we are also relatives, but otherwise he doesn't want me and doesn't want anything to do with me. I was so shocked, this happened after I protected him despite all the torture. He then decided to send me my children [from Syria] only because he didn't want to handle the responsibility and also because for some reason he didn't want me to marry again, as many revolutionary [men] were approaching my father and telling him that given her husband doesn't want her, we will happily marry her and protect her. His attempt to divert me from marriage was successful, because after he sent me my children I devoted my life to them and to ensuring they have shelter, comfort and food. I requested a divorce only 5 years later (4-5 months ago), after giving him many chances and thinking he might change his mind, but he doesn't even check up on his own children."

"There is still harm upon me if I were to go back to Syria from both my uncles and from the regime. I signed an agreement before leaving prison that I would 'disappear', if I re-enter Syria they will detain me again."

12. Legal Dynamics

The testimonies documented for this report committed by the Syrian regime against women in custody equates to violations under International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and the law of armed conflict (LOAC). These frameworks of jurisprudence set out clear obligations for Syria on the treatment of detainees. All detainees are provided guarantees – which cannot be compromised – from degrading treatment, torture and sexual violence including rape as a stratagem of war.

The TRT World Research Centre calls on Syria to run impartial and independent investigations of all the testimonies of rape and torture documented in this report. Those officers acting on behalf of the Syrian state – whether as official employees or recruited as mercenaries – must be held to account with fair trials. Victims of human rights violations must be provided adequate compensation and have access to rehabilitation, restitution and confidence that such crimes will not be repeated.

International Human Rights Law in Application

There is no denying that the Syrian regime is party to key international human rights treaties, including The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Therefore, the Syrian regime has a positive obligation to adhere to these treaties, in addition to customary international law – state practice.

The Syrian regime should take special attention to its obligations to the right to health (ICESCR, Article 12), the right to life; the prohibition of torture and degrading treatment; the right to liberty and security of the person; and the prohibition of enforced disappearance (ICCPR, 6,7,9,10,14). These obligations remain applicable in times of war and peace.

Majority of the testimonies part of this report falls under the human rights law framework, however since the inception of the civil war dynamic, some detainees were arrested on the suspicion of taking part in what the Syrian regime considers as terrorism or hostilities – joining the opposition by way of peaceful or military means – therefore triggering the application of the law of armed conflict. Either way, torture and sexual abuse inside or outside conflict cannot be justified under any circumstance.

The Law of Armed Conflict in Application

The law of armed conflict (LOAC) – otherwise known formally as International Humanitarian Law (IHL) – applies in the context of an armed conflict. Guarantees are provided to combatants and non-combatants detained, injured or those that cease to have a combat function (hors de combat). In context, the following violations as part of the International Humanitarian Law and the 1949 Geneva Conventions provide protection from the following: the killing of detainees; inhuman treatment; torture; enforced disappearances; hostage taking and arbitrary arrest / detention. These obligations are fully binding on the Syrian regime, and any non-state entity aiding and abetting the regime to implement its civil war strategy.

All military and security personnel involved in the network of prisons in Syria can be held criminally accountable. Commanders, generals and those in position of authority are liable if lower rank forces commit crimes. Denial and claiming ignorance in the face of these serious violations is not a defence under the Law of Armed Conflict. Commanders are legally responsible to ensure the adherence to International Humanitarian Law.

Syria's regime forces should be investigated for crimes committed across the network of prisons it operates. The main violations include rape, sexual violence, torture, and cruel and degrading treatment. These are all crimes under the purview of international law – regardless of whether the acts are committed against a non-combatant or the civilian population or as part of a non-international armed conflict.

Any potential trials of perpetrators of abuse must be held in accordance to international standards and include transparency, due process and accountability. There must be jurisprudential guarantees of a fair trial, and most importantly a right to defence.

Syria's own Constitution professes that it guarantees due process and freedom from arbitrary detention, but based on testimonies documented in this report it is clearly failing in its own domestic judicial processes.^{xx} The same guarantees are reinforced in Syria's Criminal Code, but the inception of the civil war has unleashed a heavy-handed, unreasonable and unnecessary stratagem which does not fall short of crimes against humanity and war crimes.^{xxi}

13. Conclusion

What is certain from TRT World Research Centre's research is that the Syrian regime is running a policy of sexual violence and rape as a stratagem of war. The testimonies documented in this report raises some serious concerns that Syria's regime forces have engaged in unlawful acts which may equate to crimes under both International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law.

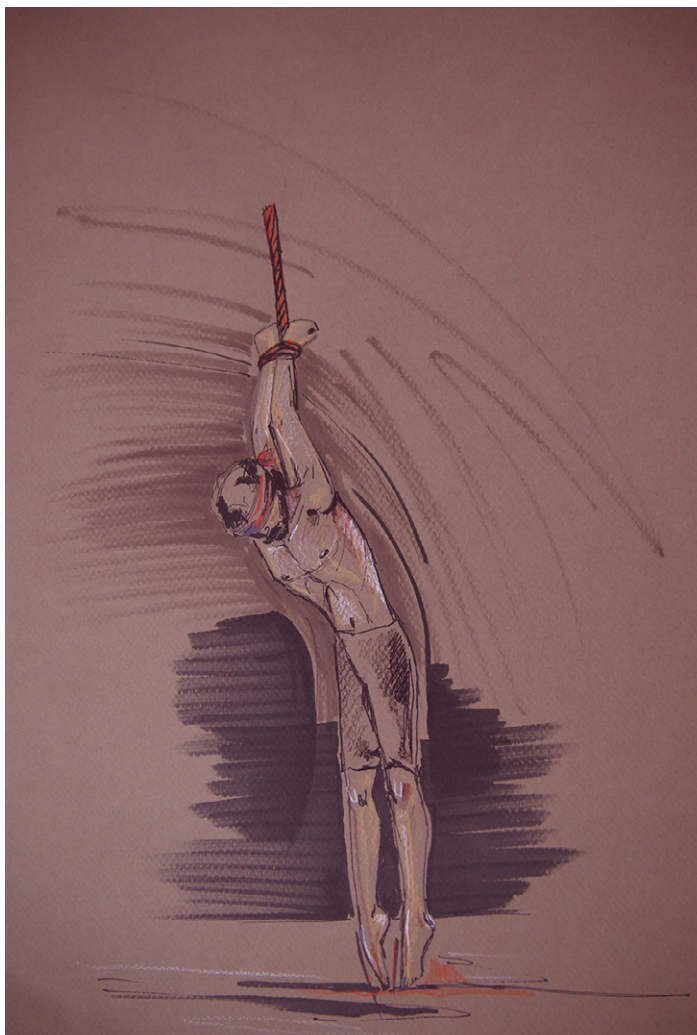
The international community has failed to step in and pressure the Syrian regime to cease its torture and sexual abuse of detainees. Subsequently, the United Nation's Security Council is required to immediately put a complete end to the incessant rape and grotesque torture techniques against women.

Women are the primary targets in the onslaught against Syria's population: sexual harassment, stripping, unlawful touching with sexual intent, systematic rape, beatings and extrajudicial killings are a few of the violations taking place in Syria. Based on the testimonies, it is clear that enforced disappearance and arrests are taking place to punish women perceived to be part of the opposition and also to obtain intelligence of male family members who may be part of an opposition armed group. The torture and abuse are used as a tool to weaken women, place fear in their hearts and extract confessions for colluding with opposition groups and anti-regime protests all under duress.

The Syrian regime's forces have applied psychological torture tactics against detainees, including forcing women to listen to torture of family members; routinely forced to walk over blood, and solitary confinement.

As of yet, the Syrian regime have not admitted to running a policy of sexual violence and rape as a stratagem of war – and have failed to investigate the crimes perpetrated by regime and associated forces aiding and abetting such measures.

Through the lens of the Syrian regime, it may seek to justify its measures with the backdrop of the civil war. However, the measures adopted are disproportional, unnecessary and clearly illegal. There cannot be any justification based on the severity of the crimes committed by regime forces in Syria's prisons and makeshift detention facilities.



14. Recommendations

Despite the growing awareness over the plight of women subjected to torture and sexual violence in Syria's prisons, the following recommendations are required to redress the violations taking place:

The United Nations

- The United Nation's Security Council must pressure the Syrian regime to adhere to International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law – including the Geneva Conventions and treaties it has ratified prohibiting the following: rape, executions, torture, ill-treatment, and enforced disappearance.

The International Community and Human Rights Community

- The international community should share expertise with local Syrian organisations – also based in Turkey – to adequately document violations as per International Human Rights Law. Thematic human rights and legal training will facilitate effectiveness of documentation of crucial cases.
- Support local initiatives to provide psychological and mental health rehabilitation as a result of the torture and sexual abuse.
- States should ensure that their national immigration and asylum policy proactively seeks to support Syrian torture and sexual abuse survivors with immediate support by accelerating applications to prevent the risk of re-entering an environment of abuse.

Syria's Regime

- The Syrian regime is well acquainted with what is required to stop the violations taking place across its network of prisons. It must ensure its military, security and associated entities stop the use of torture, sexual abuse and rape as a stratagem of war. Any measures employed by the Syrian regime must comply with international and domestic legal frameworks. Those personnel infringing international law may be prosecuted for crimes against humanity and war crimes.
- Release women imprisoned without charge, trial and apply due process and transparency for all within the network of prisons across Syria.
- Permit international monitoring groups, including the UN-backed Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic access without impediments to inspect prisons and conduct investigations.
- The use of unfair trials in military courts to prosecute civilians without an independent judge or adequate evidence is a violation of due process and transparency. All detainees must be given access to lawyers to form a legal defence. The Syrian regime must comply with international standards on trials.
- Permit detainees to contact families, or organisations like the International Committee of the Red Cross or the International Red Crescent Movement to assess the legal status of civilians in Syria's prisons.

Open Source Professionals, Journalists and Investigators

- Proactively seek to work with human rights organisations and journalists to capture photographic and video evidence found on open source networks of state and non-state entities in Syria. The use of open source intelligence and social medial intelligence methods may permit the gathering of crucial evidence for prosecution against perpetrators. Working with legal entities such as the International Bar Association in the United Kingdom, and its project 'eyeWitness' provides a platform to store data in a verifiable.^{xxii}
- Social media platforms such as YouTube should reconsider deleting videos on Syria. If potential videos are of torture and crimes infringing international law, they could serve as potential evidence. At the very least, a policy should be considered to store these videos and transfer to relevant legal organisations.

15. Appendix: Torture and Sexual Abuse Cases in Syria Documented by TRT World Research Centre

Year of Incident	Name and Age	Location of Incident / Prison	Issue	Sections of Report Where Mentioned
2015	Amal	Halab	Systematic torture and rape-interrogated for locational intelligence of male family members and threatened with murder.	P. 16, 17
2012	Bushra, 32	Aleppo	Psychological torture-forced to walk over torture blood. Tortured and raped systematically by the Syrian National Army.	P. 5, 11, 12
2016	Jamila, 32	Aleppo	Harassed and convicted in a military court. Husband was killed in prison as a result of torture. Jamila was sexually abused and raped	P. 18, 19, 20
2011	Nawal, 50	Aleppo	Prison guards requested sex in return for acquittal and ease on torture	P. 12, 15
2014	Arwa, 38	Hama	Sleep deprivation and inhuman treatment and degradation	P. 18
2014	Khawla, 26	Hama	Raped frequently and tortured in prison - observed honger girls give birth while in prison.	P. 15
2014	Zahra, 38	Damascus	Raped in front of her 14-month baby several times	P. 14, 15
2011	Hajra, 28	Homs	Raped and interrogated - fell unconscious. No account of what happened to her children	P. 3, 12
2013	Alia	Dara	Inhuman treatment and inadequate food, water and medicine	P. 18
2014	Shayma, 40	Dara	Forced to provide a confession and threatened with the torture of her daughter	P. 20
2012	Hunada, 50	Dara	Forced to share a cell with 65 women. Accused of spying for Mossad. Testimony on inadequate food, medicine and medicine	P. 13, 18
2013	Iman, 35	Aleppo	Feature case in report: full spectrum experience of torture and sexual abuse	P. 9, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21
2014	Saya, 32	Aleppo	Feature case in report: full spectrum experience of torture and sexual abuse	P. 5, 8, 9, 13, 16
2015	Jehan, 25	Damascus	Sexual abuse, rape and harassment - asked who gives more pleasure Syrian force or FSA	P. 3, 13, 14

Endnotes

- i. Pseudonym – all real names of cases in this report have been changed. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, February 2019.
- ii. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, February 2019.
- iii. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, February 2019
- iv. UN Security Council Resolution 1820, Women, Peace and Security (2008) <http://www.unwomen.org/en/docs/2008/6/un-security-council-resolution-1820>
- v. UN Human Rights Council (2016) "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic" A/HRC/31/CRP.1, P.17. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-31-CRP1_en.pdf
- vi. Amnesty International Report, "Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria (2017). <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2454152017ENGLISH.PDF>
- vii. Human Rights Watch Report, "If the Dead Could Speak" (2015). <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities>
- viii. UN Human Rights Council (2016) "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic" A/HRC/31/CRP.1 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-31-CRP1_en.pdf
- ix. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019.
- x. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019.
- xi. UN Human Rights Council (2018), "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic". <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-37-CRP-3.pdf>
- xii. Practice confirmed with Bushra, Nawal, Arwa, and Hajra.
- xiii. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019.
- xiv. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, February 2019
- xv. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019
- xvi. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019
- xvii. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019.
- xviii. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019.
- xix. Interview with TRT World Research Centre, March 2019.
- xx. Article 53, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic. Promulgated 2012
- xxi. Article 391 (i), Syrian Criminal Code.
- xxii. 'EyeWitness', International Bar Association project <https://www.eyewitnessproject.org/>

