

# In the Absence of Accountability: Torture as a Systematic Policy in Northern Syria



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*Testimonies indicate that torture and ill-treatment have become a wide scale systematic policy in the opposition SNA-held territories in northern Syria, under the full view or involvement of the Turkish forces*

Diyar was fortunate enough to survive torture at the hands of Turkish intelligence forces in the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA)-run prisons located in Afrin. He, then, decided to displace along with his family to Qamishli City for treatment and to rebuild his life, however, the Turkish bombardment on Qamishli in late 2023 [claimed his life](#).

Diyar left behind a widow and two kids, unable to escape the reach of Turkish crimes that followed him to Qamishli. At the time of his death, he was receiving medical support to recover from the impacts of torture, he had endured, within a project implemented by [Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ](#) and [Synergy Association for Victims](#).

Diyar's story is one of hundreds of painful others that reflect the [gross violations](#) and war crimes committed by Turkish forces and opposition SNA's factions in areas in northern Syria, which are under the Turkish occupation. These stories underscore the pressing need for an international action to stop such crimes and ensure a legal accountability for the perpetrators.

The analysis of 65 interviews conducted by [STJ](#) and [Synergy](#) with victims and survivors and with members of their families in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tall Abyad showed that the torture and ill-treatment carried out by the opposition SNA's factions amount to be part of a widespread systematic pattern aiming to intimidate the local population, especially the Kurds, and forcing them to leave their original homes or to continuously submit to financial extortion.

Documented patterns of torture and ill-treatment committed by the opposition SNA reflect the methods the Syrian government implements in its different security branches, including beating, burning, nail-pulling, electrocution, and the use of Blanco/Shabah.

“The United Nations must prioritize and give adequate attention to this issue, given the outrageous of violations perpetuated and the absence of legal protection for hundreds of thousands of civilians and actual and potential victims in northern Syria. Failure to take actions to address what the victims are subjected to implicitly grants these armed groups permission to continue their practices. These groups must not feel immune from accountability or indifferent to respecting and protecting human rights,” said [Izzadin Saleh](#), the Executive Director of Synergy

Detention and torture has multi-faceted impacts on men, women and children, including both physical and mental harm. Most of the former detainees described suffering from chronic physical pain resulting from torture they sustained and imprisonment and unhealthy conditions they experienced inside detention facilities. Let alone suffering headaches and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Since early 2021, STJ and Synergy have provided various types of support (medical, legal, social, and psychological) to 187 survivors of torture and to their families in north and northeast Syria. This was followed by assistance provided to a group of survivors within a vocational training program that lasted for several months. The program included rehabilitating and supporting them with the necessary equipment, aiming at assisting them to recover and reintegrate in the local work market, with the majority of beneficiaries having been forcibly displaced.

“Eradicate Torture for a More Just Society” Project has contributed to documenting the victims’ stories and statements, preserving them in a safe database to support efforts of accountability and justice on Syria. The program also provided medical, legal, social, and psychological support in Afrin and Shahba Region, northern Aleppo, in collaboration with the [Human Rights Organization in Afrin](#).

There is an urgent need to broaden the scale of support and assistance provided to victims and survivors and to their families. Since 2021, the partner organizations have documented more than 2,000 cases of torture and ill-treatment in Syria. These needs include increasing access to medical services, providing effective social and psychological support for the survivors, and enhancing legal support provided to the victims to achieve justice, as well as widening rehabilitation and vocational programs to ensure reintegration of survivors into society. This holistic approach aims to empower survivors to recover and actively participate in transitional justice and accountability processes.

### **Methodology:**

The information presented in this paper is based on the data analysis of 65 statements and testimonies (50 men and 15 women) documented by STJ and Synergy during 2023. The majority of interviews were conducted with the individuals themselves in northern and northeastern Syria.

The interviews were conducted with 59 survivors who were fortunate to escape torture and return to their families, as well as 6 persons who were relatives of victims. Excluding two Yezidi girls and one Christian young man, the majority of the victims were Muslim. Of these, 45 were Kurds, 19 were Arabs, while one was Armenian. Gender sensitivity was taken into consideration during the interviews as female survivors were interviewed by female researchers.

## **Excuses and Motives Behind Torture and Ill-Treatment:**

Victims were not informed promptly for the reasons and legal basis behind their detention. They were denied the right to retain a defense attorney, and later some of them were informed that they were detained for cooperating and dealing with the Autonomous Administration and/or the Syrian Democratic forces/SDF, one of the frequent allegations pointed against the detainees.

The majority of the interviewees were not brought before a court in any stage during their detention, but they were released for ransoms or after being forced to give up their properties. In addition, personal possessions of many victims were seized, either at the time of searching them or from their houses during the detention operation. The possessions included money, gold, mobile phones, and property documents.

Motives behind the majority of detentions and tortures in areas of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad were to extort the victims and their families [to get financial ransoms](#). Others were kept in custody for intimidation purposes to push them to leave the area. Furthermore, civilians were arrested simply for demanding to restore their seized properties.

It should be noted that Turkish officials were present regularly in SNA-run detention facilities, and former detainees stated that Turkish officials were also present during interrogation sessions, in which torture was used. The Turkish Army and Turkish intelligence agencies are involved in implementing and supervising these violations.

## **Detention Conditions and Adopted Methods of Torture:**

The Turkish-backed SNA did not adhere to any minimum standards that should be applied to individuals detained by its forces. All of the interviewees reported being held in overcrowded places or solitary confinement cells for prolonged periods without any justifications. Inhumane detention conditions were imposed on all the victims in which the perpetrators aimed to either increase pressure on the victims to extract confessions, information, and ransoms from the family, or without any specific purpose, just to cause more suffering to the victims

All victims described [poor detention conditions](#) as all were allowed to use restrooms/toilets only once a day, and sometimes once in few days. They were provided with one small meal daily, sometimes forced to pay for it. Furthermore, the victims endured exposure to freezing temperatures, sleep deprivation, and verbal abuse. Victims of the Kurdish origin were frequently described as pigs and infidels.

The victims reported various forms of severe torture methods, including slapping, punching, kicking, beating with sticks and butts of guns, hitting with quadruple cables or with sanitary hoses, electrocution, in addition to burning with a “straw” that is used in welding or melting some types of metals, pouring extremely hot or freezing liquids

on the victims' flesh, ripping off fingernails and rubbing salt into wounds. Other torture methods were also used like shabah position/Blanco, in which the victims are suspended by the wrists to ropes dangling from the ceiling, their toes just touching the ground causing intense pressure. Victims may be left hanging for hours or days while enduring severe beatings. Additionally, there is a method called Farouja (chicken) position, in which the victims' hands and legs are tied together, suspended from a wooden or metal pole, lifted off the ground in a manner resembling roasting chicken, accompanied by beating on various parts of their body.

Physical torture was accompanied by psychological harm as well, with most victims subjected to humiliation. Some of them were forced to listen to other victims' voices while being tortured, or witness instances of torture. One witness was present during the torture of a person until death. Additionally, rabid dogs were released on one victim. Another victim was blindfolded and a shot was fired next to his head. Psychological torture also included distorting and disdaining the victim's religious beliefs in several instances.

### **Women's Suffering Inside Detention Facilities:**

All the interviewed women said they were interrogated by male investigators, with their eyes blindfolded during interrogation. Many of them were tortured and mistreated of a sexual nature, including sexual harassment, violence, and rape. They also endured demeaning insults that affected their dignity and honor according to prevailing social norms. These experiences left cumulative unforgettable psychological impacts resulting in waves of crying and shock as they recounted their stories.

Women's health needs were not considered; three women were denied sanitary pads during the period of their detention which lasted over a month. Additionally, they were deliberately deprived of normal use of toilets and baths and forced to be escorted by male guards when using toilets, resulting in reproductive health issues for these female victims.

### **Pain that Never Ends - Impacts of Torture:**

Torture has imposed a huge burden on the victims' lives and their physical and mental health. Doctors who treated the victims confirmed that many of them were suffering from serious physical pains that require a continuous treatment, including back injuries, joint dislocation, visual or hearing problems, dental breaking, bone breaking, high blood pressure, wounds, scars, and burnings, nail removal, diabetes and heart diseases. These conditions have greatly affected their lives and their ability to interact with the world around them.

In addition to physical harm, psychotherapists have diagnosed many victims with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleeping disturbance, and inability to concentrate. Many experience panic attacks, constant fear, anxiety, isolation, compounded by recurring nightmares that exacerbate their trauma. Some cases developed to be PTSD, depression and chronic depression with the loss of appetite, insomnia, concentration difficulty, in addition to changes in behavior and personality, including aggression and loss of self-confidence.

Furthermore, honor stigma and social concerns related to sexual violence are exceptionally severe that female victims of arbitrary detention are often presumed to have been raped. This stigma can impact survivors for life and hinder the documentation of their stories.

### **Parties Involved:**

Many victims managed to identify the parties that directly detained, tortured and miss-treated them. Others could not recognize the perpetrators as they were abducted, blindfolded, and were withheld to obtain any information concerning the detaining authorities. Some victims were detained and tortured several times by the same perpetrator or at the hands of different parties within the opposition SNA.

At least 13 interviewed persons mentioned that they were tortured and ill-treated at the hands of the Military Police forces, 12 by al-Hamzat Division, 10 by Sultan Murad Brigade, six by Suqur al-Shamal Brigade, three at the hands of the Civil Police forces, similarly three by Ahrar al-Sham, three by the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham, three by Ahrar al-Sharqiya and three by the Elite Army/Jaysh al-Nukhba. Turkish Border Guards (Gendarmerie) and Turkish intelligence tortured at least 10 people.

### **Legal Liability and Recommendations:**

The SNA violated the detainees' rights in accordance with international legal obligations. Various SNA's factions have arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals and practiced cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment towards the detainees, in violation to the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Fundamental Principles of Human Rights.<sup>1</sup>

The SNA conducted no investigations in its forces' practices, which continue to arrest and torture civilians and violate their rights, nor did the Turkish government that has effective command and control on these forces to change their arbitrary conduct. On the contrary, it appears in some cases that the Turkish government was involved as a partner in committing such violations.

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<sup>1</sup> ICRC Rule 98. Enforced Disappearance are also characterized as a composite war crime by ICRC; See Rule 156.

As an occupying power, the Turkish authorities must ensure that their own officials and those under their command in the SNA do not arbitrarily detain, torture or mistreat anyone. The Turkish authorities are also obliged to investigate alleged violations and ensure that those responsible are appropriately punished.

This applies to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) as well, as it had [adopted](#) the formation of the SNA, and also applies to the leadership of the "National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC)", given the SNC represents the political front for the SIG and it is the one who [granted it confidence](#).

On the occasion of the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, and in efforts to enhance human rights respect and combat impunity, Syrians for Truth and Justice and Synergy Association for Victims call on the international community, in particularly members of the UN security council, to immediately intervene to stop tortures in the SNA-held areas and across the country. They also urge intensified efforts to hold all perpetrators of human rights violations and war crimes in Syria accountable and achieve justice for the victims.

## About Partners



Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.



Synergy Associations for Victims is a non-governmental, non-profit association which aims to provide a platform and a space for the victims to represent themselves and claim their rights. Synergy was founded on March 11, 2021 to seek justice for the victims of conflict in North and Northeastern Syria and participate in the process of accountability and justice.

