

Artwork by: Heba Hroub

## Confined, Abused and Instrumentalised: Detention of Women in Syria

When Syrian men and women peacefully took to the street in early 2011 to demand democratic reforms, they were met with escalating repression, including arbitrary detention, disappearance and torture.

Over four years, more than 200,000 people are estimated have been detained by government forces, including thousands of women. Accurate numbers are difficult to pin down as the Syrian government denies access to detention sites to independent monitors. Documentation efforts by Syrian human rights groups indicate that several thousands of women have been detained, while hundreds remain in captivity, often without any contact with the outside world.

*The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and the Syrian Center for Statistic and Research (SCSR) estimate that more than 2850 women remain detained by Syrian security forces across the country, including at least 120 girls under the age of 18. The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) documented around 1800 cases of women arbitrarily detained, including 69 girls under the age of 18. The three groups corroborated that at least 19 women were killed under torture in detention, including girls under the age of 18. (March 2011 until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2015).*



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Given the prevailing climate of violence, persistent repression, threats, social stigma and the failure of the international community to address impunity and protect civilians, most women are reluctant to come forward and report abuses occurring in detention, further complicating documentation efforts. This, in turn, makes accountability and psycho-social redress, essential elements of conflict resolution, extremely challenging.

The purposes and patterns of women detention have evolved as the war dragged on. During the early months of the revolt, detained women were typically activists, dissidents and humanitarian workers. However, the Syrian government soon started rounding up women relatives of opposition members, defected soldiers and activists to exert pressure on the latter to turn themselves in. Later on, the regime and its militias resorted to indiscriminate detention of women in opposition strongholds to use them for prisoner exchange deals with armed opposition groups. In order to have bargaining chips, some of those groups followed suit.

Arrested women are usually held in appalling and dehumanizing conditions, packed into overcrowded dark cells regardless of their age or health. The situation is even worse in secret underground detention centers, such as the infamous Branch 215 of the Military Intelligence where physical and psychological torture, sexual harassment and abuse are rife. Such abuses amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, therefore triggering individual responsibility under international law for perpetrators.

Like other conflicts, Syria's protracted turmoil has seen the gradual instrumentalisation of women as a weapon of war and terror. Not only do these violations inflict physical and psychological trauma on women, but they also break up families, and erode Syria's social fabric, rendering the hope for a return to normality more elusive every day.

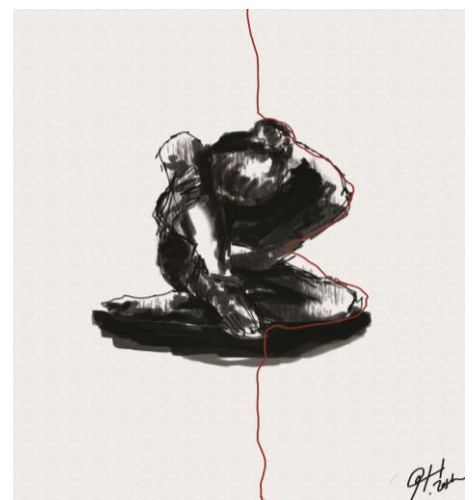
Testimonies included in this Fact Sheet aim to shed light on patterns of violations which have been documented by the EMHRN in 2014 with support of several Syrian human rights groups. Names of witnesses and victims were changed in order to protect those.

### Targeting of Women Activists

Since the beginning of the revolution, women have had a strong voice among the opposition across the country. They have been widely involved in delivering humanitarian assistance, participating in protests and developing civil society initiatives in a very dynamic fashion. The Syrian government, and pro-regime militia alike, have arbitrarily detained women, particularly peaceful protestors, activists, dissidents, journalists and aid workers, and in some cases, subjected them to torture and sexual abuse. Although many were released shortly after, some were kept longer to exert pressure on their families or to deter their relatives from joining anti-government protests. State media publicly denounced these women as "terrorists", "saboteurs" and even "sex slaves" for "terrorist groups".

#### ***Nada, 39 years, Media Activist***

*Nada has been arrested several times since the beginning of the popular protest movement in Syria due to her media coverage of the events, most recently in 2013 at a government checkpoint in al-Maliha, near Damascus. She was held at the Centre of Special Missions, part of the Air Force Intelligence. Nada spent five days in an insect-infested cell. During her detention, she was flogged and beaten with a wooden rod all over her body, including her head, causing her pain from which she still suffers today. While in Adra Prison, Nada organized debates among detainees about their rights and was put in isolation for 10 days as a punishment.*



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### ***Nahla, 40 years, university teacher and head of women rights group***

*Nahla was arrested several times for her involvement in the organisation of peaceful protests. She said her aim was to raise awareness about rights and freedoms and help prevent the militarisation of the opposition movement. As early as 2011, Nahla was arrested along with a group of students from Damascus University on charges relating to demonstrations and hiding demonstrators in her car. This did not stop her from resuming her activities upon release. In 2013, Nahla was arrested again with a female friend at a government checkpoint for taking part in the organization of entertainment activities for those under siege in the Eastern Ghouta. This time, her detention lasted several months during which she was transferred to six different security branches and police stations, and was tortured on many occasions, including in the presence of her friend to force the latter to provide information about her friend's activities.*

### **Detention of women to exert pressures on their relatives**

As the war intensified, security forces began conducting widespread systematic raids on opposition strongholds and used checkpoints to arrest women relatives of opponents to obtain information and force their relatives to turn themselves in. Since the summer of 2012, the Syrian government has increasingly resorted to this practice to force fighters to stop their operations. According to a female college student who was detained by the Military Intelligence in 2014, the majority of the 19 women inmates at "Palestine Branch" 235 of the Military Intelligence Division were detained merely because their sons or husbands belonged to opposition groups.

### ***Im Ahmad, 59 years, mother of an opposition combatant***

*In late 2012, Im Ahmad was arrested in Idlib by governmental forces in order to exert pressure on her son Ahmad and push him to turn himself in. Ahmad had defected from the Syrian Army as he refused to use force against civilians and joined an armed opposition group. According to his sister Kenana, Ahmad feared that he would be killed immediately if he turned himself in, with no guarantee his mother would be released. In June 2014, Ahmad was reportedly killed during a bombardment operation by the regime forces. His mother remains in detention.*

### ***Samaher, 39 years, Housewife and sister of a defected officer***

*In November 2012, the Syrian Army surrounded Samaher's house in Dara and arrested her to exert pressure on her brother Major Yasir al-Aboud who had defected from the Syrian military forces and established the anti-regime Fallujah-Huran Brigade and became commander of the military council in Daraa. Although Yasir was killed on 21 October 2013, Samaher remains in detention.*

### **Detention of Women as Bargaining Chips**

As the conflict evolved, government security forces began randomly arresting women, detaining them for lengthy periods before releasing them; usually following the payment of a bribe or as part of a prisoner swap with opposition groups. In the absence of fair prosecution process for detainees, corruption, bribes, and negotiations to exchange prisoners have become common practice to release detained persons. To acquire bargaining power in negotiations with the Syrian regime, a number of opposition groups started resorting to abduction of women as well. As a result, women have become indiscriminately targeted by most parties in the conflict.

This trend resulted in a situation where many women are arrested or abducted solely as a tactic to gain weight in negotiations between warring parties. Some of the interviewees claimed this practice has increased arbitrary arrests and abductions, further eroding the possibility for victims to be released by legal means. Some women ex-detainees believed that they were detained by government forces to be used in future deals.

### **Sahar, 40 years, housewife**

*Sahar spent more than nine months in Gharz Central Prison in Deraa. She was released in a deal between the armed opposition and the Syrian government under the auspices of the Syrian Red Crescent. In return for her release, the armed opposition agreed to let food in for detained soldiers of the Syrian Army.*

### **Suhayla, 29 years**

*Suhayla had been in detention for more than a year when she was released in October 2013 in a prisoner exchange that included Lebanese detainees held by the armed opposition in Azaz, Aleppo. She was reportedly released along with a group of 114 female detainees.*

### **Lena, 24 years**

*In December 2013, Lena was arbitrarily arrested in her hometown Deraa even though she was not involved in the protest movement. She was released when an exchange of prisoners took place between an armed opposition group and Syrian forces in the city of Tafas in March 2014.*

*“A young man from my city was released in exchange for an officer held by the “Fajr al-Islam” group (Dawn of Islam). The armed group asked my family to say publicly I was released in the exchange, and they spread the news in the media. I understood the armed opposition used me for propaganda purpose.”*

## **Torture**

Detained women are subjected to various types of torture. Many of the interviewed ex-detainees reported that although they were not subjected to the same torture methods as men, they were exposed to specific patterns of torture, including ill-treatments affecting their mental integrity. Out of the 46 women interviewed, seven said they were not physically harmed, 23 said were beaten by a rod, or slapped once or twice at least one time. Some were sexually harassed. Six women talked about cruel physical torture, using different means, to extract confessions. All the women interviewed spoke of the disregard for the physical and psychological conditions of the pregnant women that they happened to see while in detention. All women reported having endured severe trauma.

### **Sawsan, 37 years**

*When we met with Sawsan, torture marks were still visible on her body. She gave shocking details about her torture by members of the Popular Committees (pro-government militias), who detained her at a checkpoint on Nisrin Street in Damascus.*

*“They suspended me in a warehouse. I was upside down. My hands had been tied behind my back since I was arrested at the checkpoint. They started to kick me, and beat me with electric and wooden rods and a steel sword. They wounded my back, legs, and the rest of my body with knives. The blood started to flow from the wounds[...]He put a dirty toilet brush in my mouth. Five of them swung me against the wall. Torture continued for hours I cannot estimate. They did not give me food for three consecutive days. I had to relieve myself while I was in this condition.”*

### **Nisrin, 29 years**

*Nisrin was arrested a few days after she learnt she was pregnant. She spent eight months in detention, the first of which in a solitary confinement at the Presidential Guards on the Somariyya Mountain overlooking Damascus. Despite her pregnancy, she was subjected to various forms of torture, including electric shocks, hair pulling and flogging. Later on, she was transferred to the security branch of area 227, where she stayed three months and 17 days. She reported having seen heaps of detainees bodies in the corridors. She was finally transferred to the central prison of Damascus and was released four months later. Two days after her release, she gave birth to a stillborn baby.*

## From Detention to Refugeehood

Another ordeal awaits detained women upon release. Some ex-detainees suffer from stigmatisation and rejection by their own families and society at large. Syrian society, and especially conservative communities, tend to associate detention of women with rape and consequently with shame for the family and wider community. Many women have been divorced following their detention, while others decided to conceal their detention for fear of shame and social rejection. Others have gone into exile to escape social stigma. Fear of a similar fate has pushed entire families into refugee camps across Syria and in neighbouring countries, thus aggravating the refugee crisis.



Artwork by: Amr Fahed

### *Lena, 24 years*

*“Even though I was not rejected by my family upon my release, some people in my city started to talk about me in a way that tarnished my image. I could not stand the social pressure and shame, so I decided to leave Syria.”*

### *Salam, 42 years*

*After a year of horrifying arbitrary detention, Salam was anxious to be reunited with her family and husband. She knew, however, that things could not go back to the way they used to be. As soon as she was released from Damascus Central Prison, her husband divorced her. Lonely, frightened and desperate, she had little choice but to seek refuge abroad.*