



The Tahrir Institute  
for Middle East Policy

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# SYRIA'S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES



## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN DETENTION October 4, 2017

### Summary

- As of the [end of 2016](#), at least 8,111 women and 302 girls were being detained by the Syrian government, and at least 39 women had died of torture at the hands of government forces. The Islamic State has arrested at least 693 women and 21 girls, with 13 having died as a result of torture.
- Rape, beatings, electrocution, and sexual torture [are all common](#) within regime-affiliated prisons, and the families and communities of detainees are known to [reject](#) them following their release because of the social stigma associated with sexual violence.
- The United Nations has [affirmed](#) the criminality of such violence through numerous resolutions, but issues of enforcement and accountability hamper these efforts.

### Overall Situation

The Syrian Network for Human Rights [reported](#) that 348 women and 132 children were arbitrarily arrested by the Syrian government in the first six months of 2017 alone. Female detainees [describe](#) torture by government officials in prisons and in investigation branches of the Military Intelligence Directorate, including severe beatings, sexual assault, and electric shocks.

The Islamic State is also known to detain and torture women caught trying to [flee](#) their territory, as well as for their connections to relatives who have fled. Women are also [flogged](#) for breaking strict laws regarding dress and behavior, while minority women are [kept and traded](#) as sex slaves.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic ([COI](#)) was established in 2011 by the U.N. Human Rights Council to investigate possible human rights violations by the Syrian government. In 2015, the commission published a [report](#) outlining Syrian human rights violations and called for the referral of Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), though the referral failed to pass the Security Council after it was [vetoed](#) by China and Russia.

## Background

Torture, prevalent in Syria [before the conflict](#), is now reported to be carried out on an “[industrial scale](#),” with more than [17,000](#) people believed to have been killed in detention as of 2016. Journalists, aid workers, and human rights activists are [specifically targeted](#), and after their arrests often held without trial or legal representation for months. Those who are [tried](#) usually find themselves in military field courts, in which they are denied the right to a defense lawyer, or the Counter-Terrorism Court, in which defendants can be sentenced in absentia. Women are also detained to [pressure](#) male relatives associated with the opposition to confess or turn themselves in.

Women report physical torture within prisons. While they say torture of women is often [less extreme](#) than that of male detainees, women are beaten, electrocuted, and subject to sexual torture both in interrogation scenarios and as abuse. Sexual torture [involves](#) electrocution of the genitals, rape, and threats of raping the detainee or female relatives. Additionally, women (as well as men) are kept in close quarters, sometimes taking turns sleeping because their cells are too small to fit everyone lying down. Women are also [denied](#) sanitary products during menstruation.

Official medical documentation of abuses is rare, primarily because medical assistance is often [denied](#) to detainees, but also because of victims’ [reluctance](#) to disclose the details of their time in prison. The detention of women in Syria is closely associated with sexual violence by Syrian society, so upon their release, many women are ostracized and, in extreme cases, flee the country to avoid familial backlash. Former detainees are punished socially and economically, as their families may [restrict their movement](#), and employers may try to distance themselves from individuals who have been targeted by the regime.

For women living in territory controlled by the Islamic State, detention and torture are usually prompted by intentionally or unintentionally disobeying strict dress and social codes, or attempting to flee the area. Women caught breastfeeding in public or otherwise failing to adequately cover up are [frequently lashed](#), but rumors exist of more extreme torture methods. One woman caught leaving Islamic State-controlled territory [reported](#) being beaten, suspended from cables, and raped throughout her month-long detention, and said the nearly 50 women detained with her experienced similar treatment.

## Policy Implications and Challenges

Syria [ratified](#) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2003, yet a 2012 review of Syria's implementation of the convention, the government [failed](#) to provide the number of women detained since the conflict had begun in 2011 or discuss the newly implemented Counter-Terrorism Law, under which many of those women were detained. The convention committee responded with several questions regarding the female detainees, sexual violence, and violence against female human rights defenders. The Syrian government failed to provide the number of women detained, and instead falsely stated that any complaint alleging violence against a woman would be considered by the courts and the perpetrator would be brought to justice.

The COI, however, [determined](#) that Syrian courts are not an effective mechanism through which victims can pursue justice. Six U.N. Resolutions have followed Security Council Resolution [1325](#)—most importantly [1820](#), which defines sexual violence as an act of war, and [1960](#), which calls to end impunity for such violence—yet they have remained largely unenforced because of their [questionably binding nature](#). The COI and over 100 nongovernmental organizations called for the [referral](#) of the Syrian government to the ICC, but in 2015, Russia and China vetoed the resolution and proposed no alternative means to provide accountability.

The use of rape as a torture method is tacitly and explicitly [condoned](#) by civilian and military leaders in the Syrian government, which constitutes a [crime against humanity](#). The international community has condemned this, yet little meaningful progress has been made to end the rampant sexual violence against women in government custody, or to provide justice or aid to victims. Not only is such violence unacceptable, it contributes to the further social and economic [destabilization](#) of a country that can hardly afford more losses.



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