

U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebels Committing War Crimes, Torture, Abductions; Imposing Harsh Sharia Law: Report

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Syrian rebel groups backed by the U.S. and its allies “have committed serious violations of international humanitarian law, including abductions, torture and summary killings,” according to Amnesty International.

A report by the leading human rights organization details how extremist rebel groups have taken over large parts of major Syrian cities, in which they have created repressive theocratic regimes where critics are violently silenced and where religious and ethnic minority groups fear for their lives.

“[‘Torture Was My Punishment’](#): Abductions, Torture and Summary Killings Under Armed Group Rule in Aleppo and Idlib, Syria” shows how the Syrian people have been caught between a rock and a hard place — with extremist rebels on one side and a brutal regime on the other.

The report focuses primarily on the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib, in the north of the country. Aleppo is Syria’s largest city, and the Aleppo governorate is the most populous.

Amnesty documented abuses committed by five armed groups that have controlled parts of Aleppo and Idlib since 2012. These rebels have been supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the U.S.

In Aleppo, Amnesty investigated the actions of the Levant Front, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement and Division 16, factions in the Aleppo Conquest rebel coalition.

In Idlib, it looked at the crimes of the rebel groups Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, both of which are extremist Islamist militias that are party of the Army of Conquest coalition.

Jabhat al-Nusra is Syria’s al-Qaeda affiliate. The U.S. officially considers it a terrorist group, although Western allies [Saudi Arabia](#), [Turkey](#) and [Qatar](#) have supported it.

Amnesty noted that al-Nusra “has a significant presence” throughout the Idlib governorate. Ahrar al-Sham is present in the major cities Idlib, Aleppo, Damascus and Hama.

Executions and strict Shari’a

Armed groups have repressed many Syrians who were themselves once supportive of the

rebels.

"I was happy to be free from the Syrian government's unjust rule but now the situation is worse," a Syrian lawyer told Amnesty.

Rebel groups have established "courts" (the report uses the term in scare quotes) in Aleppo and Idlib based on strict interpretations of Shari'a (Islamic law).

Extremist Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham have harshly punished Syrians who disobey their theocratic laws, the report notes.

It cites numerous cases of summary killings carried out by Jabhat al-Nusra, the Levant Front and rebel "courts." Some have been "execution-style killings in front of crowds."

Jabhat al-Nusra has publicly executed civilian men it accused of homosexuality and civilian women it accused of adultery.

In Aleppo, the "Supreme Judicial Council" run by the Levant Front told Amnesty that the punishment for apostasy is execution. "Death sentences are carried out in the detention center according to Shari'a principles," the deputy director said.

According to the [Carnegie Endowment](#), most of the rebel groups in the Levant Front coalition likely receive support from the Military Operations Center, a Turkey-based rebel facility that the U.S. helps operate with its allies.

Most of the "courts" run by these rebel groups, Amnesty says, are based on the Unified Arab Code, a set of Shari'a-based legal codes that were endorsed by the Arab League between 1988 and 1996 but were never implemented anywhere.

This legal code demands harsh corporal punishments for hudud crimes (violations of Islamic law), including stoning, amputations and flogging.

"I publicly criticized Jabhat al-Nusra on Facebook accusing them of committing worse human rights abuses than those perpetrated by the government. The next morning, Jabhat al-Nusra forces took me from my home," a Syrian lawyer told Amnesty.

An interrogator told him he was not a real lawyer because he did not know Islamic law. The Syrian rebel threatened him, telling him he had to give up his profession or his family would never see him again. After 10 days of abduction, hearing men screaming from torture, the lawyer agreed.

"I left Syria as soon as I was released," he added.

A female activist who had just been released from detention by the Syrian government told Amnesty she was subsequently arrested and interrogated by Ahrar al-Sham rebels for not wearing a veil.

"They forced me to wear a veil and cover my face. They brought a religious man who made me kneel to confess my wrongdoings. The interrogator repeatedly threatened to conduct a virginity test," she recalled.

Torture

Amnesty documented cases of armed factions torturing journalists, activists and other civilians who do not share their ideologies.

“I heard and read about the government security forces’ torture techniques. I thought I would be safe from that now that I am living in an opposition-held area. I was wrong. I was subjected to the same torture techniques but at the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra,” explained a Syrian man who was abducted by the extremist rebel group.

Syrian lawyers who have spoken out against rebel groups’ use of torture have themselves been abducted and threatened.

In several of the cases of abduction, journalists, political activists and a humanitarian worker told Amnesty that they were tortured by either Jabhat al-Nusra or the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. Some were violently forced to sign a statement of confession.

“The methods of torture described are disturbingly similar to some of the ones used by the Syrian government,” Amnesty wrote.

Numerous journalists and activists were kidnapped and tortured by al-Nusra for “promoting secular beliefs,” the rights group reported.

One journalist who works for an international media outlet was tortured by al-Nusra rebels for “offending the jihad and mujahidin [rebel fighters] and for working with a media channel that opposes al-Qa’ida.”

The release form given to the tortured journalist by his interrogator said that he had been “acquitted of the charges after pledging that he would only report on issues that support the Islamic faith.”

Another activist was told he was being tortured for being secular.

Even groups Syrian activists described as “moderate” have abducted and tortured Syrians. Activists told Amnesty the Levant Front, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement and the 16th Division also tortured and mistreated detainees.

A humanitarian worker was abducted and tortured by the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement for complaining about the misuse of funds in a hospital in Aleppo.

The Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement is a [CIA-approved](#) rebel group that has received TOW anti-tank missiles.

Amnesty said Syrian lawyers and activists told it of cases of abduction and torture carried out by other rebel groups in Aleppo and Idlib, but it was unable to independently verify these claims.

Targeting of minority groups

The Amnesty report also shows how rebel groups have targeted ethnic and religious minorities.

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