

Syrian Government Documents Show Widespread Abuses, Rights Center Says

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Thousands of Syrian government documents recovered amid the country's civil war provide a paper trail showing widespread and systematic human rights violations by its powerful security agencies, according to a Syrian-led organization that analyzed the papers, the Syria Justice and Accountability Center.

In a report released Tuesday, the center said the documents reveal the government's own record of practices long described by numerous ordinary Syrians, including sweeping arrests for nonviolent dissent, the detention of women and children, the imprisonment of relatives of wanted people, the ordering of military attacks without apparent regard for the danger to civilians, and the harassment of the Kurdish minority.

The documents bolster reporting by The New York Times and others on the sprawling network of torture prisons where at least 14,000 people have died and nearly 128,000 remain imprisoned or unaccounted for. They provide an additional glimpse of the broad array of offenses for which the Syrian security agencies made arrests, such as attending a protest (or simply being rumored to be planning to attend one), spitting near a statue of the former president, or making a critical remark at a dinner party.

While such practices are familiar to many Syrians, the center's executive director, Mohammad Al Abdallah, called the report the first broad, public analysis of official government documents that "expose clear patterns of widespread, systematic human rights violations" and show that "security agencies operate above the law."

The Washington-based center, known as S.J.A.C., analyzed a sample of 5,003 documents drawn from about 483,000 papers retrieved from Syria during the civil war, now in its ninth year. The files were collected from government offices that were taken by rebels or abandoned during the fighting. Some were gathered by S.J.A.C., and most by another group, the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, or C.I.J.A., which has cataloged 800,000 government documents that it hopes will be used in future war-crimes prosecutions.

Additional government documents in C.I.J.A.'s possession show that top officials reporting directly to President Bashar al-Assad ordered crackdowns and knew of widespread deaths in detention. The documents in S.J.A.C.'s public analysis include just a portion of a much larger collection of documents showing similar practices, and S.J.A.C.'s analysis is broadly in line with C.I.J.A.'s findings in legal briefs that have been viewed by The Times.

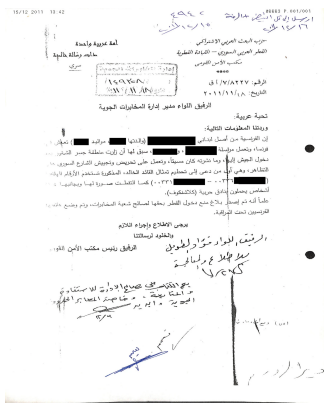
The documents could aid any future efforts toward accountability for war crimes, a truth and reconciliation process, or reform of Syria's security agencies, said Mr. Al Abdallah, whose father was imprisoned for more than seven months for political activities before the 2011 uprising.

But any such prosecution, reconciliation or reform process is likely to come years in the future — if ever — since Mr. al-Assad, with the military help of his allies Russia and Iran, has remained in power and appears to be intensifying the system of repression that helped keep him there.

Even people who have remained in government-controlled areas and signed so-called reconciliation agreements with the authorities, promising not to engage in anti-government activities, continue to be arrested, according to a Human Rights Watch report released Tuesday. It documented 11 cases of what it termed "arbitrary detention and disappearance" of people who had signed the agreements last year in areas retaken by the government from rebels, among hundreds of other arrests.

The thousands of documents analyzed by S.J.A.C. were collected from all across Syria. They came from its four main intelligence agencies, as well as other security bodies. Around 214 of the documents, S.J.A.C. said, amounted to "confessions" to human rights violations or war crimes.

Among the documents reproduced in the report were records of detained teenagers; orders to dilute populations of minority Kurds through property confiscation, population transfer and other measures; and an order to ban a French-Lebanese journalist whose writing was considered "offensive" and to surveil her phone.



An image provided by the Syria Justice and Accountability Center purportedly showing a redacted Syrian government document that accuses a French-Lebanese journalist of inciting and mobilizing the public against the government. The Syria Justice and Accountability Center, via Associated Press

There was also a warning that civilian cars could be used for attacks, with an order for forces to “engage any suspicious target with immediate destruction,” but without any description of what constituted a “suspicious” vehicle or any instructions to avoid harm to civilians.

Other documents described in the report painted a broad picture of disregard for civilian safety and well-being — something that has been well documented in the war but now appears to be detailed in the government’s own files.

Arrests into a violent, crammed, filthy prison system were often made solely on the basis of vague tips, the documents showed. Children were killed in demonstrations, or arrested for speaking against the president. There were frequent orders to “do the necessary” to deal with protesters, which defectors have called a code for permission to use lethal force.

One man, under surveillance for speaking to foreign journalists, was shot in the stomach during a security raid and arrested in stable condition, according to the S.J.A.C. report. He was taken to a military hospital — known to be a torture site — and died a week later with bruises on his body.

Then there was the case of an education official in the contested province of Idlib, who warned the government that its bombing and shelling of rebel-held areas were damaging schools, where civilians often sheltered. As a result of his warning, the files suggest, he became a target of surveillance. The bombings in Idlib have continued.