



# HEALTH CRISIS

SYRIAN GOVERNMENT TARGETS THE  
WOUNDED AND HEALTH WORKERS

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*Cover photo:* A health worker in his bloodstained gown stands in an emergency room in a hospital in Syria after treating wounded people, March 2011.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

**“I’m not going to clean your wound... I’m waiting for your foot to rot so that we can cut it off.”**

A doctor at Homs military hospital, as reported by a 28-year-old patient who was shot in the foot on 16 May 2011 <sup>1</sup>

The Syrian authorities have turned hospitals and medical staff into instruments of repression in the course of their efforts to crush the unprecedented mass protests and demonstrations that have wracked the country since March 2011. People wounded in protests or other incidents related to the uprising have been verbally abused and physically assaulted in state-run hospitals, including by medical staff, and in some cases denied medical care, in gross breach of medical ethics, and many of those taken to hospital have been detained.

As casualties from the current unrest have mounted, so President Bashar al-Assad’s government has intensified its hunt for the wounded, who are generally deemed to be opponents and outlaws. Some army soldiers and members of the security forces loyal to the government have also been killed or injured while combating the unrest but Amnesty International has received no reports of medical abuses in their cases.

In Homs, one of Syria’s major cities and governorates, government security forces have obstructed ambulances on their way to pick up wounded people and when ferrying the wounded to hospital, threatened Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) workers with violence or detention and interrogated wounded patients while they were still being conveyed in ambulances. They have ordered all those with firearm or other injuries related to the unrest to be directed to the military hospital, which is controlled by the Ministry of Defence, and such patients have been treated effectively as detainees while in hospital and held incommunicado.

Hospitals have increasingly come to be seen as dangerous places for people whom the authorities suspect of opposing the government, and both private and public hospitals have been instructed to report to the authorities any patients who have sustained firearm or other unrest-related injuries. The security forces have regularly entered state hospitals in search of people injured during the protests, who are liable to be arrested, detained incommunicado and subjected to torture or other ill-treatment. In consequence, unsurprisingly, many people are now reportedly avoiding state-run hospitals if they or their relatives have been wounded during the protests and unrest, and turning instead to private hospitals where they may obtain treatment without exposing themselves to likely arrest or to the makeshift field hospitals that have been set up by some local communities to treat people shot or otherwise wounded by the army and security forces.

These private and field hospitals, however, face problems in obtaining adequate medical supplies, including blood for use in transfusions, which they can obtain only from the Central Blood Bank controlled by the Ministry of Defence. When private hospitals request new supplies from this Central Blood Bank, it inevitably triggers official suspicion that they may

be providing medical treatment to people wounded during anti-government protests, funerals of killed protestors or other unrest-related incidents.

Doctors, nurses and other health workers who encounter people wounded in the unrest are now being confronted with a daunting dilemma – whether to obey the government’s instructions and report patients to the authorities, knowing that this may very well lead to the patients’ arrest, detention and possible torture, or to ignore or disobey those instructions, put their patients welfare first and thereby expose themselves to the risk of government reprisals. Many know that the security forces have raided hospitals in which they believed wounded unrest victims were being treated and are probably aware that a number of health professionals have been detained, and in some cases tortured, for seeking to protect patients in their care.

One doctor employed at a state-run hospital in Damascus who has also assisted as a volunteer in makeshift field hospitals, told Amnesty International:<sup>2</sup>

*“At the early stage of the uprising, I treated some wounded people in field hospitals set up near sites of shootings, and referred them to government-run hospitals... They were all detained... and we all know that they’d be subjected to harsh torture... I cannot send them to torture.”*

As has been the case for decades, people in Syria who speak to international human rights organizations risk severe repercussions. Consequently, Amnesty International exercised great caution when compiling the information contained in this report and has omitted the names of individuals it interviewed or other information that could expose these sources to serious risk.

Amnesty International was not able to conduct research on the ground in Syria; like other international human rights organizations and most international journalists and other independent observers, the organization has been effectively barred by the government from visiting Syria since the current protests and unrest broke out in mid-March. Likewise, by early October 2011 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was still awaiting permission from the Syrian authorities to visit the country to “investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law and to establish the facts and circumstances of such violations and of the crimes perpetrated”, as mandated by the UN Human Rights Council on 29 April 2011.

This report is based on research conducted in August and September 2011. Interviews were conducted with individuals wounded during the ongoing disturbances; relatives of those wounded and subsequently detained; relatives of people with firearm and other injuries related to the ongoing unrest; and health professionals and medics, including surgeons, doctors, nurses and other hospital employees. Government surveillance and restrictions on means of communication, and the poor quality of the internet connection in Syria were among the obstacles to research. The deteriorating security situation also meant that health professionals were often too busy treating patients to speak to Amnesty International or were too afraid to do so.

Despite these challenges, the patterns of abuse recorded in this report and the evidence garnered from other sources provide a compelling picture of how the Syrian authorities are blocking access to health care for people wounded during the unrest and preventing health

care professionals from treating such patients freely and without fear. Such actions flagrantly violate Syria's obligations under international human rights law.

Amnesty International is calling on the Government of Syria, among other things, to:

- Give strict and clear instructions to all public and private hospitals to accept and treat all wounded patients without delay, and to prioritize the interests of the patients over any other priorities set by the security and other authorities;
- Hold to account any health professional or employee at hospitals and other health facilities who violates medical ethics by misusing their position to subject vulnerable individuals, including wounded patients, to verbal or physical abuse, torture or other ill-treatment, or to deny them necessary medical care;
- Instruct all members of the military and security forces to prioritise the treatment of wounded individuals over interrogation, treat such individuals humanely, allow without any interference medical treatment of these and other patients, and hold to account anyone proved to have delayed, obstructed or interfered in the work of health workers providing treatment to the wounded;
- Stop arbitrary detentions of health professionals for performing their duty of attending to persons with medical needs or for exercising their right to freedom of expression or other peaceful activities, and release without delay all wounded persons, health workers and other detainees unless they are promptly charged with internationally recognizable crimes and tried in full conformity with international standards for fair trial.

## 2. ABUSES IN HOSPITALS

**“He opened the morgue door, blindfolded me again and pushed me inside and I fell face down on what I could feel was a body.”**

Testimony given by a wounded man, “Samer”, who was taken to the morgue in Homs military hospital to identify bodies.<sup>3</sup>

Wounded patients perceived as government opponents have been verbally and physically assaulted by medical staff, health workers, and security personnel in at least four government-run hospitals – the National Hospital in Homs, the National Hospital in Tell Kalakh, and the National Hospital in Baniyas, all of which fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health; and the military hospital in Homs, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence. Some of those already wounded were beaten by security officials.

There have also been reports of ill-treatment of patients wounded in the unrest by medical staff in other government-run hospitals, including in Damascus and Latakia. These reports come from doctors who did not witness the abuses but learned of them from patients who had been targeted, from fellow doctors who witnessed such practices, and from complaints raised by doctors to hospital managers.

Assaults on wounded patients by medical staff and other health workers have gone largely unpunished by hospital managements, government ministries and official medical bodies. Amnesty International is aware of only two disciplinary actions for alleged misconduct committed against wounded patients – these were both initiated by managers at Homs military hospital against two doctors reported to be army officers. Doctors and nurses working in state-run hospitals concerned by their colleagues’ abuse of patients told Amnesty International that they feared to make official complaints for fear that this would be interpreted as opposition to the government and expose them to reprisals by the security forces.

Since the uprising began in March 2011, Syrian security officials have had ready access to state-run hospitals and are reported to have intimidated health professionals working within them and on occasions to have forcibly removed wounded patients without consideration of their medical needs and without consulting the medical staff treating them.

At the National Hospital in Homs, the number of people admitted with firearm or other wounds<sup>4</sup> sustained in the unrest has dropped significantly since early May 2011, according to doctors who worked there and Homs residents despite the spiralling number of people shot and killed or injured by the army and security forces. This decline, doctors and residents say, stems directly from growing public mistrust of this and other state-run hospitals as word has spread about incidents of mistreatment of wounded patients and the hospital’s compliance

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with instructions issued by the Homs Health Directorate<sup>5</sup> requiring medical staff to report wounded people to the authorities.

In Tell Kalakh, a western town that falls under the governorate of Homs, residents opposed to



Homs: wounded people have no safe place to go. © Digitalglobe / Tomnod 2011. (Lat 34.711561 Long 36.707211).

the government told Amnesty International that they and others like them have not sought medical care at the local national hospital, also known as al-Bassel,<sup>6</sup> since the army and security forces occupied it in mid-May during a security crackdown on the town.

The authorities ordered that people with gunshot or other unrest-related injuries must be treated at Homs military hospital,<sup>7</sup> according to a circular issued by the Homs Health Directorate of the Ministry of Health on 12 April 2011.<sup>8</sup> Inevitably, this will have exposed some of the wounded to additional risk by requiring them to be transported to a particular hospital rather than the one closest to their place of injury, while those taken to the Homs military hospital have usually been treated more like detainees than patients in need of medical care and attention, being kept incommunicado and denied access to their families.

Once sufficiently recovered, such wounded have often been removed to a one-storey detention facility within the military hospital's premises, which is run by the Military Police, interrogated and tortured or otherwise abused. After this, they may be removed altogether from the military hospital's premises and transferred to a detention prison run by one or other of Syria's internal security agencies.



## NATIONAL HOSPITALS

A surgeon from Homs interviewed by Amnesty International described how he had witnessed an assault by a male nurse at the hospital on a boy suspected of supporting anti-government protests, which ultimately led the doctor to flee from Syria in June 2011:<sup>9</sup>

*“In early April, I was among five doctors in the emergency room at the National Hospital in Homs as many cases were coming in with firearm injuries. Among them was a boy, aged around 15, injured in his foot. We, the doctors, were attending to more serious injuries as he waited on a bed... I remember hearing shrieks of pain, so I walked towards the voice and saw a male nurse hitting the boy hard on his injury and swearing at him as he poured surgical spirit on the injured foot in an act that clearly intended to cause the boy additional pain...*

*“I immediately ordered the nurse to stop and said: ‘We are a medical staff whose job is to treat the wounded, not to punish them for their actions.’ He stopped. The following day, I complained about the nurse’s misconduct to the hospital director in the presence of the nurse, and I said that we, doctors, cannot work in such an unacceptable environment...*

*“The director ordered the nurse to remain in the trauma department where he was usually based, and not to go to the emergency room. Shortly afterwards, the nurse came to me and said: ‘You have made a big mistake with me and you will see what will happen’. He directly went to security forces in the square [inside the hospital premises] and complained about me.*

*“After around two weeks, the secretary of the hospital director called me and said the Political Security had summoned me. I decided not to go. They summoned me a second time, and then a third time. And I didn’t go. Then a doctor I knew well was detained, so I left the country. I learned from fellow doctors, who checked with the Political Security, that the reason for the summons was because I was ‘defending protesters’ at the hospital.”*

No disciplinary action was taken against the nurse, according to this doctor and another who worked at the hospital.

On 22 August 2011, “Ahmed”,<sup>10</sup> a man in his early forties, was beaten unconscious by members of the security forces about half an hour after a UN humanitarian assessment team deployed to Syria by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)<sup>11</sup> drove by a gathering of people hoping to meet the team<sup>12</sup> in Tell Kalakh, according to two witnesses. The severely injured man was taken by the security forces to the National Hospital in Tell Kalakh<sup>13</sup>, where one of the witnesses went to check on him. He told Amnesty International what he saw:

*“I stood at the door of the emergency room while [“Ahmed”] was unconscious as he was being stitched. There were around seven or eight security men, some carrying rifles, and nurses wearing white robes crowded around him. He opened his eyes and said: ‘Where am I?’ They all suddenly jumped on him and started beating him and hitting him, including a nurse wearing a white robe and a security man with a stick. They shouted foul language at him and said: ‘You pig, you want freedom, eh?’ When I saw that, I didn’t dare enter so I quickly left the hospital.”*

A third man, who saw "Ahmed" later that day, while they were both being detained by Military Security in Homs, said his head was bandaged and he needed support to walk.<sup>14</sup> "Ahmed" told him he had been beaten mercilessly, particularly on his stomach, by both security officials and male nurses at Tell Kalakh hospital. Then he was taken to the military hospital in Homs because his head wound started bleeding, only to be beaten and verbally abused again, though doctors did re-stitch his wound. He was moved to Military Security as a detainee, interrogated for several hours despite his injuries, and reportedly given electric shocks to his testicles, chest and neck. Next day, he was again interrogated from around 9am until the evening and was seen by other detainees to be in a very bad condition when returned to his cell. He said he had been forced into a stress position for a prolonged period and tortured with electric shocks. His fellow detainees asked a guard for anti-inflammatory pills and painkillers for him but were told there were none. "Ahmed" was still being detained incommunicado when this third man who spoke to Amnesty International was moved to another detention centre, from which he was later released. "Ahmed's" current status, whereabouts and health condition are currently unknown to Amnesty International.<sup>15</sup>

In some cases, the intrusion of security personnel into government-run hospitals has resulted in intentional or de facto obstruction of medical care.

A doctor working at the National Hospital in Homs described an incident that occurred in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in July involving a patient who had sustained a gunshot wound to the head:<sup>16</sup>

*"There was a man sitting inside the ICU room who asked me what the patient's condition was. I thought he was family, because we allow them to enter ICU rooms for very limited time. So I told him that I had actually been near this patient when he was shot in the street. The man immediately asked for my name, address and contact number and started questioning me in detail about the incident. I asked him who he was, but he said it was unnecessary for me to know... The security can enter any room they want, and no doctor dares to say a word."*

A surgeon who worked at the same hospital between March and June this year described another incident that occurred in the ultrasound room:<sup>17</sup>

*"One time a wounded patient was taken by the medics to the ultrasound room and a captain from the civilian police accompanied him and entered the room with him. He then banged his gun butt on the wounded man's knee, pulled the patient trolley and said: 'He doesn't deserve to be scanned,' and took him out of the ultrasound room. I looked at the doctor in the room and he was not even daring to look at the officer."*

The same surgeon told Amnesty International that security officials removed a patient, who was admitted on the night of 18-19 April 2011, from the trauma department without obtaining the surgeon's consent although he was treating the wounded man:

*"I was standing at the Emergency Room door as a man, aged around 28, arrived in an ambulance. He was lying on a stretcher being unloaded, when a hospital cleaner hit him and swore at him. I treated the wounded man, who had received a firearm injury that tore muscular tissues in his thigh, and admitted him to hospital, where he stayed in a room at the*

*trauma department on the first floor. The security authorities handcuffed him and sent a security man to stand outside his room to guard him.*

*“During the day on 19 April, I went to check on the patient, but he was not there. Medics working at the department told me he was taken to the hospital’s detention facility that is usually run by the police. I went there and asked to see him, but they said he had been taken to the military hospital.”*

Some health professionals are reported to have abandoned their medical neutrality, according to a surgeon who told Amnesty International<sup>18</sup> about remarks he heard made by another surgeon in April 2011 as he was operating on a 14-year-old boy at the National Hospital in Homs:

*“As we were performing surgery to a boy who had a firearm injury to his abdomen, the main surgeon said: ‘By God (wallah), if only I know that he’s a protester, I would pierce his main artery and let him die... many die under surgery, don’t they?’”*

“Mohamed”<sup>19</sup>, aged 30, told Amnesty International<sup>20</sup> that he was hit by a bullet that entered his abdomen and exited from his back on 7 May 2011 in Ibn Khaldoun Street in Baniyas during the government’s security crackdown on the coastal city. He was admitted to al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital. At around 10am the following day, as he lay in a hospital bed and was receiving serum - intravenously administered fluids to compensate for loss of blood and body fluids – soldiers entered the hospital followed a short time later by security officials. They removed “Mohamed’s” serum and took him and 10 other wounded patients to the National Hospital in Baniyas, which is located in a neighbourhood in which the government retains significant support. There, “Mohamed” says he and the other wounded patients were beaten and sworn at by both male and female nurses and members of the security forces and others who were present.

“Mohamed” was kept at the National Hospital in Baniyas for four days. He and the other wounded patients were kept in a ground floor room with their hands and feet shackled to their beds. They were not allowed to use the toilet, received no medical care and were not medically examined although most had gunshot injuries to their legs. One man in his fifties or sixties had sustained firearm injuries to his abdomen.

The 11 were guarded by a sergeant belonging to one of the branches of the security forces who, “Mohamed” alleges, tortured them openly in front of health workers, including white-coated nurses who did nothing to intervene or uphold the rights of the patients and also verbally abused and denounced them.

*“We were not treated like humans; it was like we were animals... for four days, I was cuffed to the bed by my feet and hands and it was hard to move... without food or water. Once I asked [the sergeant] for water, so he said: ‘Okay, I will give you water,’ and he peed on me... We were not allowed to use the toilet... we did it on the bed... sometimes as I closed my eyes to sleep, [the sergeant] would hit me with a baton made of wire cables... Nurses and doctors wearing white robes would come to the room, share a laughter with [the sergeant]... one told him that it was enough that we were beaten, he didn’t have to pee on us... another came and watched us and then shouted that we deserved what we’re going through because we were*

*animals... Female nurses would come to the room at different times just to poke us with needles. I was poked by at least four nurses on around five different occasions to my face, feet and abdomen.*



At the National Hospital in Homs, a boy, aged 15, was beaten up by a nurse as he waited to be treated in the emergency room. © Digitalglobe / Tomnod 2011. (Lat 34.739761 Long 36.710536).

After enduring four days of ill-treatment, “Mohamed” and the other wounded patients were moved to al-Bassel Hospital in Tartous, administered by the Ministry of Health, where they were placed in a section of the hospital used for those being held by the Military Police. They remained there for six days and suffered no further assaults or abuse; in fact, they received their first proper meal in days, had their wounds cleaned and received anti-biotic injections, though they were not able to bathe at all for the duration of their stay. After this “Mohamed” and at least two others were transferred to new detention facilities and thereafter released.

### HOMS MILITARY HOSPITAL

Mistreatment of patients in Homs military hospital has also been reported. According to two civilian doctors who spoke to Amnesty International, they saw wounded people being beaten by hospital staff, mostly nurses, male and female, because they were perceived to be government opponents on account of their wounds.<sup>21</sup> One said that in all he had seen “four or five doctors and more than 20 nurses” abusing patients,<sup>22</sup> including in early April:

*“A wounded man with a firearm injury to the arm was being unloaded from the ambulance when male nurses and hospital cleaners beat him badly; and he started bleeding from his nose...”*

In this case, a senior doctor intervened and told the nurses and cleaners to stay away from the wounded man but no disciplinary action was taken against those who assaulted him and they were not suspended or removed from their positions at the hospital.

The frequency and scale of abuses by hospital employees apparently prompted the director of the hospital to call at least four meetings between 25 March and 17 April<sup>23</sup> at which he urged medical staff to treat all patients without discrimination, declared that physically assaulting patients was not allowed and that it was the Military Police, not medical staff, who had the responsibility to conduct interrogations.<sup>24</sup> The above incident, however, occurred after the second of these meetings. At the third, the director told staff that he would take disciplinary action against anyone responsible for abusing wounded patients, after which such beatings diminished.

In April, two doctors with the military rank of major (*ra'ed*) were apparently disciplined for committing abuses against patients, though precisely what they are alleged to have done is not known to Amnesty International. They were banned from working in the hospital's operating theatres for three months. These are the only two cases of medical staff being sanctioned for abusing wounded patients known to Amnesty International, although such abuse is said to be widespread in state-run hospitals and persistent.

Some wounded patients are also reported to have been denied medical attention at Homs military hospital.

“Jamil”<sup>25</sup>, aged 28, told Amnesty International that he was shot in the foot while driving his family out of a town south of Homs on 16 May.<sup>26</sup> Soldiers took him to Homs military hospital where he was kept against his will and without contact with his family for two weeks during which doctors and nurses refused to change the dressing on his injured foot, causing it to swell and become infected. At the same time, they attended to several wounded members of the security forces who were in the same hospital ward. He was not given antibiotics or a tetanus injection, a standard treatment for people with gunshot wounds. He told Amnesty International:

*“On arrival, I was led to a room and several plain-clothed men, some holding sticks, searched me, took my wallet and cell phone as they swore at me, called me a terrorist and shouted bad words about my mother and sister. They then hit me for around half an hour until a doctor came in, told them that he had to treat me, and he apologized with a smile... He cleaned my wound and bandaged my foot, and I was transferred to a room accommodating seven security personnel and one soldier from Aleppo.*

*“Another doctor, who is a military officer, would come and change the dressings of each of the seven security members every day, but wouldn't do mine. I would ask him to clean my wound, he would respond by saying: 'I'm not going to clean your wound... I'm waiting for your foot to rot so that we can cut it off.'*

*“Once I told a nurse that my foot was swelling, he replied: ‘I don’t treat people like you; you’re an armed terrorist.’*

*“Several days later, my foot started to smell... I pleaded with the doctor to clean my wound, but the wounded security men with whom I was sharing the room would say that I didn’t deserve to be treated, and the doctor would repeat that he was hoping my foot would rot and get amputated.”*

*“The nurses would check regularly on the wounded security men and attend quickly to their needs... they would help them in sitting up and adjusting their posture... I never received such assistance. If I asked for a glass of water, I would get it after two hours.”*

*“My bed was next to the door, and in the morning, I would wake up from the doctor’s loud shouting and as he passed near me, he would slap my wound with his stethoscope.”*

“Jamil” told Amnesty International that after around 15 days, the doctor told him he had recovered but without examining his foot. However, as soon as he got home, he went to a pharmacist who examined his foot wound and found it stinking and maggot-ridden. The pharmacist told Amnesty International<sup>27</sup> that he cleaned the wound every eight hours over a 10 day period and gave “Jamil” a tetanus injection and antibiotics.

Such deliberate neglect and mistreatment of wounded patients raises serious concerns about the impartiality of medical staff and the level and quality of medical treatment afforded to people wounded in the unrest, including several who have died.

One former patient described the case of “Hossam”, a conscript soldier from Aleppo governorate aged about 20, who was apparently viewed as a “traitor” by hospital staff and other wounded members of the security forces who were receiving medical treatment before he died of his wounds at the hospital in late May. He had been shot in the chest, a hand and a foot. According to the patient who was present at the time of his death:<sup>28</sup>

*“I woke up and after around an hour, Hossam was still asleep. So I called out his name but he did not answer. When the doctor came in, I told him that Hossam is not making any move or sound. He just looked at him and left... On another occasion, I asked the doctor again and he responded saying: ‘Let him die.’ After two days like that, a nurse poked him three times but Hossam did not make any move. The nurse took him away. The medical staff then told us that he had passed away.”*

‘Abd al-Ghaffar al-Zo’bi, aged 29, died on 23 May 2011, according to the military hospital report given to his family. Eight days earlier in Tell Kalakh he was shot in his shoulder from the back, according to relatives, and the bullet remained lodged. A relative who accompanied him to al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital in Tell Kalakh, which is run by a private charity, said ‘Abd al-Ghaffar was conscious and speaking normally but complained that he could not feel his feet:<sup>29</sup>

*“‘Abdo [his nickname] said he felt cold air inside his chest, so the doctor urged us to take him immediately to a better equipped hospital in Homs and remove the bullet ... my uncle took ‘Abdo by car, and we didn’t hear anything about them. After around 10 days, my uncle*

*returned home and told us that the government forces stopped them at al-Khirbe Road while exiting Tell Kalakh, arrested the uncle and said they would take 'Abdo to the military hospital in Homs. The day after he was released, my uncle went to the military hospital where they told him that 'Abdo had died. His corpse was at the morgue... we do not know what type of medical services he received... his corpse had stitches to his shoulder and to his waist, we do not know why. And there were bandages on his ears and the back of his head."*

The hospital report gives the cause of death as bruising of the lungs caused by a bullet in the chest.



Amnesty International received reports of torture and denial of medical treatment at the military hospital in Homs. © Digitalglobe / Tomnod 2011. (Lat 34.747986 Long 36.690795).

Serious human rights violations are also reported to have been committed in facilities inside the military hospital premises, including the Military Police-run detention facility and the morgue.

For example, in two separate incidents at the Military Police facility, a wounded man and a wounded woman were tortured with a heated iron skewer placed on their genitals. The case of the woman (whose name is known to Amnesty International but is being withheld to protect her), became widely known among doctors at the hospital after an officer in charge of the Military Police facility asked in late May that she receive a gynaecological examination because she had difficulties urinating<sup>30</sup> - it was during this examination that doctors learned of her torture, according to a doctor who spoke to Amnesty International. Another wounded person who had been detained<sup>31</sup> with her and was taken to the hospital in the same ambulance on 17 May 2011 said she had been shot in one limb. He was beaten by nurses on

arrival at the hospital while the woman was verbally abused though he could not see if she too was physically assaulted. She was later released.

The case of the man, "Walid", whose genitals were burned, has been previously documented by Amnesty International.<sup>32</sup> At the time Amnesty International did not know that this torture was committed at the Homs' hospital's Military Police facility. However, according to a 34-year-old man who met "Walid" when they were held together for a time at the central prison in Homs, "Walid" said his torture had occurred at the Military Police facility in Homs military hospital<sup>33</sup> and showed burn marks on his testicles that it had caused. "Walid" has since been released.

Soldiers stabbed 21-year-old "Samer" twice in the buttocks with a bayonet during his arrest on 17 May 2011 in a town in the governorate of Homs. He was taken to Homs military hospital's morgue to identify bodies of men from his home town.<sup>34</sup>

*"I was blindfolded and my hands were tied behind my back. The security man wrapped a mask over my mouth and took me to a very cold room. I wasn't told what it was. Then the security man ordered another man, who apparently worked at the hospital, to show corpse number one.*

*"He removed the blindfold and told me not to dare to raise my head. 'Don't look up, I will kill you. Just look where I direct you,' he told me. They opened a black nylon sack and I could see a corpse from the head to the chest. It was the corpse of X.<sup>35</sup> I told him who it was. He wrote down the name on a piece of paper and tagged the corpse. His right eye was stitched, he was hit with bullets on the right shoulder and what appeared to be a stab to the chest. I remained composed but was crying deep inside me.*

*"Then he made me stand back and put the blindfold on my eyes again, and ordered the hospital worker to bring corpse number two. They showed me only the face and neck and I saw Y. It was as if they have burned his hair and beard, and his neck seemed to be broken because it was loose.*

*"Then I was told to stand back and he said: bring corpse number three. It was Z and his neck looked black and his teeth were black and his face was a bit disfigured, specifically his right eye and his chest as if they had stabbed him with a bayonet on the chest two or three times. There were maggots on the left side of his stomach. Again, he tagged the name I gave him on the corpse.*

*"Corpse number four was so disfigured that I couldn't recognize it. It was as if one side of his face had melted. I said: 'Sidi [sir], I don't know him.' So he started moving his face right and left but I just couldn't tell who he was. He showed me other corpses and I think the total was 10 corpses. I said I didn't know any of them. He got angry and said: 'So, you don't know them, eh? Okay, they will introduce themselves to you!'*

*"He opened the morgue door, blindfolded me again and pushed me inside and I fell face down on what I could feel was a body. I got up with difficulty as I was wounded in my backside, blindfolded and my hands tied. As I pulled myself up to stand up because I didn't want to lie down between the bodies, I tried to avoid stepping on any of the bodies. I finally*



*stood up... I started praying silently so that God will make things easier for me. I then tried to put my mind off the fact that I'm confined in the morgue, and I started thinking about my family and friends, anything in the outside world that will make me forget where I was.*

*"After around one or two hours, I felt so cold deep in my bones and couldn't stop shivering... my bones were shivering, so I shouted to them: I beg you; I swear to God I now know them... I know them all.*

*"So they opened the door and dragged me. He ordered me to kneel down. I told him I was wounded but he forced me to kneel. He removed the blindfold and asked me to raise my head and then poured an entire bottle of surgical spirit over my head. I first thought it was water, but then realized it was medical alcohol from the smell and its burning effect.*

*"He wiped my eyes and then brought a small digital photo camera... he showed me photos of the same corpses that I saw earlier, and I repeated the names of the first three, and then recognized another two. The rest, I couldn't recognize... but didn't dare to say so, so I just came up with names of people I know from our town. I had to save myself.*

*"I was taken blindfolded but able to look from under it in a bus and they threw me on the bus floor and men there were stepping on me and hitting me. I told them I was wounded, they asked where? And when I pointed to the injury, they beat me hard on it. Then I started bleeding and someone ordered them to stay away from me. So they started spitting and swearing at me.*

*"We arrived at the Branch [probably Military Security], and were taken to the interrogators. They removed the blindfold and asked me to keep my eyes on the floor. Then one brought a camera and showed me the same corpses and every time I gave the name of a corpse, he would put an electric taser on me. It made my voice shiver. When I reached the last corpse, I couldn't remember the name I gave earlier, and came up with another name. So he put the electric taser on my left leg and kept it there for a while and then asked the guard to take me away."*

"Samer" was released in the first week of June after putting his thumb print to documents he says he was not permitted to read.

## 3. DENIAL OF MEDICAL CARE

**“If we send a request to the Central Blood Bank... we would be putting [the patient] at risk of arrest and torture.”**

A health worker who worked at a private hospital in Homs until he fled Syria in July 2011<sup>36</sup>

### AMBULANCES IMPEDED AND ATTACKED

Syria's security forces have made it increasingly difficult for ambulance crews to transport people injured in the unrest to hospitals quickly and safely. They have impeded ambulances responding to call-outs. They have searched and questioned Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) workers while on duty. They have threatened ambulance crews with being shot at or detained. They have also examined and questioned patients being taken to hospital by ambulance.

Although Amnesty International has received reports of paramedics being detained in Damascus, it has been unable to contact the individuals or their colleagues, and the information here concerns the problems faced by SARC ambulance crews in Homs.

Amnesty International has spoken individually to three SARC volunteers who all described the difficulties they and their colleagues have faced in accessing injured people due to the actions of military and security forces.

These difficulties have continued although Ghassan 'Abd al-'Aal, who was appointed Governor of Homs on 21 April 2011,<sup>37</sup> issued a circular shortly following assuming his post requesting from the security forces to allow ambulances to operate freely and not to remove patients from them.<sup>38</sup>

### AMBULANCE UNDER FIRE<sup>39</sup>

On 7 September 2011 at 10.13pm, SARC was called to pick up a wounded man in al-Warshe area of Homs. The driver and four SARC paramedics and volunteers wearing their SARC uniforms headed there in an ambulance flashing its red and blue lights. They stopped at a checkpoint in al-Hameediye neighbourhood. Unusually, the security officer in charge there said that if the person's injuries were serious, the ambulance could take a shorter route to the hospital avoiding the security checkpoint on the way back. According to a SARC officer, there was no sound of gun fire at the time and the situation in the area was calm. However, when the ambulance had picked up the wounded person at about 10.35pm, it came under fire, apparently from the security forces as it took the alternative route from Haret al-Hameediye to Abu al-Hol Street. Three SARC volunteers were injured, including Mohamed Hakam Durraq al-Siba'i who died eight days later.<sup>40</sup> Video footage and photos taken after the attack shows at least 12 bullet holes in the ambulance and blood stains on the floor and on a bench inside the vehicle.<sup>41</sup>

In several cases, security checkpoints have delayed ambulances trying to reach injured

people. For example, on the night of 5-6 August at 12.30am, SARC was called to help an injured 14-year-old girl in Hayy al-Fakhoura in Homs.<sup>42</sup> The ambulance was stopped at three security checkpoints on al-'Adawiyya, around a 2km-long street. At the first, security personnel reviewed the Governor's circular and the mission order, then allowed the ambulance to pass. At the second checkpoint, an officer asked the crew to open the ambulance doors, checked the number of names listed on the mission order against the number of crew in the ambulance, and then let the ambulance pass. At the third checkpoint, an officer ordered the crew to hand over their IDs. The doctor said that he had forgotten his ID because he was in a rush. He was ordered out of the ambulance even though he explained that he would be in charge of treating the wounded girl. Despite repeated orders, the doctor continued to refuse to leave the ambulance. Eventually, the officer decided to keep the other five IDs to make sure that the ambulance returned to his checkpoint, warning the crew that if they did not return after five minutes, he would consider the ambulance stolen and it would be hit "with a propelled grenade".

Fortunately, the girl was conscious and could walk, despite injuries to the pelvis, and the ambulance returned to the checkpoint within the five-minute deadline. Normally, as told to Amnesty International by a SARC paramedic, the doctor would have cleaned and closed the wound before transporting the patient to hospital, but he could not do so because of the threat. In addition, the ambulance workers asked the girl's father not to accompany his daughter as they feared his presence might trigger additional delays or problems at the checkpoints.

At the checkpoint, all of the crew apart from the driver were ordered to step out of the ambulance and raise their hands. Soldiers then searched them. The officer who initially had stopped them entered the ambulance holding his rifle – a clear breach of SARC rules – and questioned the girl. When she explained that she had been shot while in her grandfather's garden, the officer accused her of lying. Eventually, he returned the IDs to the ambulance crew and the ambulance was allowed to leave.

In another incident,<sup>43</sup> on the third week of July 2011, SARC was called at around 3pm to collect a seriously injured man in Hayy al-Fakhoura. The ambulance was stopped at a checkpoint at Hayy Bab Tadmor, next to the ambulance's destination, and the crew handed over the Governor's circular and the mission order. The officer said in reference to the circular: "I don't take orders from him. Soak it in some water and drink it." He then told the crew to wait and walked away. When he returned he asked who called them about the wounded man. The crew said that they did not know. Again, the officer walked away, spoke into a radio, then returned and ordered them to open the vehicle. He counted the seven ambulance workers and asked why there were only six names on the list. The crew explained that the seventh man was a volunteer who joined them at the last minute due to the urgency of the journey. The officer accused them of smuggling people into Bab al-Sbaa' while it was under attack by government forces, ordered them out of the ambulance and searched the vehicle. The officer boarded the ambulance with his rifle, but the workers were too scared to challenge this breach of SARC rules. The crew reminded him that they had to pick up a wounded person, but he ordered them to wait, saying he had not finished speaking with his commanders. One of the crew told Amnesty International:

*"We then told the officer that the wounded person may have died by now, and asked to be*

*permitted to return to our office. But the officer said we might be taken to the Fara' [security branch]. We got really scared because when a person is taken to a security branch, no one knows when he'll get out.*

*"We spoke to our office and asked them to send another ambulance to the wounded person, and they did so by taking another route. The officer then took our cell phones away... we did not know what would happen to us. Our field leader<sup>44</sup> went to speak to the officer to persuade him to let us go... The officer then said that the battery for his radio receiver had run out and that he needed to recharge it as we waited...*

*"After the battery was charged, he spoke again with his commanders, and returned. He gave us back our cell phones and allowed us to leave. We returned to our office after around an hour."*



The Syrian Arab Red Crescent ambulance that was hit by at least 12 bullets on 7 September 2011. © Private

In an incident in June,<sup>45</sup> SARC received a call to pick up two wounded people in Bab al-Sbaa'. The ambulance reached al-Qala'a roundabout at the entrance of Bab al-Sbaa' Road, but there was a heavy exchange of fire going on forcing the team to turn back. The ambulance was then intercepted by two red Opel cars, a model often used by the police, and signalled to stop. The ambulance stopped and armed soldiers got out of the cars. One of the paramedics told Amnesty International:

*"A soldier with a bandage on his neck stepped out of one of the cars, headed to the*

*ambulance as he carried his rifle, opened the ambulance door, lay down and said: 'treat me'. I said: 'I will, but you have to give your rifle to your colleague and they can follow us in their cars', and I explained that we have rules that no rifles are permitted in the ambulance. He swore at me and said he wouldn't leave his rifle.*

*"I saw that he was lightly injured so I insisted, saying: 'Then I cannot treat you while you're hanging on to your rifle in the ambulance. He loaded the rifle and held it to my waist and told me: 'You will treat me right now!' ... His colleague told him: 'Come on, we will take you, we don't need these people.' He got off the ambulance swearing at me... He then pointed his rifle at the ambulance and placed his finger on the trigger but his friends led him away and returned him to their car."*

## HOSPITALS AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FACING OBSTACLES

With mistrust deepening about government-run hospitals, a growing number of wounded people and their families and friends have been opting to find treatment in less well-equipped private hospitals or makeshift field hospitals. In response, the authorities have restricted the medical care that such facilities can offer.

A circular issued by Homs Health Directorate and addressed to all government-run and private hospitals, dated 12 April 2011, calls on hospitals to accept all cases and provide all necessary first aid.<sup>46</sup> However, it also orders hospitals to send wounded patients to the military hospital and to inform the Health Directorate of all cases involving people wounded "due to events". The circular was not welcomed by many health professionals as it did not prioritize patient care, required forcible transfer without their consent and put patients at risk of illegal arrest and torture.

A second circular issued by Homs Health Directorate, dated 26 April 2011, requests government-run and private hospitals to be in a state of preparedness for accepting, treating and performing essential operations on wounded people.<sup>47</sup> It also orders hospitals to inform "concerned departments" and Homs Health Directorate of the arrival of wounded people. Crucially, it also states that the Central Blood Bank, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence, is the only entity in the governorate authorized to distribute blood. It warns that no hospital or other body is allowed to receive donors or take blood "as this would lead to the spread of communicable diseases, therefore in the interest of protecting public health, anyone contravening this ban will be prosecuted by law".

Central Blood Bank centres have long been the sole provider of blood. However, the monopoly on blood supplies by the Ministry of Defence - particularly during security crackdowns when it is unsafe to move freely - may jeopardize emergency medical treatment of wounded persons in urgent need of blood transfusions in hospitals and other health facilities. Therefore, the restrictions that the Ministry of Health is placing on licensed hospitals and health facilities with regard to receiving blood donors or taking blood are questionable.

A health worker who worked at a private hospital in Homs until he fled the country in July 2011 told Amnesty International:<sup>48</sup>

*"We faced a dilemma every time we received a patient with a firearm injury and an urgent need of blood: if we send a request to the Central Blood Bank, the security would know about*

*him and we would be putting him at risk of arrest and torture, and possibly death in custody. And if we do purchase blood by other means, we would be putting the hospital and ourselves at risk of prosecution for violating the ban."*

## **MEDICS WORKING UNDER SIEGE**

Mohamed Majed al-Akkari was injured in al-Bourj neighbourhood in Tell Kalakh during a security crackdown on 14 May 2011 and was taken to the town's al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital by two men on a motorcycle, according to a medic who treated him. The medic told Amnesty International:<sup>49</sup>

*"He was bleeding heavily and shrieking from pain... we had no anaesthetics and no blood units, and all we could do was clean his wound, and provide him with painkillers and serum... What we needed were blood units, an anaesthetic, and a surgeon, and all are usually available at al-Bassel Hospital. But it was impossible to take Majed there because the army and security occupied the hospital and snipers positioned on its rooftop shot at anyone in their line of vision."*

Indeed, in the early hours of the security crackdown on Tell Kalakh on 14 May, snipers had positioned themselves on the roof of the government-run National Hospital (al-Bassel).

Mohamed Majed al-Akkari died two days later. Video footage was taken of his body on the floor of a house. Two ice blocks had been put on top of him as it was too dangerous to take his body to the hospital morgue, which had been taken over by the army. He was eventually buried in the garden.

Treating Mohamed Majed al-Akkari involved using 15 bags of serum, each lasting four hours, according to a second health worker who treated him.<sup>50</sup> This left the medic and health worker treating other wounded people with only 30 units, which quickly ran out.

On 7 May, in another incident, a doctor working at a private hospital in the coastal city of Baniyas during the security crackdown on the city described the difficulties he faced in treating the wounded:<sup>51</sup>

*"Communications and electricity were cut off, so we couldn't use essential medical equipment such as the X-Ray machine, which we desperately needed to locate the bullets lodged in the body... We had to perform clinical examinations without any diagnostic investigations."*

Private hospitals and health professionals working in them suspected of treating the wounded without informing the authorities and providing blood units from a source other than the Central Blood Bank have been targeted by government forces.

The medical care of patients has also been compromised during security raids of hospitals after which wounded people have been taken away against medical advice. In at least one case, security forces stormed an operating theatre while a patient was undergoing surgery.

On 7 September 2011, government forces raided al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital<sup>52</sup> in Homs after learning that Bilal al-Kinn, reportedly an armed field commander opposed to the government and wanted by the authorities, was being treated there.<sup>53</sup> In fact, Bilal al-Kinn had died earlier that day and his family had taken his body shortly before the raid.

The government forces searched the hospital between 2pm and 3.15pm and asked

specifically for Bilal al-Kinn, according to a health worker. When they did not find him, they arrested 18 wounded people without consulting medical staff to determine the medical condition or needs of the patients, and without telling staff where they were taking them. The security forces loaded the patients onto a military vehicle and drove away.

The health worker who was present during the raid said that he saw at least one patient, who was unconscious and on a ventilator, having the ventilator removed before he was taken away. The health worker said that colleagues also present at the time told him that government forces took away a patient who had come out of surgery less than half an hour earlier and was still under the effect of anaesthesia.

In another incident in early May, a surgeon said that he was performing a laparotomy<sup>54</sup> in al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital in Homs on a patient shot in the stomach when suddenly three members of the security forces entered the operating room:<sup>55</sup>

*“We, all the medics in the operating room, were wearing fully sterilized medical uniforms, caps, masks and shoes, when the security men walked into the room in their shoes without the slightest concern for the operating room rules... One was wearing black and holding a baton; the other two were plain-clothed with one carrying a rifle and the other a notebook and a pen. One of them asked: ‘What’s the name of this dog (meaning the patient)?’ A female nurse gave them his name.*

*“The man with the baton walked forward until he was less than 50cm away from the patient and stared at him for around two minutes while twirling his baton next to the patient’s legs... We had placed a medical table with sterilized instruments over his legs, and if the baton hit the table by mistake, the instruments could have fallen on the patient’s opened abdomen... No one dared to say a word to him. The security men then left the room and we were all so tense. We had no option but to continue operating on the patient...I was so nervous that I had to recite ayat al-kursi<sup>56</sup> by heart to calm down... we then resumed the surgery.”*

## TORTURE AND DENIAL OF MEDICAL CARE AT DETENTION FACILITIES

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the widespread use of torture in Syria over many years during which it has also become evident that detention facilities run by the various security and intelligence agencies lack facilities for adequate medical care of detainees. Since the present unrest began, this situation has been further exacerbated as a result of thousands of arrests and overcrowding in places of detention, as well as the detaining authorities’ hostility to people perceived as opponents to the government.

After spending four days at the National Hospital in Baniyas, where he was tortured and six days at al-Bassel Hospital in Tartous, “Mohammed” and two other wounded patients were taken to the Military Security detention prison in Tartous. “Mohamed”<sup>57</sup> was held there for nine days and interrogated but told Amnesty International that he was not physically abused. However, he was in pain throughout and unable to stand after sustaining an abdominal wound and being tortured at the National Hospital in Baniyas. His interrogator allowed him to sit while being questioned, blindfolded and with his hands cuffed, but neither he nor the two other wounded detainees were examined by a doctor or treated for their injuries.

Following this, “Mohamed” was moved to “Branch 235”, a security installation in Damascus

where he was subjected to further torture and abuse but received no medical care throughout the 17 days that he was held there. Boiling water was poured onto his neck, armpit and the soles of his feet and he and other detainees were whipped by guards. He told Amnesty International that he had feared to ask for access to a doctor. Subsequently, after a judge allowed his release in late June, he had a hernia operation at al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital in Baniyas where security officials recognized his name, questioned him on whether or not he had sustained a second firearm injury, and raided his home while he was out and told his family he should report to State Security. Instead, he fled to Lebanon on 21 September 2011.

“Kareem,”<sup>58</sup> aged 30, was detained by State Security in Damascus in late May during which he was forced into a stress position by cuffing his wrists to the iron bars of his solitary confinement cell’s window, according to a testimony he gave to Amnesty International. As a result, he could not sit down day or night, and every time he fell asleep while standing, the weight of his entire body rested on his foot, twisting and straining it, and causing him to wake up abruptly. He asked to see a doctor and was eventually allowed to do so, but the doctor was unable to assist him due to the objection of the prison authorities.

*“The soles of my feet were swollen, had turned very red and very hot...I had been standing in this same position for three days, 24 hours a day. Around 3am or 4am (of the third day), I just couldn’t take it any longer. I shouted to the guard repeatedly. He showed up and said: ‘What’s wrong with you?’ I said: ‘I need a hospital.’ He giggled and said: ‘Where do you think you are?’ I said: ‘I want a doctor. You have to get me a doctor.’ He answered: ‘Shut up before I get in there and smash you...’*

*“I continued banging the door until the prison director woke up. I told him that I need to go to hospital and could no longer take it. He unshackled my wrists and then tied them to the back and told me to lie down. I was allowed to rest and was getting brief sleeps but kept waking up from the pain in my feet, and was too exhausted, my brain malfunctioning, imagining movements around me, getting terrified before realizing there was nothing. After maybe two hours, I was again forced into the same stress position until night fell when I was allowed to see a doctor.”*

He was taken to a doctor but a prison official was also present. At first, the doctor assured him that his feet would recover when his shackling ended, then conceded that he could suffer damage if he remained shackled, only for the official to make clear that the doctor’s advice had no bearing on whether “Kareem” should remain shackled or not. The doctor simply gave him pills to temporarily reduce the swelling and relieve the pain. He was eventually released after some five weeks in detention.



## 4. ARREST AND TORTURE OF HEALTH WORKERS

**“Soldiers and security would come in turn, and ask: ‘Where is the doctor?’ Then they would beat him very hard.”**

A witness to torture of medical staff arrested at al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital<sup>59</sup>

Medical staff have been among the thousands of people who have been arrested and tortured by the security forces since the current unrest began in March. Some have been detained for treating people injured during the unrest without reporting them to the authorities, others because of their participation in anti-government demonstrations or because they are suspected of providing information about human rights violations by Syrian security forces.

Government health authorities have actively sought to identify health professionals who are opposed to the government or who have participated in protests. For example, the Homs Health Directorate issued a circular to public hospitals on 22 August 2011 instructing them to “inform us on the morning of everyday of the names of your employees who are proved to have taken part in anti-State demonstrations.”<sup>60</sup> The Circular lists the information to be provided, including employees’ full names, dates of birth and profession, as well as their father’s name, and the date on which they took part in “anti-State demonstrations.”

On 7 August 2011, the army raided a state-run hospital during a security crackdown on a town in Homs governorate<sup>61</sup>. A hospital worker who was present at the time of the raid and a nurse who works there reported <sup>62</sup> that a group of 20 or so security forces entered and searched the hospital thoroughly, breaking down any doors they found locked. They arrested the hospital worker and four other hospital staff, then went to the homes of two doctors who were off duty and arrested them. The security forces were working from a list they had with them, but they did not show any arrest warrants.

The seven detainees were held for two weeks. They were then charged with participating in anti-government demonstrations and undermining the image of the state, and released on bail. The hospital worker told Amnesty International that they were severely ill-treated in detention:<sup>63</sup>

*“We were blindfolded with our hands tied behind our backs, and they swore at us and beat us badly. One of the doctors was wearing his white robe when he was arrested, and he was picked on a lot. They would say: ‘So you’re the one who treats the wounded, aren’t you?’ He attracted the attention of all the security personnel, and no one missed beating him.*

*"We were taken to the Military Security in Homs where we were welcomed with kicks and slaps to the face, and then placed in an overcrowded room... The following morning at around 10am, I was taken to the interrogator, who asked: 'do you want to be tortured or do you want to talk?' I said there was no need to torture me and that I'd talk. He accused me and my colleagues of treating the wounded without reporting them to the authorities, and asked me for the names of the wounded. I said there was only one wounded that we treated without reporting him to the authorities, and I denied treating any others without informing the authorities. He also accused me and the other medics of sending hospital medicines to makeshift field hospitals, and of protesting, rioting and damaging the image of the state.*

*"I was not tortured at the Military Security, but my colleagues, two doctors and the head of nursing, were beaten up badly... At the late stage of our detention, I was taken to an investigating judge and he told me that I had confessed to protesting and rioting. I said that I hadn't and that they forced me to sign a document that I had not read because I was blindfolded.*

*"I was released in late August on bail along with my colleagues and now face charges of protesting and damaging the image of the state... Since it would be improper to put us on trial for treating the wounded, they came up with such charges."*

On 8 May, army and security forces carrying rifles raided al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital in Baniyas city at around 10am during a security crackdown.<sup>64</sup> One of the health workers who was detained told Amnesty International:

*"They came in carrying rifles... They took our IDs and asked me where the cellar was that they said we used to store weapons... the cellar does not exist... They searched the entire hospital thoroughly and didn't find any cellar or weapons. All they found were wounded people and three corpses of men who died from their injuries... They asked me, an anaesthetist and a male nurse to go with a soldier to speak to an officer waiting for us behind the hospital. We went there and were ordered to join a large group of men, all assembled to be taken away."<sup>65</sup>*

He and the others were taken to the local sports stadium where there were hundreds of men, including some elderly men and a number of boys, who had been detained during the crackdown. They were blindfolded and had their wrists secured with plastic ties.

Soldiers there accused a doctor and a nurse from al-Birr wa al-Khadamat Hospital, who were still wearing their green medical robes, of treating "terrorists" and marked them out for brutal treatment, according to two witnesses.<sup>66</sup> One witness said:<sup>67</sup>

*"Soldiers and security would come in turn, and ask: 'Where is the doctor? Where is the doctor?' Then they would beat him very hard... They would taunt the nurse, ["Ihab"], saying: 'Look how beautiful he looks, wearing green!' Then I could hear a loud collision of the thick wooden baton against his body followed by "Ihab's" loud shrieking... As they hit him, they would say: 'You were at the hospital, weren't you? Treating the wounded, weren't you?'"*

"Ihab", a nurse, aged 19, is still in detention.

A doctor treating wounded people at a private hospital in Tartous governorate<sup>68</sup> said he was picked up by security forces and assaulted during mass arrests, and that he and two others were singled out and referred to as the “field doctor”, the “sniper”, and the “uprising-funder”. He was taken to Political Security in Tartous and interrogated for four days in mid-May about wounded people he had treated. His interrogators demanded to know their identities and insisted that all wounded people were simply “armed elements” opposed to the government.

In early May, the Fourth Armoured Division (FAD), an elite security force commanded by Maher al-Assad, a brother of Syria’s President, raided al-Assad University Hospital in the upmarket al-Mazze district of western Damascus. They arrested three doctors and seized their laptops, according to a fourth doctor<sup>69</sup> who was at the hospital at the time and witnessed the events.

He told Amnesty International that first members of Military Security then FAD members arrived at the hospital shortly after noon prayers, then argued over who should arrest the doctors, though neither produced arrest warrants. Eventually, the FAD took the three doctors, away leaving the hospitals’ cardiac surgery and intensive care units devoid of medical cover for several hours. The doctors were then released and allowed to return to their posts in the evening. They had apparently been suspected of providing information to Aljazeera, the Qatar-based satellite TV broadcaster, and were badly beaten before being cleared. One doctor reportedly sustained a broken rib and injuries to his arm, back and an eye, while another had a tooth broken and was beaten on his back.

The management of the hospital, which falls under the authority of the Ministry of Higher Education, reportedly apologized to the three doctors for their ordeal but did not file an official complaint.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the course of the state authorities' disproportionate response to demonstrations and protests, military and security forces have killed and injured peaceful protesters, bystanders and armed individuals. Members of the military and security forces have also been killed and injured in the disturbances.

While serious injuries require prompt and adequate medical attention, it is precisely at such moments of greatest need that healthcare services in Syria have become another casualty of the internal disturbances: vulnerable to disruption, interference, and attack. Violence, both actual and threatened, has seriously impacted the delivery of healthcare in Syria.

Impediments investigated by Amnesty International start from the delivery by ambulances of wounded people that are delayed at checkpoints for what the Syrian authorities say are 'security' reasons. No matter how valid the security concerns, if ambulances are delayed at checkpoints while they are searched and crews and patients are questioned lives that might otherwise be saved may be lost. Intimidation and threats against ambulance paramedics and volunteers by armed forces and security personnel may themselves constitute human rights violations.

In the Homs area and Baniyas, Amnesty International's research indicates that wounded patients in at least four government-run hospitals have been subject to torture or other ill-treatment and, in some cases, have faced discrimination in access to, and quality of, healthcare on account of their perceived beliefs or opposition to the government. Although prohibited by international human rights law and a serious breach of medical ethics, healthcare personnel have denied treatment to wounded patients on the basis of their real or presumed political affiliations.

As well, security crackdowns and violent confrontations in the vicinity of healthcare facilities, and the occupation of facilities by armed forces and security personnel have prevented access to them by the wounded. People wounded in the unrest have become fearful of using state-run hospitals in case this leads to their being seen as government opponents and targeted for reprisals.

While Amnesty International recognizes that military and law enforcement personnel may need to arrest or detain wounded patients on occasions, in all such cases the detaining authorities have an obligation to ensure that the arrest is legal and that medical treatment of injured people is not compromised. In Syria, Amnesty International's investigations indicate that such standards have not been met, and that detaining authorities, moreover, have subjected wounded patients to torture or other ill-treatment and have failed to provide adequate medical care. In some occasions, as documented here, they have interfered in the treatment of wounded persons inside health facilities.

Human rights law protects the right of all individuals to healthcare at all times, including

during internal disturbances. State authorities are bound to uphold human rights law but, in this area as in so many others, the Syrian authorities are now committing serious and widespread human rights violations as they seek to crush the popular protests and unrest that have gripped the country since last March.

Human rights law, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and other conventions, affirms that:

- Everyone has the right to life. States must refrain from deliberately withholding or delaying health care to the wounded and the sick in life-threatening circumstances;
- Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment are absolutely prohibited under all circumstances;
- Whenever the use of force is unavoidable, law enforcement officials must ensure medical assistance to those affected as early as possible;
- Everyone has a right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States must provide at least essential primary health care;
- Everyone has a right of access to essential health-care facilities and services on a non-discriminatory basis. States must refrain from arbitrarily denying or limiting such access, for instance, against political opponents;
- States must take active measures to enable and assist individuals to enjoy their right to health.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **To the Syrian Ministries of Health, Defence and Higher Education:**

- Give strict and clear instructions to all public and private hospitals operating under your authority to accept and treat all wounded patients without delay, and to prioritize the interests of the patients over any other priorities set by the security and other authorities;
- Give strict and clear instructions to all health professionals and employees in hospitals and other health facilities working under your authority to make no distinction among patients based on their perceived political loyalties or suspected activities;
- Take immediate and firm disciplinary measures against any health professional or other employee at hospitals and other health facilities who violates medical ethics by misusing their position to subject vulnerable individuals, including wounded patients, to verbal or physical abuse, commit abusive practices against patients, deny necessary medical treatment, or torture or otherwise ill-treat patients;
- Refer for criminal investigation any health professional who has taken part in any way in subjecting vulnerable individuals, including wounded or other patients, to physical or other abuse, in accordance with Syria's Penal Code of 1949, promulgated by Legislative Decree No. 148 (amended on 3 January 2011 by Legislative Decree No. 1 of 2011), concerning the

punishment of assaults or other acts that inflict physical harm;

- Refer for criminal investigation any health professional suspected of having subjected patients to torture or other ill-treatment;
- Ensure that no facility inside hospital premises – even if it falls under the command of Military Police or other security services – are used to subject wounded patients or those recovering or who have recovered from their injuries to any form of torture or other ill-treatment;
- Rescind instructions to hospitals operating under your jurisdiction to report to authorities health professionals and hospital employees who have taken part in peaceful demonstrations and respect fully their rights to freedom of expression and opinion.

**To the Syrian Ministries of Interior and Defence:**

- Give clear instructions to all members of the armed forces and security services to prioritise the treatment of wounded individuals over interrogation and to treat wounded individuals humanely, protect and transport them to hospitals without any delay; also, allow immediate access to ambulances trying to reach the wounded;
- Give clear instructions to all members of the armed forces and security services to respect hospital standards of safety and welfare of wounded patients, allow without any obstruction or interference treatment of these and other patients, and take disciplinary measures against anyone who has illegitimately delayed, obstructed or interfered in the work of health professionals providing treatment to the wounded at hospitals and health facilities;
- Instruct all members of the armed forces and various services to cease arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including wounded persons;
- Instruct all members of the armed forces and security services to identify themselves clearly to health professionals and hospital employees and show arrest warrants to the patient they seek to arrest, their health care provider and hospital management;
- Take urgent concrete measures to improve conditions at detention facilities and set up well-equipped clinics capable of addressing the medical needs of all detainees and prison inmates;
- Instruct officials at detention facilities and prisons to respond promptly to medical advice, attend to prescriptions and refer detainees and prisoners with health problems, including wounded patients, to the nearest available hospitals when required;
- Stop targeting health professionals for performing their duty of attending to persons with medical needs, and release immediately and unconditionally all health professionals imprisoned solely for treating patients or for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression;
- Refer for criminal investigation any member of the armed forces or security services suspected of committing or ordering acts of torture or other ill-treatment.

**To the Syrian Ministry of Justice:**

- Investigate independently, proactively and thoroughly all allegations of torture or other ill-treatment, enforced disappearances, unlawful killings and other serious violations of human rights, and bring to justice anyone found responsible in proceedings that comply with international standards for fair trial and without recourse to the death penalty;
- Urge judges handling cases of detainees, including wounded individuals and health professionals, to exclude statements extracted under torture or other ill-treatment or duress; such statements should never be submitted or accepted as evidence in court trials.

## 6. ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Skype interview with the patient conducted by Amnesty International on 16 August 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International on 2 September.

<sup>3</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 13 June 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Other wounds may include bayonet stabs, cuts and bruises.

<sup>5</sup> The Health Directorate operates under the Ministry of Health.

<sup>6</sup> Some state-administered hospitals are named after late President Hafez al-Assad's son, Bassel, who was reportedly killed in a car crash in 1994.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to serving members of the military and their families, the military hospital in Homs also treats military and civilian detainees.

<sup>8</sup> A scanned copy of the document, obtained by Amnesty International from a health worker on 8 September 2011, is found in Annex I.

<sup>9</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 6 September 2011.

<sup>10</sup> This and other names given in quotation marks are not the real names of the persons concerned.

<sup>11</sup> A UN humanitarian team, led by Rashid Khalikov, the director of the Geneva office of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), visited Syria from 20 to 25 August 2011 to assess food, medical and other humanitarian needs of the civilian population.

<sup>12</sup> "Ahmed" was among dozens of men who gathered at the town's Abu Arab Square hoping to meet members of the UN, according to the witnesses and other Tell Kalakh residents who spoke to Amnesty International on 22 and 23 August 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Additional testimonies of abusive practices by health professionals in Tell Kalakh's National Hospital can be found in Amnesty International's *Crackdown in Syria: Terror in Tell Kalakh*; Index MDE 24/029/2011, Chapter 4, p13.

<sup>14</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 2 September 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International received information that "Ahmed" was released in third week of October 2011 shortly before this report went to print.



<sup>16</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International on 5 September 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 5 September 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 22 September 2011.

<sup>19</sup> This and other names given in quotation marks are not the real names of the persons concerned.

<sup>20</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 22 September 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Skype interviews conducted by Amnesty International with the two doctors separately on 8 August and 6 September 2011. The first doctor interviewed had worked at the military hospital during the early stage of the uprising; the second doctor interviewed has worked there throughout the uprising.

<sup>22</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International with the doctor on 6 September.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International on 16 August 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Amnesty International is withholding the name of “Jamil’s” town to avoid revealing his identity by authorities who may check hospital records.

<sup>27</sup> Skype interview conducted with Amnesty International on 15 August 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International on 16 August 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International with a relative on 10 August 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International with doctor working at the military hospital on 6 September 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 13 June 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Amnesty International, *Crackdown in Syria: Terror in Tell Kalakh* Index MDE 24/029/2011, Chapter 4, p14: “Wassim” and “Mahmoud” told Amnesty International separately about “Walid”, a wounded young man from Tell Kalakh, who they said was tortured with a heated skewer to his testicles at an unidentified detention facility in Homs, probably run by Military Security. “Wassim” said: *“I heard some of the men shrieking from pain I peeked out from under the blindfold and saw one of the interrogators heating an iron skewer over a gas fire. I trembled with fear that he would come towards me and burn me. But then he went to someone else, [‘Walid’], who was wounded in his thigh and was lying naked in bed and he*

*placed the skewer on his testicles. [‘Walid’] shrieked loudly with pain and started screaming: ‘I beg you, no, please!’”* “Mahmoud” met “Walid” in Homs central prison in June and said that “Walid” was unable to stand because of his injuries.

<sup>33</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 10 September 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 13 June 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Amnesty International is withholding the names of those killed as they would identify the town and possibly reveal the identity of “Samer”.

<sup>36</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 9 September 2011.

<sup>37</sup> President Bashar al-Assad issued Presidential Decree No.159 appointing Ghassan ‘Abd al-‘Aal as governor of Homs on 21 April 2011, days after issuing Presidential Decree No.136 to remove Mohamed Iyad al-Ghazal from this post in response to demands made by residents of Homs during mass protests.

<sup>38</sup> Amnesty International was unable to obtain the circular, but the content was relayed by a SARC paramedic.

<sup>39</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International with a SARC volunteer who spoke on condition of anonymity and without authorization from the SARC administration on 8 September 2011; also related information on this incident was gathered by Amnesty International from SARC public statements released on 8 September 2011.

<sup>40</sup> A public statement released by SARC on 16 September 2011.

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_pTCVOR87aA&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pTCVOR87aA&NR=1); and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgJbxntZJrM&feature=related> Footage uploaded on Youtube on 7 September 2011 and seen by Amnesty International on 8 September, showing the SARC’s Mercedes Benz plate number: Homs 269837; prints on the ambulance state it was donated by the UAE’s Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum Humanitarian and Charity Establishment.

<sup>42</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International with a second SARC volunteer, who spoke on condition of anonymity and without authorization from SARC administration, on 8 August 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> A field leader at SARC is the person in charge of communicating with the state authorities during missions.

<sup>45</sup> Skype interviews conducted with two SARC volunteers, who spoke on condition of anonymity and without authorization from SARC administration, on 8 August and 3

September 2011.

<sup>46</sup> A scanned copy of the circular, obtained by Amnesty International on 8 September 2011, is found in Annex I.

<sup>47</sup> A scanned copy of the circular, obtained by Amnesty International on 8 September 2011, is found in Annex II.

<sup>48</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 9 September 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International with a medic, who treated Majed al-Akkari, on 15 August 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International with a health worker, who treated Majed al-Akkari, on 15 August 2011.

<sup>51</sup> A message sent via Facebook by the doctor to Amnesty International on 2 September 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Skype interviews conducted by Amnesty International with a health worker who was present at the time of the raid and a trusted contact in Homs on 8 September 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Amnesty International interview with an established source in Homs on 8 September 2011.

<sup>54</sup> A laparotomy is a surgical procedure involving a large incision through the abdominal wall to gain access into the abdominal cavity.

<sup>55</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 7 September 2011.

<sup>56</sup> A verse in the Muslim holy book of the Quran that is recited by Muslims seeking protection from God.

<sup>57</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 22 September 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Interview in person conducted on 16 August 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International on 2 September 2011.

<sup>60</sup> A scanned copy of the Circular, emailed to Amnesty International by a doctor on 9 September 2011, is found in Annex III.

<sup>61</sup> Amnesty International has withheld the name of the town as requested by one of the two health workers to ensure the safety of the health workers, including doctors, working at the same hospital as some of them have been charged with undermining the image of the state and are awaiting trial.

<sup>62</sup> Skype interviews conducted by Amnesty International with a nurse on 1 September and health worker on 4 September 2011.

<sup>63</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International on 4 September 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Amnesty International interviewed a medic, who was present at the time of the hospital raid, via Facebook. His responses were sent between 2 and 10 September 2011; another medic, who volunteered at the same hospital but was in a nearby home at the time of the raid, was interviewed by Amnesty International via Skype on 2 September 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Response sent by health professional via Facebook on 4 September 2011.

<sup>66</sup> One was interviewed in person by Amnesty International on 22 May 2011, and the second was interviewed via skype on 2 September 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Skype interview conducted by Amnesty International on 2 September 2011.

<sup>68</sup> A message sent by Facebook to Amnesty International on 4 September 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Phone interview conducted by Amnesty International on 9 September 2011.

# ANNEX I



A circular issued by the Health Ministry's Health Directorate in Homs on 12 April calling on hospitals to send wounded patients to the military hospital, where wounded patients are considered detainees and held incommunicado.

# ANNEX II

FROM :HOMS -HOS -DEPA FAX NO. :8312468777 26 Apr. 2011 12:42PM P1

Syrian Arab Republic  
Ministry of Health  
Homs Health Directorate

الجمهورية العربية السورية  
وزارة الصحة  
مديرية صحة حمص

الرقم: ٢٠١١/٤/٢٣  
التاريخ: ٢٦/٤/٢٠١١

تعميم

إلى كافة المشافي العامة وخاصة والمراكز الصحية

إشارة إلى كتاب السيد محافظ حمص رقم بلا تاريخ ٢٠١١/٤/٢٣ المتضمن خطة تنظيم إسعاف المصابين ونقل الدم بطلب إليكم:

- ١- المحافظة على الجاهزية التامة لقبول وإسعاف ومعالجة وإجراء العمليات اللازمة لأي مصاب يرد إليكم وفق الأصول. البنية على أن يتم إبلاغ الجهات المختصة فور وصول أي مصاب وفق التشريعات الصحية.
- ٢- اعتبار بنك الدم المركزي في المحافظة هو الجهة الوحيدة المعتمدة لتعطف وفحص وتوزيع الدم على المشافي وفق الحاجة وضمن الأصول المرجعية ويحظر على أي مشفى أو جهة أخرى استقبال التبرعين أو قطف الدم تحت طائلة تحميل المسؤولية القانونية لدى مخالفة ذلك لمنع انتقال أمراض مؤذية وسفاحية على الصحة العامة.
- ٣- إعلام مكتب الجاهزية في مديرية صحة حمص على الفاكس رقم (٢٤٦١٢٥٦) بشكل فوري عن الحالات المذكورة أعلاه بالتاريخ والساعة.

وشكراً

مديرية الصحة:

- مكتب السيد مدير الصحة.
- مكتب السيد معاون مدير الصحة
- مكتب المشافي.
- شعبة الإسعاف الصحية.

مكتب الشكاوى : ٢٤٥٤٦٠١ - ٢٤٦١٢٥٦ - Fax : ٢٠٠٢ - Tel :

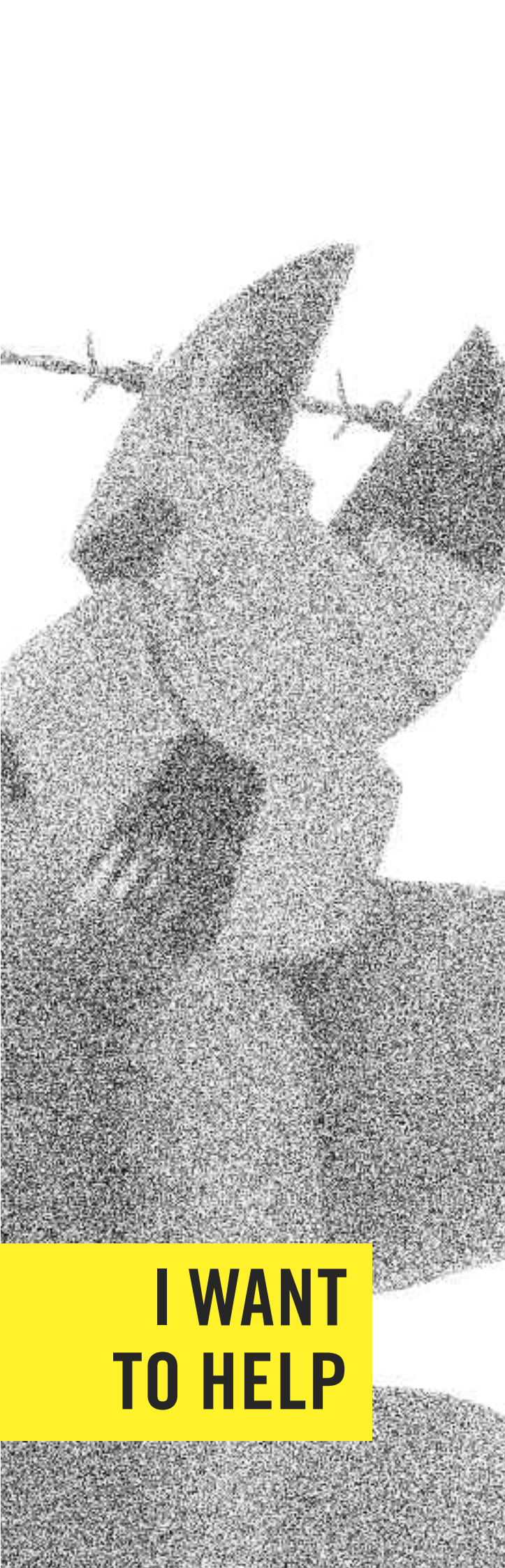
WWW.HOMR.SOH.GOV.SY

A circular issued by the Health Directorate in Homs on 26 April warning hospitals not to receive blood donors or take blood except through the Central Blood Bank that falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence. Such a monopoly on blood supplies could jeopardise emergency medical treatment of wounded patients in urgent need of blood transfusions in hospitals and other health facilities.

# ANNEX III



A circular issued by the Health Directorate in Homs on 22 August instructing hospitals to report on health workers taking part in protests. By doing so, the Health Directorate is putting health professionals and hospital employees taking part or suspected of taking part in such protests at risk of arrest, detention and torture.



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## HEALTH CRISIS

### SYRIAN GOVERNMENT TARGETS THE WOUNDED AND HEALTH WORKERS

The Syrian authorities have been blocking and manipulating access to health care for people wounded during the unrest that has swept across the country since mid-March 2011, putting many lives at risk. They have routinely deemed those wounded by firearms as opponents of the government and treated them as detainees and held them incommunicado. Security forces have obstructed ambulances, interrogated patients, and threatened crews with violence.

As the repression of protests has intensified, government-run hospitals have increasingly become dangerous places for the wounded. In some, medical professionals have assaulted wounded patients they believed were government opponents. In all, staff have been ordered to report patients with firearms injuries to the security authorities. This has presented health professionals with a terrible choice – to report patients, knowing this will lead to their arrest and likely torture, or protect their patients and risk detention and torture themselves, a fate that some, indeed, have suffered. The dangers have led people to avoid government-run hospitals and turn instead to makeshift field hospitals or private hospitals that have limited access to essential medical items, again putting lives unnecessarily at risk.

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October 2011

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