

Joint Public Statement

Abducted human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh and her three colleagues must be released unharmed

11 December 2013

Four Syrian activists abducted in the Damascus suburbs, apparently in relation to their human rights and humanitarian work, must be released immediately and unconditionally, 16 human rights organizations said today.

Award-winning Syrian human rights defender and writer Razan Zaitouneh, along with her husband, Wa'el Hamada, and two colleagues, Nazem Hamadi and Samira Khalil, were abducted by unknown individuals on 9 December 2013 from a joint office for the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) and the Local Development and Small Projects Support (LDSPS) in the Damascus suburb of Douma, part of Eastern Ghouta, an area under the control of a number of armed opposition groups that is being besieged by government forces.

In a joint statement issued on 10 December 2013, the VDC and the LDSPS attributed the abduction of Razan Zaitouneh to her activities as a founding member of these organizations. The VDC is an independent non-governmental organization that has been mainly documenting human rights abuses committed by the Syrian government in the context of the conflict. The LDSPS provides humanitarian assistance, particularly to medical centres in areas like Eastern Ghouta.

Like many other human rights activists perceived by the government to be involved in pro-reform protests, Razan Zaitouneh was forced into hiding in 2011 after receiving threats from the Syrian authorities. In the last few months, she received threats from at least one armed opposition group in the Eastern Ghouta area.

Razan Zaitouneh was recently the recipient of the 2013 International Women of Courage Award. She also has received the Anna Politkovskaya Prize and, in 2011, the European Parliament's Sakhorov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Civil society activists, writers, journalists and lawyers have borne a heavy price during the ongoing conflict in Syria, falling victim to unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture and other ill-treatment at the hands of government security forces and, more recently, becoming targets for armed opposition groups that disapprove of their activities. All parties to the conflict should adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law, which prohibits the abduction of civilians, hostage-taking and torture.

Co-signing organizations in alphabetical order:

1. Alkarama Foundation
2. Amnesty International
3. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
4. Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network
5. Gulf Center for Human Rights
6. Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)
7. Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)
8. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
9. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) - in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
10. International Media Support (IMS)
11. LAWYERS FOR LAWYERS
12. PEN International
13. Reporters Without Borders

14. SKeys Center for Media and Cultural Freedom
15. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
16. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) - in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders