

09-December-2016

For Immediate Release

Syria: Abducted Activists' Whereabouts Remain Unknown
3 Years on, No Word on Douma 4



The prominent Syrian human rights defenders **Razan Zaitouneh, Samira Al-Khalil, Wa'el Hamada** and **Nazim Hammadi**, who remain missing three years after armed men abducted them, should be released immediately, 56 human rights organizations said today, on the anniversary of their abduction.

On December 9, 2013, a group of armed men stormed into the office of the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) in Syria, a local human rights monitoring group in Douma, in the Damascus countryside. They abducted Zaitouneh, the head of the center, her husband, Wa'el Hamada, and colleagues, Samira Al-Khalil and Nazem Hamadi. There has been no news of their whereabouts since then.

The armed groups exercising de facto control over Douma at the time include the Army of Islam, which is part of the Islamic Front, a coalition of armed groups. The groups should immediately release the four human rights defenders if they are in the groups' custody, or work toward ensuring they are released unharmed and without delay. Countries that support these groups, as well as religious leaders and others who may have influence over them, should also press for the immediate release of the four activists and for an end to abductions of civilians.

Zaitouneh had defended political prisoners in Syria since 2001 and played a key role in the promotion and protection of human rights through her brave work as a lawyer, activist and journalist. Since the beginning of the crisis in 2011, Zaitouneh had played a key role in efforts to defend human rights for all and to protect independent groups and activists in Syria. Along with a number of other activists, she established the VDC, which monitors human rights violations and records casualties in Syria.

She also co-founded the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), which coordinates the work of local committees that document human rights violations in various cities and towns across Syria. And she established the Local Development and Small Projects Support Office (LDSPS), which assists non-governmental organizations in besieged Eastern Ghouta. As a result of her work, she had been threatened by both the Syrian government and armed opposition groups in Douma several months before her abduction.

Al-Khalil had been a longtime political activist in Syria. The Syrian government detained her between 1987 and 1991 for her activism. She later worked in a publishing house before shifting her efforts to working with the families of detainees and writing about detention in Syria. Before her abduction, she was working to help women in Douma support themselves by initiating small income-generating projects.

Hamada was also an activist before the 2011 uprising in Syria. When peaceful protests first broke out in the country in 2011, the government detained and later released him. He was an active member and co-founder of the Local Coordination Committees and the VDC. Before his abduction Hamada had been working to provide desperately needed humanitarian assistance to the residents of besieged Eastern Ghouta.

Hammadi, a lawyer and poet, was one of the most prominent volunteer defenders of political prisoners before and after the 2011 uprising in Syria. He contributed to founding the Local Coordination Committees and also worked to provide humanitarian assistance to residents of Eastern Ghouta.

Zaitouneh and her colleagues appear to have been abducted and arbitrarily deprived of their liberty as punishment for their legitimate activities as human rights defenders. Such actions are prohibited by international humanitarian law and are contrary to international human rights standards. The armed groups in control of the area and the governments who support them should do everything in their power to facilitate the release of Zaitouneh, Hamada, Al-Khalil and Hamadi.

List of 56 signatories:

1. Amnesty International (AI)
2. Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship
3. Article 19
4. Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
5. Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR)
6. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
7. Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria (VDC)
8. Center For Women s Equality (CWE)
9. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
10. Digital Lighthouse
11. English PEN
12. El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence
13. EuroMed Rights
14. European - Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR)

15. FIDH, within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
16. Front Line Defenders (FLD)
17. Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria (FREE-Syria)
18. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
19. Hivos International
20. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
21. Index on Censorship
22. Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)
23. International Center for Supporting Rights and Freedoms (ICSRF)
24. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
25. International Media Support (IMS)
26. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
27. Iraqi Al-Amal Association
28. Iraqi Journalists Rights Defense Association (IJRDA)
29. Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)
30. Justice for Life observatory in DeirEzzor – Syria
31. Kvinna till Kvinna
32. Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L)
33. Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada
34. Libya's Future Center for Media and Culture
35. Maharat Foudnation
36. Martin Ennals Foundation
37. MENA Media Monitoring
38. Metro Centre to Defend Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan
39. NGOs Platform of Saida (Tajamoh)
40. Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA)
41. PAX
42. PEN International
43. RAW in WAR (Reach All Women in War)
44. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
45. Sisters' Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF)
46. SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom
47. Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC)
48. Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Researches
49. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
50. Syrian Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights
51. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
52. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ)
53. Vigilance Association for Democracy and the Civil State in Tunisia
54. Vivarta
55. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
56. Umammu Organisation in Syria