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Syria: Human rights organizations mark birthday of Razan Zaitouneh with renewed call for release of 'Duma Four'



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To mark the 38th birthday of missing human rights defender and lawyer **Razan Zaitouneh**, head of the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC), winner of the 2011 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the 2011 Anna Politkovskaya Award of RAW in WAR (Reach All Women In War), the undersigned human rights organizations today reiterate their call for her immediate release, as well as that of her missing colleagues **Samira Khalil**, **Nazem Hamadi** and **Wa'el Hamada**.

On 9 December 2013, the four human rights defenders, collectively known as the "Duma Four", were abducted during a raid by a group of armed men on the offices of the VDC in Duma, near Damascus. There has been no news of their whereabouts or health since.

The VDC is active in monitoring and reporting on human rights violations in Syria and the undersigned organizations believe that the abduction of the four activists was a direct result of their peaceful human rights work. Their ongoing detention forms part of a wider pattern of threats and harassment by both government forces and non-state actors seeking to prevent human rights defenders exposing abuses.

In the months prior to her abduction Razan Zaitouneh wrote about threats she had been receiving and informed human rights activists outside Syria that they originated from local armed groups in Duma. The most powerful armed group operating in Duma at the time of the abductions is the Army of Islam headed by Zahran Alloush. In April 2014, Razan Zaitouneh's

family issued a statement saying they held Zahran Alloush responsible for her and her colleagues' wellbeing given the large presence his group maintained in the area.

The undersigned organizations, as well as other activists, have been calling for the release of the "Duma Four" since their abductions. Today they again urge the Army of Islam and other armed groups operating in the area to take immediate steps to release the abducted VDC staff, or investigate their abduction and work for their release. They further urge governments that support these groups, as well as religious leaders and others who may have influence over them, to press for such action, in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139, which "strongly condemns" the abduction of civilians and demands an immediate end to this practice.

Razan Zaitouneh has been one of the key lawyers defending political prisoners in Syria since 2001. She has played a key role in efforts to defend the universality of human rights and support independent groups and activists in Syria. Along with a number of other activists, she established the VDC and co-founded the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), which coordinate the work of local committees in various cities and towns across Syria. She also established the Local Development and Small Projects Support Office, which assists non-governmental organizations in besieged Eastern Ghouta.

Samira Khalil has been a long-time political activist in Syria and had been detained on several occasions by the Syrian authorities as a result of her peaceful activism. Before her abduction, she was working to help women in Duma support themselves by initiating small income-generating projects. Wa'el Hamada, an active member of the VDC and co-founder of the LCC network had also been detained by the Syrian authorities. Before his abduction he was working, together with Nazim Hamadi, to provide humanitarian assistance to the residents of besieged Eastern Ghouta.

Signatories are:

- 1- Alkarama Foundation, Geneva
- 2- Amman Center for Human Rights Studies
- 3- Amnesty International
- 4- Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship
- 5- Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
- 6- Arab Organization for Human Rights in Syria
- 7- Badael Foundation
- 8- Bahrain Centre for Human Right
- 9- Defending Prisoners of Conscience in Syria Organization
- 10- Cairo Center for Development (CCD)
- 11- Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHR)
- 12- Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
- 13- Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights in Syria
- 14- Committees for the Defending Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria
- 15- El-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence
- 16- Enmaa Center for Democracy and Human Rights
- 17- Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)
- 18- Fraternity Center for Democracy and Civil Society
- 19- Front Line Defenders (FLDs)
- 20- Freedom House
- 21- Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)
- 22- Human Rights First Society, Saudi Arabia
- 23- Human Rights Organization in Syria - MAF
- 24- Human Rights Watch (HRW)
- 25- Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries (HIVOS)
- 26- Hand in Hand Organization, Syria
- 27- Monitor for Human Rights in Saudi Arabia

- 28- Index on Censorship
- 29- International Media Support (IMS)
- 30- International Centre for Supporting Rights and Freedoms
- 31- International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
- 32- International Service For Human Rights (ISHR)
- 33- Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)
- 34- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
- 35- Iraqi Women Network
- 36- Iraqi Journalists Rights Defense Association (IJRDA)
- 37- Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)
- 38- Kurdish Committee for Human Rights in Syria (Observer)
- 39- Kurdish Organization for Human Rights in Syria (DAD)
- 40- Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
- 41- Lawyers for Lawyers
- 42- Lulua Center for Human Rights
- 43- Madad NGOs
- 44- Maharat Foundation
- 45- MENA Media Monitoring group
- 46- Metro Centre to Defend Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan
- 47- National Organization for Human Rights in Syria
- 48- Nazra for Feminist Studies
- 49- No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ)
- 50- One World Foundation (OWF)
- 51- Omani Observatory for Human Rights
- 52- World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
- 53- Pax for Peace, Netherlands
- 54- Pen International
- 55- Reach All Women in War (RAW)
- 56- Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- 57- Sawt Al Niswa
- 58- Sentiel Human Rights Defenders
- 59- Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF)
- 60- Syrian American Council (SAC)
- 61- Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
- 62- Syrian Center for Legal Research & Studies
- 63- Syrian Journalists Association
- 64- Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
- 65- Syrian League for Citizenship
- 66- The Regional Coalition for Women Human Rights Defenders In Middle East and North Africa
- 67- Tunisian Initiative for Freedom of Expression
- 68- Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC)
- 69- Vivarta
- 70- Yemeni Organization for Defending Human Rights and Democratic Freedom