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Syria: Free Prominent Rights Defenders

Armed Groups Should End Harassment, Abductions

A prominent human rights defender and three of her colleagues believed to be in the custody of an armed opposition group should immediately be freed, 45 civil society organizations said today. Razan Zaitouneh, Wa'el Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazem Hamadi were abducted on 9 December 2013, in Douma, a city outside Damascus under the control of a number of armed opposition groups.

The armed groups exercising de facto control over Douma should release the activists if they are in their custody, or investigate their abduction and work for their release, the organizations said. The armed groups in Douma include the Army of Islam, headed by Zahran Alloush, which maintains a large armed presence in the area. Countries supportive of these groups, and religious leaders who can influence them, should also press for the immediate and unconditional release of the activists and for an end to abductions, the organizations said.

For nearly six months Zaitouneh and her colleagues have been deprived of their freedom while their families worry about their fate and their communities suffer from the absence of their important work and leadership, the organizations said. The fighters exercising control over Douma have a responsibility to them and to their communities to secure their release.

A group of armed men abducted Zaitouneh; Hamada, who is Zaitouneh's husband; Khalil and Hamadi from their office at the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) in Douma. A statement by the VDC said that "an unknown armed group" had stormed into the office, confiscated laptops and documents, and abducted the rights defenders on 9 December. Since then, there has been no information on the health, status or whereabouts of Zaitouneh and her team, and no group has claimed responsibility for their abduction or made requests in return for their release.

A few months before her abduction, Zaitouneh had been receiving threats, which she [wrote](#)

about in the online news outlet Now Lebanon. She had also informed human rights activists outside Syria in September that she was being threatened by local armed groups in Douma. In April 2014, Zaitouneh's family issued a [statement](#) holding Alloush responsible for her and her colleagues' wellbeing, given the large presence his group maintains in the area.

Zaitouneh, a lawyer who founded the VDC and co-founded the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), a network of civilian local groups that organizes and reports on protests, had been threatened by the government and by anti-government groups over her human rights work.

Zaitouneh and the others are among a number of journalists and human rights defenders believed to have been abducted at the hands of non-state armed opposition groups in areas under their control. Their ongoing detention is a part of a wider campaign of threats and harassment against people seeking to expose abuses by armed opposition groups in Syria, the groups said.

The organizations urged both government and armed opposition groups to stop arbitrarily arresting, abducting and detaining people for their peaceful, journalistic, and humanitarian activities – in line with United Nations Security Council resolution 2139, which demands the release of all arbitrarily detained people in Syria.

Armed groups exercising de facto control in Douma should do all they can to facilitate the release of peaceful activists and journalists, including by mediating with groups both in and outside Douma, and end abductions in areas under their control.

Abductions of human rights defenders by armed groups in Syria are an assault on the very freedoms the armed opposition groups claim to be fighting for, the organizations said.

Co-signing organizations in alphabetical order:

1. Amnesty International
2. Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
3. Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (AFTD)
4. Dawlaty Foundation
5. Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies
6. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
7. Center for civil society and democracy in Syria (CCSDS)
8. Collectif des Familles de Disparus en Algérie (CFDA)
9. Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network
10. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)

11. Etana Syria
12. Fraternity Center for Democracy and Civil Society
13. Free Syrian Lawyers
14. Front Line Defenders
15. Freedom Days
16. Friends for a NonViolent World
17. Gulf Centre for Human Rights, Lebanon
18. Human Rights Watch
19. Human Rights Association of Turkey (Insan Haklari Derneği – IHD)
20. Hivos
21. Institute for War and Peace Reporting
22. International Media Support (IMS)
23. KISA Action for Equality, Support, Anti-racism
24. Kvinna till Kvinna
25. Kurdish Organization for Defending Human Rights and Public Freedoms (DAD)
26. Lawyers for Lawyers
27. Ligue Algérienne pour la défense des droits de l'Homme (LADDH)
28. Reporters Without Borders
29. Right to Nonviolence
30. Samir Kassir Foundation
31. Syrian Network for Human Rights
32. Syria Justice & Accountability Center
33. Syrian Nonviolence Movement
34. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
35. Solicitors International Human Rights Group
36. Syrian Observatory For Human Rights
37. Syrian Organization for Human Rights (Sawasyah)
38. Syrian Kurdish Center (S.K.C)
39. The Day After (TDA)
40. The Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)
41. The Syrian Center for Democracy and Development Rights SCDR
42. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
43. Violations Documentation Center (VDC)
44. World Organization against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
45. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom