

## **Syria: Whereabouts of four abducted activists unknown** *Three years on, no word on Douma four*



Prominent human rights defenders **Razan Zaitouneh, Samira Al-Khalil, Wa’el Hamada** and **Nazim Hammadi**-the Douma four- should be released immediately, 32 human rights organizations said today, on the third anniversary of their abduction.

On 09 December 2013, a group of armed men stormed into the office of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC) in Syria, a local human rights monitoring group in Douma, in Damascus Countryside, and abducted Razan Zaitouneh, the head of centre, her husband, Wael 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 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.

Razan Zaitouneh defended political prisoners in Syria since 2001 and has 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, Razan Zaitouneh has played a key role in efforts to defend human rights for all and 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, and co-founded the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), which coordinates the work of local committees in various cities and towns across Syria. She also 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 received threats from the Syrian government and armed opposition groups in Douma several months before her abduction.

Samira Khalil, has been a longtime political activist in Syria. The Syrian government had 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.

Wael 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 Hamada. He is an active member and co-founder of the Local Coordination Committees and the VDC. Before his abduction Wael Hamada was working to provide desperately needed humanitarian assistance to the residents of besieged Eastern Ghouta.

Nazim 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.

Razan 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 Razan Zaitouneh, Wa'el Hamada, Samira Al-Khalil and Nazem Hamadi.

### **List of signatories:**

1. Amnesty International (AI)
2. Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
3. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
4. Digital Lighthouse
5. English PEN
6. El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence
7. FIDH, within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
8. Front Line Defenders (FLD)
9. Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria (FREE-Syria)
10. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
11. Hivos International
12. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
13. Index on Censorship
14. Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)
15. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
16. Iraqi Al-Amal Association
17. Iraqi Journalists Rights Defense Association (IJRDA)
18. Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)
19. Justice for Life observatory in DeirEzzor – Syria
20. Kvinna till Kvinna
21. Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L)
22. Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada
23. Metro Centre to Defend Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan

24. PAX
25. RAW in WAR (Reach All Women in War)
26. SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom
27. Syrian Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights
28. Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Researches
29. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
30. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ)
31. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the  
Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
32. Umammu Organisation in Syria