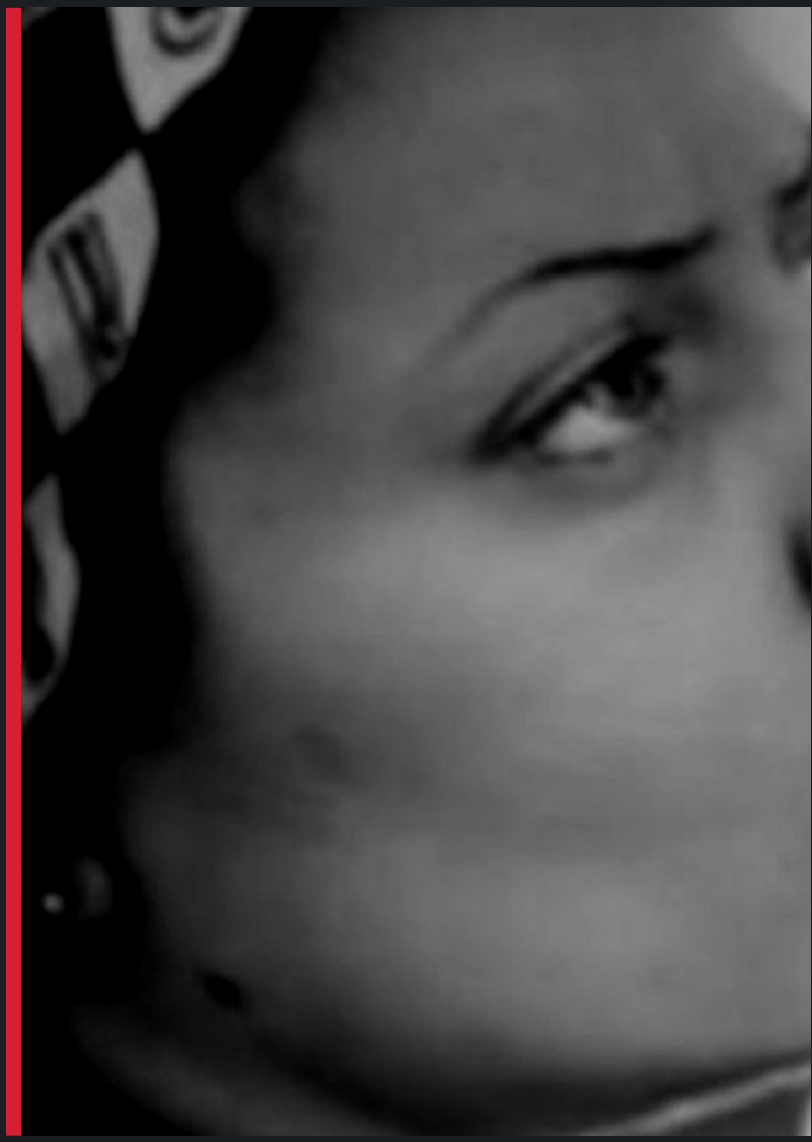

Advocacy dossier

Razan Zaitouneh

رزان زيتونة

Forcibly disappeared **Syria**

Razan Zaitouneh is a Syrian human rights lawyer who founded the Violations Documentation Center and was abducted from its office in Douma on 9 December 2013 with Samira Khalil, Wael Hamada and Nazem Hammadi. Her fate remains unknown; in May 2025 a Paris court convicted a former Jaysh al-Islam spokesperson in a case that covered their abduction, and relatives continue to call on Syria's new authorities to reveal the truth.

01

The case at a glance

Razan Zaitouneh is a Syrian human rights lawyer who founded the Violations Documentation Center and was abducted from its office in Douma on 9 December 2013 with Samira Khalil, Wael Hamada and Nazem Hammadi. Her fate remains unknown; in May 2025 a Paris court convicted a former Jaysh al-Islam spokesperson in a case that covered their abduction, and relatives continue to call on Syria's new authorities to reveal the truth.

Status	Arrested	Country
Forcibly disappeared	**9 Dec 2013**	**Syria**

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Immediately disclose the location, legal status, and condition of Razan Zaitouneh.

02 Grant unrestricted access to family and independent legal counsel.

03 Bring Razan Zaitouneh promptly before a competent judicial authority, or release them.

04 Investigate the disappearance as a crime under international law and hold all responsible officials accountable.

05 Immediately lift the travel ban imposed on Razan Zaitouneh and on any family members affected by the same order.

02

How the case unfolded

2002

Travel ban imposed

Travel ban imposed over her defence of political prisoners

Syrian authorities imposed a travel ban on Razan Zaitouneh in 2002, in connection with her work as a lawyer defending political prisoners.

2011

Other act

Awarded the Sakharov Prize and the Anna Politkovskaya Award

Razan Zaitouneh received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the Anna Politkovskaya Award in 2011. During the same year she co-founded the Local Coordination Committees and founded the Violations Documentation Center, which documented deaths and ill-treatment in Syria's prisons and abuses by all parties to the conflict.

May 2011

Reprisal against relatives

Intelligence officers raid her home and detain her husband and brother-in-law

In May 2011, Syrian Air Force Intelligence raided Razan Zaitouneh's home in Damascus and detained her husband, Wael Hamada, and her brother-in-law. Both were held for three months.

9 December 2013

Start of enforced disappearance

Abducted from the Violations Documentation Center office in Douma

On the evening of 9 December 2013, masked gunmen stormed the joint office of the Violations Documentation Center and the Local Development and Small Projects Support office in Douma, in Eastern Ghouta, and abducted Razan Zaitouneh, her husband Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil and Nazem Hammadi. The area was then under the control of armed opposition groups. No group has claimed responsibility. Jaysh al-Islam, the dominant group in Douma at the time, has denied involvement.

8 December 2016

Other act

56 organisations call for the release of the four on the third anniversary

On the eve of the third anniversary of the abduction, 56 human rights organisations issued a joint statement calling for Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil and Nazem Hammadi to be released immediately. The statement noted that Jaysh al-Islam, part of the Islamic Front, exercised de facto control over Douma at the time of the abduction, and that there had been no news of the four since.

August 2018

Other act

Reporting points to Jaysh al-Islam's Tawbah prison; the four not among detainees released from Douma

Reporting in August 2018, based in part on an Associated Press investigation, described clues including a written threat and witness accounts pointing to the four having been held in Jaysh al-Islam's Tawbah prison. Mazen Darwish, a colleague of Razan Zaitouneh, said the centre had evidence that she was in the group's custody until early 2017. Jaysh al-Islam denied any role. When the group surrendered Douma to government forces in April 2018 it released detainees from Tawbah prison, and the four were not among them.

29 January 2020

Other act

Former Jaysh al-Islam spokesperson Majdi Nema arrested in France

French authorities arrested Majdi Nema, known as Islam Alloush, a former spokesperson of Jaysh al-Islam, in Marseille, following a complaint filed on 26 June 2019 by FIDH, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression and the Ligue des droits de l'Homme. He was charged in January 2020 with offences including complicity in war crimes, torture and enforced disappearance, with the abduction of the four defenders from Douma among the facts under investigation.

20 November 2023

Other act

Paris investigating chamber finds Jaysh al-Islam responsible for the disappearance

In the French case against Majdi Nema, the investigating chamber of the Paris Court of Appeal found that Jaysh al-Islam must be considered responsible for the disappearance of the four human rights defenders abducted in Douma. It nonetheless dismissed the charge of complicity in enforced disappearance, holding that the legal criterion of state involvement was not met for the group, and kept only the charges of complicity in the war crime of enlisting minors and participation in a group formed to prepare war crimes.

14 February 2024

Other act

French Court of Cassation upholds dismissal of the enforced disappearance charge

The French Court of Cassation upheld the decision not to try Majdi Nema for enforced disappearance, finding that Jaysh al-Islam did not act as, or with the authorisation, support or acquiescence of, a state. This closed that avenue for the abduction of the four defenders in the French proceedings. The remaining charges went to trial.

1 January 2025

Other act

Protesters in Douma call on Syria's new authorities to investigate

After the fall of the Assad government, protesters held a sit-in in Douma demanding justice for Razan Zaitouneh, Samira Khalil, Wael Hamada and Nazem Hammadi, and called on Syria's new rulers to investigate what happened to them. There has been no sign of life or proof of death since the abduction.

28 May 2025

Other act

Paris court convicts former Jaysh al-Islam spokesperson in a case covering the four defenders' abduction

After a trial held from 29 April to 28 May 2025, the Paris Assize Court convicted Majdi Nema of complicity in the war crime of enlisting minors and of participating in a group formed to prepare war crimes, with the kidnapping and confinement of the four human rights defenders taken in Douma in 2013 among the crimes covered, and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. He appealed. The fate and whereabouts of the four remain unknown.

June 2026

Other act

Convicted Jaysh al-Islam spokesperson asks Syrian authorities to seek transfer of his case; the four remain missing

In an audio message attributed to him and released in June 2026, Majdi Nema, held in France since 2020, asked Syria's president and the ministers of defence, foreign affairs and justice to contact the French authorities and have his case transferred to the Syrian judiciary. An Al Jazeera account of the case published on 7 June 2026 recalled that the French courts had found Jaysh al-Islam responsible for the disappearance of the four defenders. No public step by the Syrian authorities to establish their fate had been reported, and their fate and whereabouts remain unknown.

03

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Razan Zaitouneh has been missing since she was abducted in Douma on 9 December 2013 with Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil and Nazem Hammadi. Her fate and whereabouts remain unknown; a Paris court convicted a former Jaysh al-Islam spokesperson in May 2025 in a case that covered the abduction, and that verdict is under appeal.

Background and Work

Razan Zaitouneh is a Syrian human rights lawyer, activist and journalist. She graduated in law from Damascus University in 1999 and began defending political prisoners in 2001, the year she co-founded the Syrian Human Rights Association. Her work led the Syrian authorities to impose a travel ban on her in 2002.

In 2005 she founded the Syrian Human Rights Information Link, a bilingual Arabic and English website that became one of the few respected sources on killings, arrests and other violations during the Syrian uprising. In 2011 she co-founded the Local Coordination Committees, which organised protests and documented repression, and founded the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, which compiled lists of people detained, executed and disappeared and monitored abuses by all parties to the conflict. She was also a member of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

In 2011 she received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the Anna Politkovskaya Award. In May 2011 Syrian Air Force Intelligence raided her home in Damascus and detained her husband, Wael Hamada, and her brother-in-law for three months. She was named an International Woman of Courage in 2013 and was a finalist for the Martin Ennals Award in 2016.

The Abduction

By 2013 Razan Zaitouneh was working from the centre's office in Douma, in Eastern Ghouta, which was then held by armed opposition groups and surrounded by government forces. In the months before her abduction she reported threats from local armed groups in Douma. On the evening of 9 December 2013, masked gunmen stormed the joint office of the Violations Documentation Center and the Local Development and Small Projects Support office in Douma and abducted her together with her husband Wael Hamada, the political activist Samira Khalil, and the lawyer and poet Nazem Hammadi. The four became known as the Douma Four.

No group has claimed responsibility. Jaysh al-Islam, the most powerful armed group in Douma at the time, has denied involvement. Amnesty International has noted that the group made no significant effort to investigate.

The Case

In August 2018 reporting based in part on an Associated Press investigation described clues, including a written threat and witness accounts, indicating that the four had been held in Jaysh al-Islam's Tawbah prison. Her colleague Mazen Darwish said the Violations Documentation Center had evidence that Razan Zaitouneh was in the group's custody until early 2017. When Jaysh al-Islam surrendered Douma to government forces in

April 2018 it released detainees from Tawbah prison; the four were not among them.

After the fall of the Assad government in December 2024, protesters, including Samira Khalil's husband Yassin al-Haj Saleh, held a sit-in in Douma on 1 January 2025 and called on Syria's new authorities to investigate. No public step by the Syrian authorities to establish the fate of the four has been reported. There has been no sign of life and no proof of death since the abduction.

Legal Proceedings

On 26 June 2019, FIDH, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression and the Ligue des droits de l'Homme filed a complaint in France against Jaysh al-Islam. On 29 January 2020 French authorities arrested the group's former spokesperson, Majdi Nema, known as Islam Alloush, in Marseille. He was charged with offences including complicity in war crimes, torture and enforced disappearance, with the abduction of the four among the facts under investigation.

On 20 November 2023 the investigating chamber of the Paris Court of Appeal found that Jaysh al-Islam must be considered responsible for the disappearance of the four, but dismissed the enforced disappearance charge on the ground that the group did not meet the legal criterion of state involvement. The Court of Cassation upheld that ruling on 14 February 2024.

After a trial held from 29 April to 28 May 2025, the Paris Assize Court convicted Majdi Nema of complicity in the war crime of enlisting minors and of participating in a group formed to prepare war crimes, with the kidnapping and confinement of the four among the crimes covered, and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. He appealed. In June 2026 an audio message attributed to him asked the Syrian authorities to seek the transfer of his case to the Syrian judiciary. No date for the appeal trial has been confirmed by a court or by the organisations that are civil parties.

International Response

Human rights organisations have called for the release of the four on each anniversary. On 8 December 2016, 56 organisations called for their immediate release, and on 11 December 2018 a group of 15 organisations called on the United Nations and international and regional actors to facilitate an investigation into what happened to them. Front Line Defenders lists Razan Zaitouneh as disappeared, and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights lists her as missing.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/razan-zaitouneh/

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement is a non-governmental organisation documenting the situation of human rights defenders in the Middle East and North Africa. This file is based on the public record of the case in the defenders archive. To report an error: archive@humena.org