

Advocacy dossier

Yahya Shurbaji

يحيى شربجي

Died in custody **Syria**

Yahya Shurbaji was a civic activist from Daraya who organised peaceful protests and was arrested on 6 September 2011 with his brother Ma'an. His family learned from the civil registry in July 2018 that he had died in custody, with his death recorded on 15 January 2013.

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The case at a glance

Yahya Shurbaji was a civic activist from Daraya who organised peaceful protests and was arrested on 6 September 2011 with his brother Ma'an. His family learned from the civil registry in July 2018 that he had died in custody, with his death recorded on 15 January 2013.

Status	Arrested	Country
Died in custody	**8 Sep 2011**	**Syria**

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Order a full, independent, and impartial investigation into the killing of Yahya Shurbaji, with timely public reporting on findings.

02 Identify and prosecute those responsible, both the direct perpetrators and any state officials who ordered, enabled, or covered up the killing.

03 Provide effective reparation to the family of Yahya Shurbaji.

04 Take immediate steps to protect other defenders working in the same field from similar attacks.

02

How the case unfolded

3 May 2003

Arrest

Arrested in Daraya over a local civic campaign

Army intelligence officers arrested Yahya Shurbaji in Daraya together with several other young men, including Tarek Shurbaji and Abdel Akram al-Sakka. According to the source cited by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the group had started a programme to clean up the town, urging civil servants to refuse bribes and residents to stop smoking.

26 May 2004

Other act

UN Working Group finds the 2003 detention arbitrary

In Opinion No. 6/2004, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the detention of Yahya Shurbaji and ten other men from Daraya arbitrary, in breach of articles 9, 14, 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It noted that a military court had sentenced the men to three or four years' imprisonment with no right of appeal. The Government did not reply to the communication.

6 September 2011

Arrest

Arrested in Daraya with his brother and Ghiath Matar

Plain-clothes officers arrested Yahya Shurbaji in Daraya after his brother Ma'an Shurbaji telephoned him to say he had been injured in a raid on his home; Amnesty International's sources said Ma'an was already in custody and had been forced to make the call. Ghiath Matar, who also helped lead peaceful protests in Daraya, was arrested the same day. Amnesty said Yahya had organised peaceful protests since March 2011.

8 September 2011

Start of enforced disappearance

Held incommunicado, reportedly by Air Force Intelligence

Amnesty International issued an urgent action saying that Yahya and Ma'an Shurbaji were held incommunicado, reportedly by Air Force Intelligence, and were at serious risk of torture and other ill-treatment. Their whereabouts were never disclosed to the family, and Amnesty later described both brothers as forcibly disappeared.

13 September 2011

Other act

Amnesty warns of particular risk after Ghiath Matar dies in custody

Amnesty International reported that the body of Ghiath Matar, arrested with Yahya Shurbaji, had been returned to his family, with video and other evidence suggesting he had been tortured before his death. It said Yahya was at particular risk because of his role in organising peaceful protests, and called on the authorities to disclose the detainees' whereabouts and grant them access to lawyers, families and medical care.

15 January 2013

Death in custody

Recorded as having died in custody

Civil registry records later obtained by the family list 15 January 2013 as the date of Yahya Shurbaji's death. His brother Ma'an is recorded as having died on 13 December 2013. Reports say Yahya was held in Saydnaya Military Prison; the cause of death was not disclosed.

23 July 2018

Other act

Family learns of both brothers' deaths from the civil registry

The family learned of the deaths of Yahya and Ma'an Shurbaji while checking the civil registry, after lawyers and activists advised relatives of detainees to do so. Their sister Bayan Shurbaji told Al-Araby Al-Jadeed that the family had been approached several times by people offering information about the brothers in exchange for money.

26 July 2018

Other act

Amnesty calls for the return of remains

Amnesty International named Yahya and Ma'an Shurbaji among at least 161 forcibly disappeared people whose deaths had been confirmed in family records issued by civil registry offices. It called on the Syrian government to return the remains to their families and to disclose the circumstances of the disappearances and deaths.

03

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Yahya Shurbaji died in the custody of the Syrian authorities; civil registry records list his death on 15 January 2013, and his family learned of it in July 2018. No public report was found of his remains being returned or of anyone being held to account.

Background and Work

Yahya Shurbaji was a civic activist from Daraya, a suburb south-west of Damascus, and a member of the circle of young people from the town known for advocating nonviolent change through civic action. His activism began long before 2011. In May 2003, army intelligence officers arrested him with several other young men from Daraya, among them Tarek Shurbaji and Abdel Akram al-Sakka, after the group started a local programme urging civil servants to refuse bribes and residents to stop smoking. A military court sentenced the men to three or four years' imprisonment without a right of appeal.

When protests began in Syria in March 2011, he helped organise peaceful demonstrations in Daraya. Amnesty International described him as being at particular risk because of this role. Protesters in Daraya became known for carrying flowers in response to the violence of the security forces, a practice associated with Ghiath Matar, who was arrested with him.

The Arrest

On 6 September 2011, plain-clothes officers arrested Yahya Shurbaji in Daraya. According to Amnesty International, he was detained after his brother, Ma'an Shurbaji, telephoned to say he had been injured in a raid on his home; Amnesty's sources said Ma'an was already in custody and had been forced to make the call. Ghiath Matar was arrested the same day. Amnesty reported that the detainees were held incommunicado, reportedly by Air Force Intelligence, and were at serious risk of torture.

Within days, Ghiath Matar's body was returned to his family. Amnesty International said video and other evidence suggested he had been tortured before his death, although officials told the family he had been shot by armed gangs.

Detention Conditions and Health

The authorities never told the family where Yahya Shurbaji was held. Later reporting by The Intercept said he died while held in Saydnaya Military Prison, north of Damascus. Civil registry records obtained by the family give his date of death as 15 January 2013, and that of his brother Ma'an as 13 December 2013. No cause of death was disclosed.

The Case

There was no known trial or charge in connection with his 2011 arrest. For almost seven years his family received no official information. On 23 July 2018, while checking the civil registry on the advice of lawyers and activists, they found both brothers recorded as dead. His sister, Bayan Shurbaji, told Al-Araby Al-Jadeed that the family had been approached several times by people offering information about the brothers in exchange for money. The family left Daraya more than a year after the arrests.

International Response

In Opinion No. 6/2004, adopted on 26 May 2004, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his 2003 detention and that of ten other men from Daraya arbitrary, in breach of articles 9, 14, 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In September 2011, Amnesty International issued an urgent action and a public statement on his arrest. On 26 July 2018, Amnesty named Yahya and Ma'an Shurbaji, together with Islam Dabbas, another activist from Daraya, among at least 161 forcibly disappeared people whose deaths had been confirmed in civil registry records, and called on the Syrian government to return their remains and disclose the circumstances of their deaths.

Following the change of government in Syria in December 2024, the Syrian state news agency SANA reported in February 2026 that a community library and cultural centre bearing his name had opened in Daraya.

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