



Enforced Disappearances

A continuous and permanent
CRIME



Introduction

August 30th marks the International Day Of The Victims Of Enforced Disappearance. International law defines enforced disappearance as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.”

In the Middle East and North Africa region, conflict, war, and political repression, as well as devastation, death, and homelessness, have led to the disappearance of a large number of people, including political and social activists. It is estimated that between 250,000 and one million Iraqis have vanished over the past fifty years due to political conflicts, war, and political repression.

At least 82,000 people have vanished in **Syria** since the country's civil wars began in 2011. Of these, only 2,000 disappeared due to terrorist jihadist organizations, while the rest were victims of arbitrary arrest and detention operations and kidnapping by Syrian government agents. There is no information regarding their condition, probable location, or whether they are alive or dead.

In **Egypt**, between 2013 and January 2023, the Stop Enforced Disappearance Campaign documented that over 3,600 people were forcibly disappeared. The term “forced disappearance” first appeared in Egyptian media in 2003 to refer to the case of journalist Reda Helal, who disappeared in August of that year.



It was suspected that he was detained by Egyptian security for criticizing President Hosni Mubarak; Helal's fate remains unknown to this day.

In February 2023, a group of Egyptian human rights organizations demanded that the government stop forcible disappearances and that authorities carry out independent investigations into perpetrators.

After the revolution of 1979 and the ascension of the clerics to power in Iran, thousands of government opponents were detained, incarcerated, and put to death. Their families are still unsure of the fate of many of those detained. In the 1960s, thousands of individuals were victims of the Islamic Republic's policy of enforced disappearance. The United Nations Working Group on Disappeared Persons has registered the names and files of at least 522 people who have been forcibly disappeared in the Islamic Republic of Iran; approximately 100 of these are women, but there is little information about them.

Forcible disappearance is used in the region by security forces as a tactic to silence opponents and activists and instill fear. The practice not only impacts those directly targeted, but also the broader political and rights communities, as well as the families of the victims. Increasingly these tactics are being used against women human rights defenders in the MENA region. Even in cases where male rights defenders and political activists are forcibly disappeared, mothers, daughters, wives and sisters take up the task of following their cases, sometimes for years and decades. In this report, we take a cursory glance at the names and fates of some of those who have been forcibly disappeared in Syria, Iran, and Egypt.



Syria

Peaceful Syrian activists, Samira al-Khalil, Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamada and Nazim Hammadi, who worked at the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), an NGO that monitors human rights violations, were abducted by an armed opposition group from their office in Eastern Ghouta on December 9th, 2013.

It is believed that the four human rights defenders were kidnapped by the Islamist group Jaysh Al-Islam that had taken control of Douma. These four icons of the Revolution have become known as the “Douma Four.” There remains no news of them.

1- Samira Khalil

A Syrian political dissident, Samira Al-Khalil tirelessly defended human rights and justice. As a young woman, she was arrested for belonging to the Communist Action Party and for her opposition to the regime of Hafez Al-Assad. She was tortured, then detained from 1987 to 1991. A few years after her release, Samira married Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a Syrian writer and intellectual who has also spent sixteen years in the regime's jails. Seeking justice and democracy, both Samira and Yassin became involved in the Syrian Revolution in 2011.

In the spring of 2013, they left Damascus for the recently-liberated town of Douma.

Yassin then went on to Raqqa, his birthplace. Surrounded by her activist colleagues and the town's population, whom she grew to know, Samira remained in Douma, until December 9, 2013, when she was abducted along with her 3 colleagues.

A few years after Samira disappeared, Yassin retrieved her diary and published it. Her writings have been published in Arabic, Spanish, and Italian.





2-Razan Zaitouneh

Razan Zaitouneh is a prominent human rights lawyer, activist, and journalist in Syria. Razan has dedicated her life to defending political prisoners, documenting crimes against humanity, and helping others free themselves from oppression.

Razan's involvement in human rights advocacy began early in her career, causing the government to ban her from leaving the country in 2002.

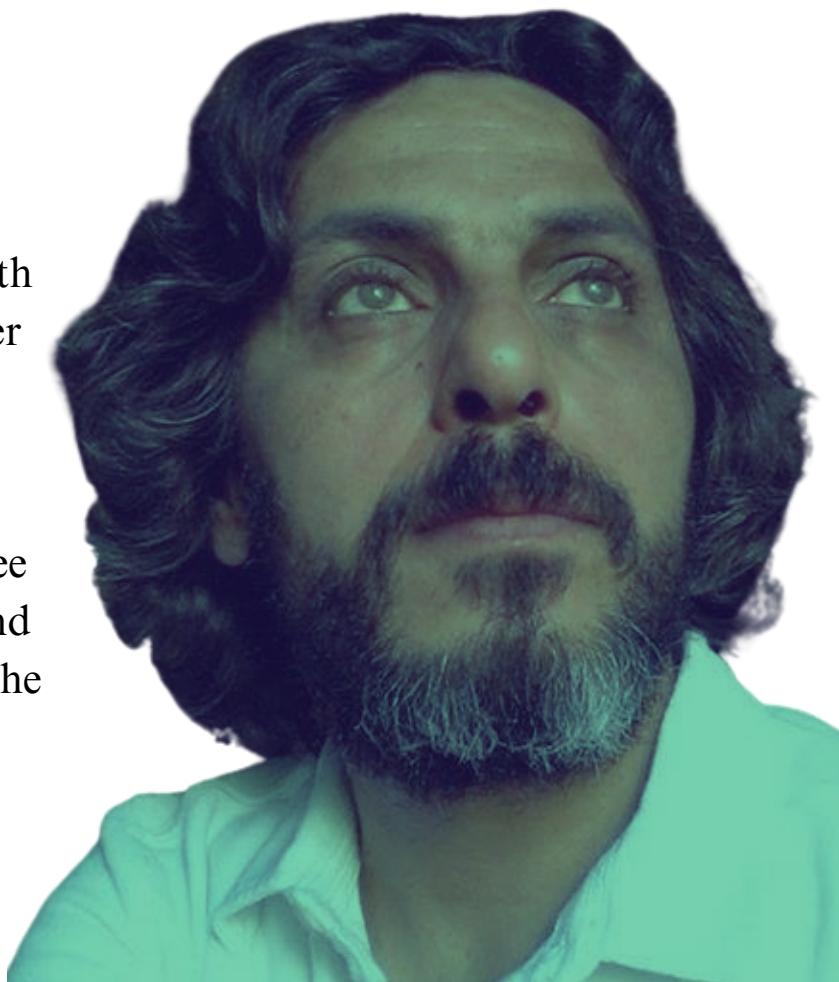
In 2005, Razan founded the Syrian Human Rights Information Link (SHRIL), Syria's first public documentation resource for human rights violations. SHRIL exposed human rights violations of the Syrian government. As the conflict which followed the 2011 Syrian Revolution intensified, to include use of chemical weapons, she founded the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), which works to document the death toll resulting from the conflict and develops reports about conditions in Syria's prisons. With the VDC, Razan compiled lists of the detained, the executed, and the disappeared.

Most of the work was done in secret, with many activists using pseudonyms to preserve their safety. Razan, like other activists, was forced into hiding. As she worked, she moved from place to place, evading government forces.

On December 9th, 2013, a group of masked gunmen stormed the VDC office in Douma, and kidnapped Razan along with her husband, Wael Hamada, and their two colleagues, Nazem Al Hamadi and Samera Al Khalil. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

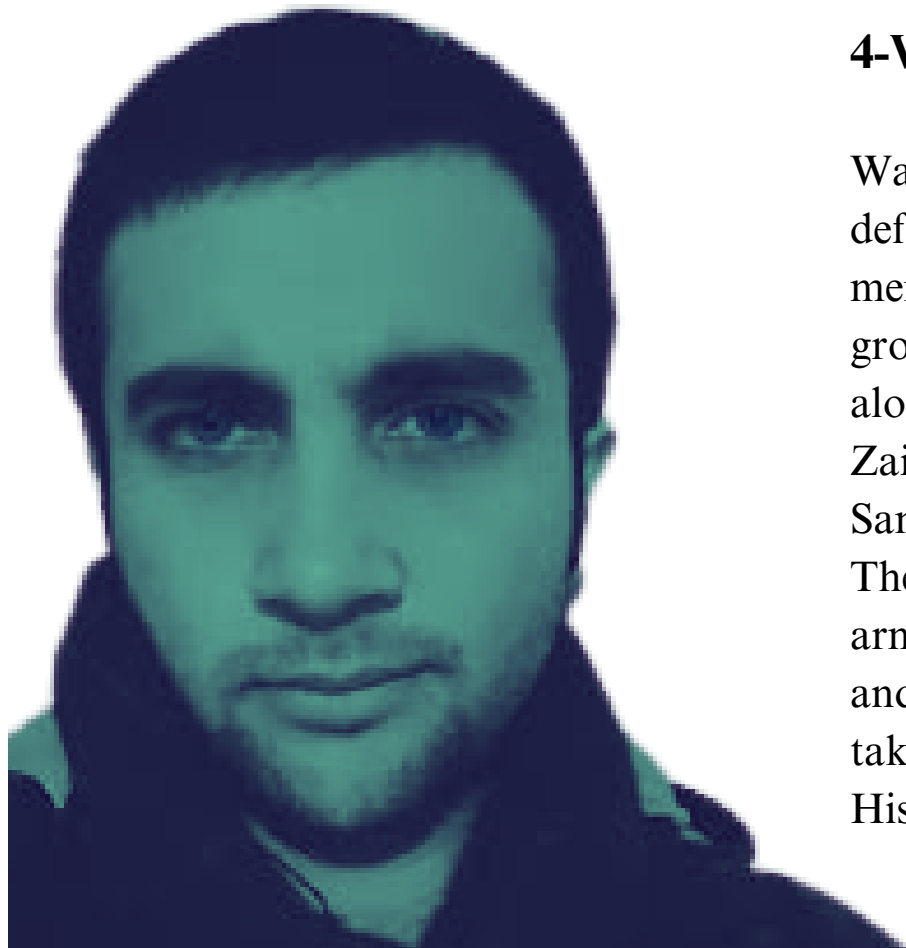
3-Nazem Hammadi

Nazem Hamadi is a human rights defender and a poet, who worked with the Violations Documentation Center (VDC). He was kidnapped from the offices of VDC and the Local Development and Small Projects Support (LDSPS) along with his three colleagues on December 9th, 2013 and his whereabouts remain unknown. The LDSPS provided humanitarian assistance, particularly to medical centers.



4-Wael Hamada

Wael Hamada is a Human rights defender who was abducted by members of unidentified armed groups, on December 9th, 2013, along with his wife Razan Zaitouneh, and two colleagues Samira Khalil, and Nazem Hamadi. They were abducted by masked armed men, from the offices of VDC and LDSPS, where they worked and taken to an unknown location. His whereabouts remain unknown.



5. Ali Mustafa

On July 2th, 2013, Ali Mustafa, a political opposition figure who had been arrested several times in the past, was abducted and forcibly disappeared from his family home in Damascus, located in the “Hay al-Muhajireen” an area that has continuously been under the control of the Syrian government.

While Mustafa was allegedly spotted in a transport vehicle belonging to the State Security Intelligence Branch 285 a few days after his arrest, to date his family has received no information regarding his fate and whereabouts.

Since his disappearance, his daughter, Wafa Mustafa, has been fighting to find her father. In this quest, she has taken up the cases of others who have been forcibly disappeared in Syria.



Wafa Mustafa: the woman fighting to find her father – and all of Syria’s disappeared



Members of the Baha'i Community who were arrested and disappeared in August 1981

Iran

Thousands of opponents were detained, imprisoned, or disappeared following the Islamic Revolution's victory in Iran and during the purges of the new government. This included including 11 Baha'is, who were detained by security forces on August 30th, 1981, and then disappeared. These eleven individuals' names are as follows:

Alimorad Davoudi Maneshi, Abdolhossein Taslimi , Behiye Naderi, Kambiz Sadeghi Milani, Ibrahim Rahmani, Hossein Naji, Manouchehr Ghaem Maghami, Ataollah Moghrebi, Houshang Mahmoudi, Heshmatollah Rohani, Yousef Ghadimi, Yousef Abasian Milani.

The most prominent cases of enforced disappearance in Iran involve two students who vanished in 1999 during student protests in Iran.

1- Fereshteh Alizadeh

Fereshteh Alizadeh was a student at Al-Zahra University, who went missing in Tehran during the 1999 student protests. According to reports, her family followed up on her situation. The last known date of their followup was in 2002, but Fereshteh's family eventually abandoned their investigation into her disappearance, due to security threats and pressures.

In a March 2001 speech at Amir Kabir University, Ali Akbar Mousavi Khomeini, an MP in the 6th Parliament who was monitoring the situation of detained students, stated that Fereshteh Alizadeh, “a student from Sabzevar, was kidnapped and disappeared after the student protests. This student's mother passed away six months after this incident due to pressure and an intense emotional bond with her child. This student's brother is a teacher, and despite his best efforts, he cannot locate his sister in any of the detention centers or institutions. Even after several years have passed since the incident at the university, Fereshteh Alizadeh's family has not heard from her, and none of the institutions have been willing to respond to them. Her family is presently attempting to communicate with the UN inspectors.”



A picture of Student's Protests in 1999



2- Saeed Zeinali

Saeed Zeinali is one of Iran's most prominent political activists who remains missing to this day. The notoriety of his case is due to his mother, Akram Naqabi, who, 22 years after her son's disappearance, is still searching for him along with other Iranian plaintiff families who have lost children due to political reasons.

Saeed Zeinali, a student at Tehran University, was detained at his residence five days after student protests began in July 1999. In an interview with BBC Persian, his mother, Akram Naqabi, stated: "Three agents with guns arrived and stated they would interrogate Saeed for 10 minutes. Saeed was 22 years old when he was arrested. Two or three months after his detention, he called from prison to report that he was doing well; I have not heard from him since." In 2000, a UN report on the incident provided the following explanation: "During the student demonstration in Tehran, approximately 1,500 people were arrested, and at least eight people were killed in an attack on a dormitory."

Akram Naqabi has spent over twenty years looking for her son. During this time, security forces detained her family at least twice and threatened to end their search for Saeed. In 2015, Mohseni Ejei, the Judiciary spokesman, stated that there is no evidence of Saeed Zinali's arrest, in response to reporters' inquiries about his status.



Egypt:

There are numerous factors to consider when writing about the enforced disappearance of human rights defenders in Egypt, especially in the past 10 years. Those most susceptible to enforced disappearance are individuals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, whether they are political activists or social media activists. Many young men have disappeared since the dispersal of the Rabaa sit-in. Following them, the next most susceptible are non-Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political activists.

However, in recent years in Egypt, when the authorities apprehend human rights defenders, they often subject them to enforced disappearance for days or sometimes months before disclosing their places of detention. In some way, nearly all human rights defenders, whether affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or not, have been subjected to enforced disappearance, for periods ranging from hours to days.

“In August, the 'Stop Enforced Disappearance' campaign reported that out of 3000 cases submitted to the 'Presidential Pardon Committee' for amnesty or release, 2300 cases included instances of enforced disappearance. Then, in December, another local non-governmental organization published a report indicating the presence of 3155 cases of enforced disappearance in 2022, with a cumulative total of 16955 cases over the past nine years.”



1- Moustafa Masouny

Moustafa Masouny is a video editor who participated in the Egyptian revolution and became well-known within the community of political activists. He was forcibly disappeared in July 2015 and his whereabouts remain unknown.

2- Ashraf Shehata

Ashraf Shehata is a lawyer who is the founder of a school, and a member of the liberal political party “Al Dostor.” Shehata was abducted and forcibly disappeared in January 2014. Maha Mekaway, Shehata’s wife has been following his case and activists launched widespread solidarity campaigns, hunger strikes, and submitted petitions to the Attorney General, but Shehata’s whereabouts remain unclear to this day.



3-Mostafa El Nagar

Mostafa El Nagar is one of the prominent figures of the January Revolution, an opposition figure, writer and a father and husband, who disappeared in 2018. Rumors have circulated about his presence in one of the state's prisons, but there is still no confirmation. Many political activists have demanded transparency about his whereabouts and his release, but to no avail.

After his disappearance for two weeks in 2018, more than one newspaper mentioned that the dentist and politician Mustafa El-Naggar had been arrested. However, the official authorities continue to deny knowledge of his whereabouts. Testimonies have reached his family from individuals who met him face to face in one of the prisons, yet there remains no confirmation from the state.



4-Khaled Mohamed EzzelDin

It has been 10 years since the disappearance of Khaled Mohammad EzzelDin. His wife saw him on television screens during the Rabaa sit-in after he endured a head injury. This was during the clashes between the protesters and police forces on Al-Nasr Street near the stage in Nasr City. Later, an ambulance took him out of the protest area to an undisclosed location. Information confirming that he had recovered from his injuries, was relayed to his wife by a doctor from the prison hospital. However, despite her inquiries there, Khaled's wife was unable to locate him, and the authorities denied arresting him.

Khaled's wife has searched for him in official prisons and central security camps without success. She has also conducted genetic fingerprint analyses on the charred bodies that remained unidentified after the dispersal of the Rabaa Al-Adawiya and Nahda Square sit-ins, but the remains did not match her husband's.

Despite extensive efforts of his family to locate him, Khaled's whereabouts remain unknown.



According to Article 5 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the act of enforced disappearance is an international crime and is considered a "crime against humanity;" therefore, lawsuits for the victims of this crime are outside the statute of limitations for criminal cases.

Article 8 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in the same context requires countries, if they implement a time limit for enforced disappearance, that this period of time must be "long" and commensurate with the "great importance of this crime."

Considering the nature and essence of this crime, its commission is continuous and permanent, and the crime will continue until the government responsible for the disappearance reveals the victim's fate and whereabouts.



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Femena supports Women Human Rights Defenders, their organizations and feminist movements through analysis of trends and policy, documentation, fostering the development of regional communities of practice and advocacy.

Femena's work is primarily focused on contexts of shrinking or closed civic space and contexts complicated by growing extremism and conflict.