(New York, May 27, 2014) – 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 Zeitouneh, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazem Hammadi were abducted on December 9, 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 Zeitouneh 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 Zeitouneh; Hamada, who is Zeitouneh’s husband; Khalil and Hammadi 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 December 9. Since then, there has been no information on the health, status or whereabouts of Zeitouneh 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, Zeitounehan 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, Zeitouneh’s family issued a statement holding Alloush responsible for her and her colleagues’ wellbeing, given the large presence his group maintains in the area.

Zeitouneh, 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.

Zeitouneh 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.
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Co-signing organizations in alphabetical order:
Amnesty International
Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (AFTD)
Dawlaty Foundation
Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
Center for civil society and democracy in Syria (CCSDS)
Collectif des Familles de Disparus en Algérie (CFDA)
Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)
Etana Syria
Fraternity Center for Democracy and Civil Society
Free Syrian Lawyers
Front Line Defenders
Freedom Days
Friends for a NonViolent World
Gulf Centre for Human Rights, Lebanon
Human Rights Watch
Human Rights Association of Turkey (Insan Hakları Derneği – IHD)
Hivos
Institute for War and Peace Reporting
International Media Support (IMS)
KISA Action for Equality, Support, Anti-racism
Kvinna till Kvinna
Kurdish Organization for Defending Human Rights and Public Freedoms (DAD)
Lawyers for Lawyers
Ligue Algérienne pour la défense des droits de l’Homme (LADDH)
Reporters Without Borders
Right to Nonviolence
Samir Kassir Foundation
Syrian Network for Human Rights
Syria Justice & Accountability Center
Syrian Nonviolence Movement
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
HYPERLINK “http://www.sihrg.org/” Solicitors International Human Rights Group
Syrian Observatory For Human Rights
Syrian Organization for Human Rights (Sawasyah)
Syrian Kurdish Center (S.K.C)
The Day After (TDA)
The Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)
The Syrian Center for Democracy and Development Rights SCDR
The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
Violations Documentation Center (VDC)
World Organization against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom