



**Gulf Centre for Human Rights**

**MISSION REPORT:**

**Syrian Human Rights Defenders Losing Hope with International Community as Human Rights Violations Continue Unabated**

**March 2016**





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## **I. Introduction**

### **A) Overview**

The stories of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Syria demonstrate some of the terrifying outcomes of the conflict in Syria of the last five years. “Blood has become so normal to see now, and the same way we overcame the scene of blood we need to overcome the challenges to survive and help others survive,” said **Mohammad Khoder**, a journalist working with Sound and Picture. With widespread insecurity, constant fear, and the normalisation of violence, carrying the responsibilities of providing hope and lobbying for justice during the biggest crisis of our time makes Syrian HRDs’ lives extremely hard and inevitably prone to high risk. But it does not deter their commitment to protect people’s rights from all sides of the conflict.

Lawyers face mayhem in non-existent judicial procedures, journalists face restrictions on telling the truths in a chaotic media sector, and humanitarian workers face difficulties due to the lack of access into areas in dire need. Each region in Syria has its own story and its own escalation of events, and eventually its own controlling faction. Experiences of HRDs vary from region to region based on local context, but they all aim for a minimum level of respect for civilians who have no say in this imposed war and who take no part in the conflict, but who many of them at this stage are trying to survive and work during the conflict. Their collective goal is a set of human rights that were internationally adopted and should be respected nationally even at times of war. Lawyers demand the just treatment of prisoners in detention and document violations to be used in court someday. Journalists lead the exercise of freedom of expression and tell the world what is happening in Syria. Humanitarian workers carry kits and supplies through checkpoints and dangerous roads to make sure fellow Syrians don’t die of starvation, they pull survivors from the rubble of attacks, treat wounded and physically affected population and provide safe passages for those in need for intensive medical care.

The Syrian war is no longer an internal conflict, it now involves international actors with varying political interests, thus increases the risk HRDs face in and outside Syria. With Russia, Lebanon, Iran, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, each playing a role, plus others involved in the alliance against the so-called Islamic State (Da’esh), regional geopolitics play a major role in the conflict and HRDs find themselves in limbo with no protection mechanisms or an end to the conflict in sight.

While there was hope for some kind of reconciliation through the United Nations with the initiation of peace talks in February 2016, further setbacks have damaged prospects for UN resolution 2254 (2015) to achieve a lasting settlement. The obstacles are severe, such as: HRDs being targeted by all sides in this ongoing war, including by the Syrian government and armed groups in addition to other stakeholders; reprisals against those who cooperate with international mechanisms including the UN system; and restrictions including judicial harassment in state-controlled areas. Those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity should stand trial, the Syrian opposition is split and has so far been unable to unite a Syrian opposition front that includes all Syrian people, and the presence of Da’esh is aggravating the situation. Despite this context, HRDs continue to sustain efforts to promote human rights.

Recognising the importance of the work of HRDs in the region and specifically in Syria, GCHR has since 2012 documented their work and repeatedly called on all those involved in the conflict in Syria to respect and protect them.

Many of the defenders with which GCHR has worked are in detention, have been disappeared, or are on trial before military and anti-terrorism courts. Despite an overall difficult picture there have been some individual successes. For instance, in 2015 human rights organisations including the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) succeeded in their calls to member states of the UN Security Council and elsewhere to help release HRD **Mazen Darwish**, and his colleagues **Hani Al-Zitani** and **Hussein Gharir** of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), although the fate of others like **Bassel Khartabil** remain unknown. Some HRDs remain missing and forcibly disappeared in both government prisons or in detention by armed groups. Since 2013, human rights defender and lawyer **Razan Zaitouneh**, head of the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC), has been missing, presumed kidnapped by extremist militias with human rights defenders **Samira Khalil**, **Nazem Hamadi** and **Wa'el Hamada**, who are collectively known as the “Douma Four”. The same unknown fate applies to lawyer and HRD **Khalil Ma'touq**, whom former detainees report to have seen in government detention, and since 2012 continues to be held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance. **Abdulahdi Sheikh Awad**, director of the Syrian Democratic Institute, and HRDs **Abdalaziz Al-Khayyir**, **Iyas Ayash**, **Maher Tahan** and many others also remain missing. Some HRDs, according to the citizen group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), have been reportedly caught by Da'esh, tortured and kept in custody or killed for being “opponents of the caliphate.”

These cases and others were the main drive behind GCHR's documentation mission in late 2015 to meet with Syrian HRDs who provided their own detailed stories and suggestions for what the international community should do. Some keep working despite the hardships, but others are starting to lose hope, and they are in urgent need of support and encouragement. This report highlights three different groups of HRDs the GCHR has identified as being the most targeted in and outside Syrian borders: journalists, lawyers and humanitarian workers. This report provides a general overview of their situation, including their accounts and some recommendations they wish to deliver through this report to the international community.

## **B) Methodology**

The report's objective is to highlight the lack of response to promote and protect human rights defenders working in life-threatening situations. It focuses on three groups of HRDs: journalists, lawyers and humanitarian workers. The GCHR mission took place in the end of 2015 and incorporates a month of extensive follow-up research.

The selection of HRDs to interview depended on GCHR contacts sharing their networks, the availability of HRDs at the time and their willingness to share their testimonies with GCHR and with the public.

The interviewers were from the region and could speak Arabic, the language of the interviewees, which helped to create a sense of trust during the mission. There were 30 interviews, 20 of which could be used in this report for public audiences. Ten were private conversations contributing to a general understanding of some of the issues, and were anonymous and confidential due to a high risk of reprisals against the HRDs.

Before the interviews, the interviewees were provided with relevant information and context about the report, and gave verbal consent to the use of their information. The testimony extracts start on page six. For security reasons notebooks and offline documents were used to record testimonies, some testimonies are not included in the report, and some names have been withheld and/or changed.

## II. Human Rights Defenders

### A) Journalist HRDs

With the escalation of the conflict in Syria, there is an increased challenge to journalists exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. Today's Syrian journalists haven't all studied journalism, and many had little or no experience in journalism or documentation prior to the popular uprising that took place in March 2011. While this has not prevented them from collecting and disseminating information, a lack of experience has been one of several challenges they face, including "yellow journalism"<sup>1</sup> or sensationalism, where the striking headline is more important than accurate information. Yellow journalism has damaged the credibility of some Syrian media, with an overload of unverifiable material. For example, the use of video as evidence of human rights violations has increased when its visual impact on international audiences was seen to be significant.

While some journalists used this technique to credibly document violations, other fake videos became popular on social media. Journalists had to find ways - sometimes, with the help of international organisations such as WITNESS - to verify videos.<sup>2</sup>

Other kinds of challenges are rooted in the infrastructure of Syria's Internet, as connectivity and access are key to journalists' work. From around 3 million users in 2009, this grew to over 4 million users in 2011, almost 20% of Syria's 2011 population.<sup>3</sup> There have also been several infrastructure issues and some degree of censorship. The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) has blocked some internet use through malware, imported devices or software from international private companies mainly via two government agencies, the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE) and the Syrian Information Organisation (SIO). Several activists/bloggers and journalists were harassed and targeted based on their activities online relating to human rights (this harassment predates the conflict, with Syria appearing on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF)'s Internet Enemies List.<sup>4</sup>)

The Syrian government has used "denominational unrest" as a justification for its actions which didn't always stop at harassment, as in the case of **Bassel Khartabil**. Khartabil is a well-known developer and digital rights activist who was arrested in 2012. He is still in custody and it is strongly suspected that his detention is linked to his work in opening internet access in Syria.<sup>5</sup> There has been no information on his whereabouts since October 2015.<sup>6</sup> Apart from SEA harassment another problem is the tech expertise found in other opposition groups as well as Da'esh. There are cases where individuals are liable to be executed for "liking" a certain post, according to RBSS spokesperson **Abdel Aziz Hamza**.

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<sup>1</sup> Yellow journalism, or the yellow press, is a type of journalism that presents little or no legitimate well-researched news and instead uses eye-catching headlines to sell more newspapers. Techniques may include exaggerations of news events, scandal-mongering, or sensationalism.

<sup>2</sup> WITNESS - *See it, Film it, Change it*. WITNESS is an international organisation that trains and supports people using video in their fight for human rights <https://witness.org/>

<sup>3</sup> *The World Factbook*, Middle East, Syria - Last updated: February 11, 2016 <http://1.usa.gov/JZ2o63>

<sup>4</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Internet Enemies, Syria <http://bit.ly/1OjuwdB>

<sup>5</sup> EP, Parliamentary questions, Imprisonment of Bassel Safadi Khartabil <http://bit.ly/1QNX40y>

<sup>6</sup> Gulf Centre for Human Rights, *Syria: Disclose Whereabouts of Detained Freedom of Expression Advocate, Release Bassel Khartabil Held Unfairly since 2012* <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1099>

Another favoured tactic is to slow the Internet. Before the conflict, the Internet speed was very slow with an average 768 kbit/s download capacity. Since the conflict began it has become even slower making news harder to disseminate. In many cases bloggers and journalists have been unable to reach the international community for help or to raise awareness of incidents in the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Syria's Internet infrastructure is often too weak for journalists to be able to fully access, an obvious disadvantage that hampers their efforts, although some have been trying to find improved access from Turkey via the FSA-controlled parts of Aleppo.<sup>8</sup>

While HRDs struggle to find proper Internet channels, Da'esh manages to access faster Internet connections to glorify its acts of violence against people labelled as "infidels."

Larger challenges journalists face daily include death, kidnapping, arrest and forced disappearance. With over 93 journalists confirmed killed in Syria since 2011, other than the ones being killed in Turkey and other places around the world, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists<sup>9</sup>, Syria was the deadliest country for journalists in 2015.<sup>10</sup> Journalist **Naji Jerf** is one of those who lost their lives because of their brave work. He was shot and killed in Gaziantep, Turkey on 27 December 2015, his death said to be linked to his documentation and exposure of Da'esh's human rights violations. This kind of killing, and other arrests, especially without clear mechanisms of accountability, damages the credibility of the international community. The failure to prevent journalists being detained without charge - many in unknown prisons - hinders the sort of media work that Syria needs. Some journalists who report on violations committed by the opposition factions risk being accused of being traitors of the popular uprising and are consequently at risk from both the state and opposition.

The following section highlights some testimonies from formerly detained and currently threatened journalists and shows how necessary it is to be careful when reporting about violations and missing activists. (At the end of this report, we have included: their recommendations to the international community on how to best respond and help.)

### Journalists' Testimonies - Highlights:

The following are some excerpts from the testimonies received by GCHR from journalists:

#### **1. Maisa Saleh - Damascus**

**Maisa Saleh** lived in Damascus until the beginning of the popular uprising. She was an ophthalmologist working in a private hospital known to treat mainly the ruling class. When hospital officials heard Saleh was sympathetic to the opposition, they harassed her and eventually forced her to leave. That is when Saleh formally started her activism. She became a journalist reporting that the popular uprising was not completely Islamist. Saleh was detained by the Syrian authorities, and after her release faced further harassment in the workplace for expressing her thoughts as a journalist, even within her own media organisation. Saleh mainly talked of the challenges she faces as a woman HRD and the kind of torture women witness in government detention centres.

*"I delivered two babies during my imprisonment, one in Kafar Sousa and one in Adra. There was no medical access at all and I was told by several women that they had been raped."*

<sup>7</sup> Reporters Without Borders (for freedom of information), Internet Enemies, Syria <http://bit.ly/1OjuwdB>

<sup>8</sup> "Seeking Internet Access, Syrians Turn to Turkey's wireless Network", Al Monitor, April 14, 2015 - Mohammad Al Khatib <http://bit.ly/1ox6irj>

<sup>9</sup> "93 Journalists Killed in Syria since 1992/Motive Confirmed", CPJ, Last updated December 2015 <https://cpj.org/killed/mideast/syria/>

<sup>10</sup> "Syria, France most deadly countries for the press", CPJ, 29 December 2015

<https://cpj.org/reports/2015/12/journalists-killed-syria-france-most-deadly-countries-for-the-press.php#more>

*“During my entire imprisonment I was not allowed to see a lawyer, even when I was only taken to court once, I had no lawyer. The court was presided by the 5th judge, Abla. It was clear I’d be stopped no matter what, and I denied all charges. My family had put my name in the prisoner exchange list. I was constantly told by security that I’m in for life and I won’t be able to escape.”*

*“I escaped. I did not carry a thing while escaping. And now that my belongings and my papers are no longer with me, I can neither work in ophthalmology anymore nor can I practice my journalism work because of the constant harassment. Now what?”*

## **2. Shiyar Khalil - Damascus**

**Shiyar Khalil** started off as a journalist who participated in several protests as the popular uprising began. He then documented violations of the government in Damascus mainly, where he was arrested in a “kamine” [ambush] and was detained for two years in government detention centres where, as a Kurd, he faced sectarian abuse and torture. His testimony - which he gave GCHR only a couple of weeks after his release - mentions several torture methods used to extract confessions or to exert pressure. His main point was that detainees, especially at state detention centres, need more attention and that prison conditions should meet international standards or even basic human standards. He also called for better support to lawyers who could help detainees gain access to better protection mechanisms for HRDs who need safe haven, especially the journalists amongst them.

*“The officer then ordered one of the security officers to bring ‘Lakhdar Brahimi.’ You can imagine the surprise on my face, expecting to see the UN representative brought in. The officer came back into the room with a long green pipe, which apparently they call by that name. For two hours they beat me and when they couldn’t move well inside the small room, they took me outside and beat me in front of everyone. At one point the officer put his boot on my head and said, ‘You’re Kurdish what are you doing here, go fight for a free Kurdistan.’ I told him ‘I’m a Syrian and part of Syria and will fight for my country.’ The marks of the beatings and torture are still visible on my body.”*

*“It was a mass grave. Each prisoner sitting on one slab on the ground. Some would sing, or recite poetry. We felt we were dying, and I was the only one who was an actual activist, who “deserved” to be there. The only one who consciously and willingly was an opponent. The other 109 people had no clue.”*

*“I was made to say that we had photoshopped the number of protesters in our videos, and that we were funded by the USA. In addition, I had to say that we paid people to protest.”*

## **3. Hussein Gharir - Damascus**

**Hussein Gharir**, known as one of the three detainees of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), was a journalist and close colleague to **Hani Zitani** and **Mazen Darwish** who were all freed in August 2015. Their cases had been highlighted by the GCHR and several other organisations throughout the period of their detention. Gharir reported he experienced several torture techniques within several state detention centres, the most extreme of which was known as the “black nights” where prisoners would not be allowed to sleep for days in a row. Gharir highlights the need for greater attention on detained prisoners whether they are HRDs or not. He says many are not formally educated and - due to the severe torture - might reach a point where they might turn to Da’esh to find revenge.

*“They told us they wanted to invite us over for a coffee for 15 minutes. But it seems their time is different from ours.”*

*“There was a guard who worked every other day, and every time he would say ‘bring someone we can use to stay awake’. He would make people get down on all fours and make animal sounds. One time the person refused to make the sound of a dog, and I heard severe beating followed by silence.”*

*“Breakfast was two or three olives and one spoon of labneh for ten people. Lunch was half a cup of rice or potato; and there was no dinner. If someone got sick and collapsed, they’d say ‘it’s ok, die. Only knock if someone dies.”*

#### **4. Saef Azzam - Aleppo**

**Saef Azzam** was one of the journalists and activists selected to meet Turkish President Erdogan in January 2016 to present the challenges of Syrians in Turkey and of activists on the Turkish-Syria border. Azzam fled Syria but also faced threats within Turkey. With a severely sick son, and a constant need to work to be able to live and take care of his family, Azzam explains the struggle of a journalist who had to flee by foot and who still needs to regularly relocate due to constant intimidation and threats.

*“Da’esh had executed a 16-year-old boy after torturing him severely. He was a street seller and had been heard by a Da’esh member responding to someone who had asked for a loan by saying ‘even if the prophet came here I wouldn’t give him a loan.’ The Da’esh member found it offensive to the prophet and this resulted in the boy’s killing. We [Azzam and his colleagues in Aleppo] decided to visit his family despite knowing that their home might be watched. I did an interview with the parents and due to that I came under serious threat and had to go into hiding. This was followed by a series of kidnappings of our colleagues and we reacted by protesting in front of Da’esh offices which I filmed. This was all happening alongside the barrel bombs.”*

*“We had to go through forests in a mountain to get into Turkey. As we were walking down to the border, I heard people screaming from being beaten. The smuggler guide told us that it was nothing, and that we were fine because we had paid off the border patrol. As we were crossing the border, the Turkish military held us. They were beating everyone. They laid us down on our stomach, brought olive tree branches and started beating us severely. They electrocuted me numerous times on my sides. There were four of them. The smuggler had gotten away. What saved us was that the officer in charge came so they stopped beating us and took us to border police office. They searched us and found my press card; I thought it was a good thing at first.”*

#### **5. Feras Swaiha - Deir ez-Zour | Ar-Raqqah**

In any region controlled by Da’esh, carrying a camera puts a person at risk, “They’re terrified of cameras and documentation,” **Feras Swaiha** explained. He was a 22-year-old protester and a photographer in the first protests in Deir ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqah. He was detained several times in state detention centres in 2012, has witnessed torture and been severely tortured at the hands of Da’esh in 2014. Throughout his testimony he kept calling on the international community to monitor individuals who have been detained at Da’esh detention centres, because the torture Da’esh uses is “artfully awful” as he described it, and urges that any survivor should be properly supported. Swaiha still suffers the consequences of his arrest with Da’esh, both psychologically and physically but it hasn’t prevented him from carrying out journalism and documentation with Sound and Picture, an NGO documenting violations against civilians by all parties.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For more information: Sound and Picture, Syria, Official Website <http://sound-and-picture.com/en/>

*“All the Da’esh members I came across were local. I was held [by Da’esh] for 11 days. The first three days of my detention I was kept completely naked. The torture I endured under Da’esh was worse than during my arrest by the Syrian authorities. I still suffer from the psychological terror they subjected me to till today. Lashings, numbness, you can’t think of anything, you just feel pain. Several times, they put a knife or gun to my head and they would say things like “tomorrow you’re going to heaven.” These threats alone are violations. I was suspended from my wrists on and off for three days, they beat me with ‘Lakhdar Brahimi’ [a green pipe] on the nerve area on my shoulder which is why my arm still constantly shakes.”*

*“Since my arrival in Turkey, my situation has become somewhat stable and I’m getting treatment. The healing is very slow but there is progress with my arm. My family is still in Raqqa, and are receiving threats from Da’esh because of my work.”*

## **6. Mohammad Khoder - Deir ez-Zor**

**Mohammad Khoder** used live feeds to highlight the situation in Deir ez-Zor from 2011, which first angered the Syrian authorities and later other parties in the conflict. His testimony highlights how things happen in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor in terms of the power of local tribes, which he used at various points to get himself or colleagues out of custody but which also put him at risk of revenge by other factions such as Ahrar El-Sham [*Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant*]. In 2015, his use of a personal Internet device and his dissemination of information lead Da’esh to call him in and ask for help in return for large amounts of money. He instead left Syria and currently leads a team at Sound and Picture which publishes a magazine with comic content on Da’esh to challenge fear and the stigma they have created for themselves in the media.

*“We started doing live feeds so I was re-arrested by government forces. I was tortured severely. They would beat me with water pipes until I go numb then they would electrocute me on my genital area to make sure the numbness stops and hit me again so that I feel the pain again. My family was able to get me released through their connections a week later which caused anger towards my family.”*

*“I was summoned by Da’esh. One of them was a local, the other Tunisian. I waited for six hours while nothing happened. Then they asked me to create a logo for their channel, called Al-Furat. They offered me a lot of money. I asked them to give me three days to think which is when I escaped to Turkey with my wife and daughter. Right now we work on using comedy against Da’esh to raise awareness which has resulted in Da’esh sending us constant threats.”<sup>12</sup>*

## **7. Ahmad El Hajj Saleh - Tell Abyad/ Ar-Raqqa Governorate (Attention: graphic testimony)**

With the rise of Da’esh in Tell Abyad in 2013, anyone was liable for arrest. “If you’re not with them, you’re against them,” **Ahmad El Hajj Saleh** explained. His being one of the elected members of the local council in Tal El-Abyad made his situation even more delicate. Saleh was caught by Da’esh and accused of being an atheist, opposed to the creation of a caliphate. His extremely graphic testimony highlights the need for ending the violence Da’esh inflicts on detainees. Saleh left Syria but the psychological and physical torture scars remain, as does his work as a journalist.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

*“They [Da’esh] told us to avoid being the person killed during Ramadan, but didn’t tell us how to avoid it. They would leave the bodies of those killed in the cell with us for two days. Then they would take the swollen, bruised, dead bodies, put them in orange nylon bags, put a cement rock on the lower end to make it heavier, close up the bag from up, and dump them in the river, which caused those who drank the water from the river to become ill.”*

*“I witnessed the shooting of 14-year-old Ahmed. He was shot in the forehead, his brains splattered and the Saudi Da’esh member was watching me. I was not allowed to have any reaction on my face; I knew I’d be punished if I did.”*

*“I lost most of my humanity in there. The selfish want to survive that our instinct imposes on us, created a sense of numbness in me especially that I needed to see all the torture while captive. Once, [Ahmad pauses for a short while] they shot one of the prisoners in his eye, and the Da’esh representative got a chair, put one of its ends inside the shot eye, and sat on the chair then looked at us. I could not feel a thing back then, and if I did, I couldn’t show it.”*

#### **8. Abdul Aziz Hamza - Ar-Raqqah**

**Abdul Aziz Hamza** is a 24-year-old prominent journalist with the citizen journalism group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS). With extreme caution, Hamza told GCHR his testimony. The risk of him and others from RBSS being followed, threatened, or even kidnapped or killed wherever they are is very high. He was a biology student, who dreamed of making a career in pharmacology, but the war changed his plan and he became a spokesperson for RBSS. RBSS is a leading organisation in citizen journalism efforts documenting violations by Da’esh against civilians in Ar-Raqqah. They have won several international awards, and continue to improve their skills in documentation and other areas. They risk their lives daily, hoping that one day those responsible for the violations will be held accountable.

*“In February 2013, Ar-Raqqah was liberated; but Da’esh took over in June. I was interrogated by Da’esh four times for doing media work. In January 2014 there were battles between FSA and Da’esh which I documented. I became wanted by Da’esh, so I went into hiding for two days then escaped from Syria. In May 2014 a cleric incited against us during Friday prayers, saying we are apostates.”*

#### **9. Hammoud Al-Moussa - Ar-Raqqah**

The lives of **Hammoud Al-Moussa**’s family have been regularly threatened as a result of his work. With a daring vocal stand concerning the liberation of Raqqa he started Ar-Raqqah blog, and later joined RBSS. He left Syria because Da’ash started looking for him, but the harassment and threats are still ongoing and there is no-one to protect his family.

*“There were protests against Ahrar Al-Sham [Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant]. During the protests the militants shot towards the protesters, so we tried to talk to them; to ask them not to use force. One of the militants put an automatic rifle against my head then shot three times in the air. One of the militants who was in a car then drove right into me, I flew almost four meters. I was in the hospital for about four hours with severe bruising. The protest continued, and the militants opened fire.”*

*“In May 2015, Da’esh militants raided my father’s store, confiscated the devices in the store, arrested our neighbour who was sitting in the store and took his laptop. My father, **Mohammad Al-Moussa** who was 49 at the time, and my little brother, 13 years old, were arrested the next day at 5 am. They kept my brother in solitary confinement for 14 hours then released him. For a month and a half they kept saying they’d release my father when they were done with interrogations. Then my uncle went to ask again and he was told to check the register. He found my father’s name, with the word “executed” next to it. Several days prior to that I had been approached by a Da’esh member in Istanbul who told me that they would burn my father alive if I didn’t give them the names of three journalists in Ar-Raqqah. Five days later he called again with the same threat. Two days after the last phone call my uncle found out that my father and our neighbour had been executed. Da’esh released videos of the executions, including my father’s.”*

In December 2015, Al-Moussa’s brother, **Ahmed Mohammed Al-Moussa**, also a journalist with RBSS, was executed in Idlib by Da’esh.<sup>13</sup>

#### **10. Hazem Asaad El Hussein - Ar-Raqqah**

**Hazem Asaad El Hussein** was a peaceful protester from the beginning of 2012 and as a result of his activities he was detained at a government-led detention centre several times. Through contacts in local tribes in Ar-Raqqah he was released from custody. According to Da’esh his activities became too anti-Islamic and he was kidnapped in the middle of the city of Raqqa in 2013. Da’esh detained him in the south of Ar-Raqqah in a desert-like region, where he witnessed various atrocities. He was kept in solitary confinement and subjected many times to “shabah” [a torture technique where hands are tied behind a person’s back and suspended by rope from the ceiling]. He says he was tortured for information but kept silent until Da’esh was pressured to let him go. They made him sign an oath that he would not speak of what happened but he left Syria and lived to tell the story despite the risk.

*“Before Da’esh officially took over, they only carried out kidnappings. When I got kidnapped by Da’esh there were about 40 or 50 FSA fighters imprisoned along with me. Each one of them was placed in solitary confinement. The word “torture” there could not give the right weight to how severe things were; they imprisoned people inside water tanks. Da’esh used to create prisons in the middle of civilian buildings. Ours was a secret prison in the middle of nowhere where they would do training camps. Most Da’esh fighters I saw were Saudis and Moroccans. I heard them torturing **Dr. Ismail Homedh** who was working in humanitarian aid and who is still missing until today.”*

#### **11. Asaad Hanna - Homs**

**Asaad Hanna** left Syria after his colleague had been arrested because of their human rights work and their journalism. He moved to Turkey where he was threatened several times. Someone actually visited his house and stabbed him repeatedly. Hanna survived and continues to write articles but feels unsafe where he is and thinks there should be better protection mechanisms and more credible NGOs to protect HRDs.

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<sup>13</sup> “CPJ condemns the murder of Raqqa is being Slaughtered Silently journalist”, CPJ, December 2015, New York <https://cpj.org/2015/12/cpj-condemns-murder-of-raqqa-is-being-slaughtered-.php>

*“I was stabbed in my own house in Turkey. And had no-one to turn to and if I had to record who was the one who stabbed me, I wouldn’t know, being at threat from different Syrian individuals who do not agree with my thoughts. What makes things even more delicate is the refugee situation that does not guarantee any protection from the UN or from any other government, my mobility in and out of Syria is also a delicate issue which is accompanied by the fact that NGOs have become financial institutions that are receiving thousands of dollars, with no accountability and no follow up. Those who are working on media projects but don’t have affiliations or connections cannot find funding or recognition.”*

*“One of the main problems in Turkey is that there is no centralised authority dealing with Syrians. Even if we complain, Turkish authorities say that they receive hundreds of complaints a day and can’t do anything. Unfortunately the UN is absent as well. I applied to the UNHCR, but there still isn’t a file made for me. The process has become very corrupt. There is no protection for HRDs, legally or physically.”*

## **12. Bassam Al-Ahmed**

**Bassam Al-Ahmed** is the spokesperson of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC), where HRD **Razan Zaitouneh** worked. Al-Ahmed suggested that the way the international community has been dealing with the Syrian conflict has led to more clashes within civil society rather than bringing coherence. He noted how little experience Syrian civil society activists have and how much they need to set standards and definitions for their work.

*“HRDs inside Syria have become unwelcome by both the state and non-state actors. We saw this in the case of the Douma 4 and we see it with other detained individuals in Syrian authorities detention centres. Inside Syria, even carrying a phone camera puts you at risk in the liberated areas.”*

*“Providing support for HRDs for basic living expenses has become a challenge. People who want to stay and work despite the risks end up leaving because there is no support and/or because the procedures for applying for financial support is extremely difficult.”*

*“There is a need to identify HRDs, focusing on them, giving them training on credibility and importance of precision, what it means to be an HRD and being impartial, because there’s a lack of definition when it comes to what an HRD is within Syrian civil society.”*

## B) Lawyer HRDs

A war with a military dictatorship on one side and armed and civil fragmented opposition factions on the other means that many government institutions are severely disrupted. With the judiciary close to paralysis, lawyers calling for human rights find themselves abandoned by the system and even targeted. Lawyer HRDs find themselves torn between the need to stay - even if it means accepting to work within the system - to help detainees out of prison, or to leave and find other ways to practice their legal knowledge - mostly through documentation that might eventually be used in courts. Those who choose to stay try to use national constitutional laws to defend human rights, even in war. But some laws are so general they are abused by the Syrian authorities to keep people detained. For instance, Syria's Constitution provides for the rights to free expression (Article 38) and assembly (Article 39), due process and freedom from torture (Article 28). But under the Syrian Penal Code (mainly Articles 285 and 307), HRDs face charges such as the "weakening (of) national sentiment" and "arousing (of) sectarian or ethnic tension," which are so broad that they potentially criminalise behaviour that in normal and fair circumstances would be afforded unequivocal protection according to international law.<sup>14</sup> Syria's international treaty obligations also supposedly have superiority in domestic law. With Syria, a party to the principal international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Convention Against Torture, without any reservations, it is the state's responsibility to abide by them. But what we see are the massive killings of civilians and torture/killing of detainees.

Lawyers in Syria were targeted by the Syrian government long before the popular uprising. In 1981, **Anwar Al-Bunni**, a well-known lawyer today, was beaten, bayoneted and had his beard set on fire by pro-government militants during a military raid in Hama. That event was what inspired him to fight for more human rights and better legal systems to protect the oppressed and hold those who committed abuses accountable. Eventually his determination in calling for democratic reform and defending the oppressed was what led to his imprisonment in 2002 for two years.<sup>15</sup> With the rise of the popular movement, lawyers like Al-Bunni who protested were targeted by the Syrian authorities, the Syrian Bar Association (seen as an extension of the state), the courts, and recently even opposition groups.

Criticising Syrian law and the Syrian government, or defending critics of the government or other factions in the conflict is risky. "Exposed lawyer HRDs were persecuted and continuously harassed by intelligence entities, as well as armed groups," says **Michel Shammas**, a well-known Syrian lawyer, "In the case of the renowned lawyer **Khalil Maatouk**, the authorities deny his presence in its detention centres since 2012 in spite of the fact that several detainees in government detention centres declared they had seen him there," because, and as GCHR understood from the lawyers met, the government knows if they give information of his whereabouts there are lawyers who would try to get him out. "In the case of lawyer **Razan Zaitouneh** and her colleagues," Shammas continued, "it is claimed that they were kidnapped by opposition armed groups and until now we know nothing about their whereabouts and if they are dead or are still alive. This kind of risk is what we live with when we practice as lawyers."

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<sup>14</sup> Syrian Penal Code: Article 285: 'Anyone in Syria who, in wartime or at a time when war is expected to break out, engages in propaganda aimed at weakening national sentiment or at arousing ethnic or sectarian tension is to be punished by temporary detention'; Article 307: 'Every activity, every piece of writing, and every speech, in which what is intended is, or which results in, either firstly the arousing of sectarian or ethnic tension, or secondly the incitement of a dispute between sects and different elements making up the nation, is to be punished by imprisonment for from six months to two years and by a fine of one hundred to two hundred [Syrian pounds], and also by being prohibited from exercising [their civil rights]'.

<sup>15</sup> For further details: "Syria jails human rights activist", *BBC NEWS*, April 24, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/6587229.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6587229.stm)

Lawyers' Testimonies - Highlights:

The following are some excerpts from the testimonies received by GCHR from lawyers:

**1. Free Lawyers of Syria (FSLA) - Idlib and Aleppo**

**Zakaria Al-Hiraki, Hanaa Al-Mohammed, Ramy Alnouman and Manar Olwan** are the four main lawyers who met GCHR from FSLA. Throughout their collective testimony they expressed how hard they worked in the beginning to create a single coherent body to work together on legal matters, albeit unsuccessfully. However, they were able to create a group of lawyers no longer able to do their jobs within governmental bodies because of their opposition views, and because of harassment they received, and say they were not supported by the Syrian Bar Association. This group aimed at documenting violations in a way that can be used in court. Though they have an office in Turkey, their main operations are in Syria. The main challenges they say are the risk of getting caught by one of the various factions. For example, they reported that one of their colleagues was killed by Da'esh. They also report infrastructural challenges such as Internet access, digital security, archiving, and training of personnel inside and outside Syria.

*“As soon as we started working in 2011, we were unable to continue to work within the system and our work as lawyers stopped. As soon as we became revealed to the authorities we went underground. We knew taking cases meant both we and the client would get arrested. Lawyers who still work within the system are mostly working as brokers. You're kept or you're released based on the price you can pay and the brokerage on cases partially happened because the authorities needed the cash.”*

*“All steps we take are carefully planned. Sometimes it is better not to run campaigns on specific individuals due to the risk they may be killed.”*

**2. Anwar Al-Mhameed – Homs**

**Anwar Al-Mhameed**, a lawyer who used to live in Homs at the start of the popular uprising, would visit the field registry where he would find names of the detained. With time, figuring out names and prisons to work on certain cases got harder due to the constant monitoring of lawyers who would take up cases of opposition individuals. Eventually he was banned from even visiting the registry. Al-Mhameed also highlights how afraid the families of detainees became, with families refusing to provide documentation on their detained relative's case in the hope that this would increase their chances of release.

*“In the civil courts we'd get involved by putting in requests to get information for the families of those arrested. The authorities would answer sometimes if the person is alive; receiving no response usually meant the person was dead. The system has some loopholes though. For example, if the family of the individual arrested has money, then they can pay to get them out.”*

*“Civil society is unable to document some cases because of backlash from the opposition for focusing on anyone other than Assad. Documenting opposition crimes is very difficult. For example, in Aleppo a woman was executed by Da'esh but there was no accountability even though the case was documented. People also follow the logic of 'if the criminal is a friend or family then don't document the crime.' Another problem is that some groups will avoid doing documentation on certain cases based on the sect of the victims to feed a certain narrative.”*

*“Syrian civil society needs training on how to document war crimes in a way that it can be used as evidence in court. The problem is that there are too many centres who put out conflicting information which results in loss of credibility due to lack of cooperation.”*

### **C) Humanitarian Worker HRDs**

Before the conflict, the Syrian people had access to education, health services, clean water, food and cheap goods. With the rise of the conflict, the formal economy was disrupted by black markets and informal parallel economies. “Check-points become places where you need to buy your safety by providing certain products or a certain amount of money. The house you live in would become an asset you might need to give up someday for your own survival,” explained a Syrian refugee who fled to Lebanon in 2014. Poverty rates reached 75% by the end of 2013, signalling how far economic development in Syria had regressed.<sup>16</sup> A 2015 study showed that Syria’s total economic loss since the start of the conflict was at \$202 billion by the end of 2014, equivalent to 383 percent of the 2010 gross domestic product (GDP) of Syria.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the conflict, oil wells were seized, and agriculture severely damaged - for example wheat production went down from 4 million to 2 million tons in 2013 alone leading to the drop in bread production<sup>18</sup>; based on a study done on bakeries around Syria, bakery production is down mainly due to the lack of flour (34%), as well as security reasons and operational costs (16%). According to a November 2015 study, some areas cannot access bakeries at all such as rural Damascus where 1,298,290 individuals suffer from bread shortages. Idlib and Aleppo governorates record high numbers of people without access to bread.<sup>19</sup> Even the planting of vegetables and the production of olive oil - mostly developed in Hama and Daraa respectively - has plummeted by 60% and 40% respectively highlighting the need for more food supply in the presence of such previous self-sufficiency shortage.<sup>20</sup>

Syrians not only find themselves in the middle of an inflated economy with little money to survive, little land to invest in or products to live from, but also find their schools being bombed or used as military bases. They also see cuts in health supplies at a time where they are in dire need of them. Hospitals in Syria currently either have become inaccessible, or are destroyed, or have no more supplies to keep their work going. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) much of the Syrian people are now more prone to diseases but 58% of public hospitals are only partially functional or have closed, and 49% of primary health centres face the same situation. More than 640 health workers have been killed since the start of the conflict.<sup>21</sup>

Transporting food and medical supplies has become dangerous work. Roads that were previously safe could subsequently be threatened by snipers, or could have checkpoints whose guards will kill on the basis of the sect written on the identification card of the person trying to pass. Those hoping to travel around Syria need to try and identify safe routes, often with the help of locals and mapping systems used by WHO for instance.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “Squandering Humanity, Socioeconomic Monitoring Report on Syria”, Syrian Centre for Policy and Research, UNRWA & UNDP, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1k1bEXi>

<sup>17</sup> “Syria: Alienation and Violence, Impact of Syria Crisis Report 2014” Syrian Centre for Policy and Research, UNRWA & UNDP, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1E8TPwZ>

<sup>18</sup> “The War Economy in the Syrian conflict: The Government’s Hands-off Tactics”, Carnegie Middle East Centre, December 15, 2015 <http://ceip.org/1MxNOuK>

<sup>19</sup> “Bakeries in Syria: Assessment Report”, Assistance Coordination Unit <http://bit.ly/24e13zV>

<sup>20</sup> “The War Economy in the Syrian conflict: The Government’s Hands-off Tactics”, Carnegie Middle East Centre, December 15, 2015 <http://ceip.org/1MxNOuK>

<sup>21</sup> “Five facts on the Syrian crisis and its impact on health” Humanitarian Health Action, WHO <http://www.who.int/hac/crises/syr/releases/28january2016/en/>

<sup>22</sup> “Syrian Arab Republic: Crossing borders with life-saving support”, WHO, January 2016 <http://www.who.int/features/2016/life-saving-syria/en/>

Humanitarian worker HRDs increasingly feel the need to provide education to children whose schools were hit, or who have no access to schools anymore - these include refugees in Lebanon and Turkey. With a 50% drop in education for children in Syria, many of them have had to work, thus increasing percentages of child labour. Some others have been forced to join militia groups and use weapons to “protect their country,” or “protect their families and homes,” making them child soldiers.

According to Save the Children, up to 5.4% GDP of Syria’s post-war economy could be lost due to loss of future earnings caused by the lack of schooling.<sup>232425</sup>

Civilians in Syria’s conflict zones and those under siege need food supplies. Similarly, internally displaced people and refugees additionally need education and housing. Those injured by air-strikes and other violence need first aid and health supplies, and children who were made to leave their schools need to get the needed education. According to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), inside Syria, 12.2 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance, including more than 5.6 million children.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, as the Syrian conflict persists and the humanitarian crisis in the region worsens, humanitarian actors are looking at ways to find solutions to respond to the growing needs of affected people. Many face the risk of being caught at checkpoints, or being killed while sending aid, or even executed for helping anyone in a specific region.

### Humanitarian Workers’ Testimonies - Highlights:

The following are some excerpts from the testimonies received by GCHR from humanitarian workers:

#### **1. Keshmalek – Aleppo**

**Marcel Shehwaro** and **Ziad Khayyata** from Keshmalek worked together on eight different schools in “liberated areas” within Syria. Having faced threats from both state and non-state actors, they created the campaign “Same Shit” explaining how both the state and Da’esh are violating basic human rights and how neither differ much from each other. Keshmalek (which means checkmate) has also been creating new projects for emergency relief and remains on the ground no matter the consequences.<sup>27</sup>

*“Mustapha, one of the initiators who wanted to start a school, was killed in a [government-led] tank strike. So we started the first school in his name. The schools are for education, but also serve as a platform for cultural and artistic activities. In 2014, five schools that we initiated were targeted [by the government] with barrel bombs. Children can’t be put in this situation anymore. But education is still a basic right they need. What would happen to them if they don’t learn anything?”*

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<sup>23</sup> “Syria’s lost generation: report counts cost of collapse in education system” Kareem Shaheen, *The Guardian*, March 2015 <http://bit.ly/1xsTuFW>

<sup>24</sup> “Turkey: 400,000 Syrian Children Not in School” Human Rights Watch, November 2015 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/08/turkey-400000-syrian-children-not-school>

<sup>25</sup> Syria crisis: Education interrupted, UNHCR, 2013 <http://www.unhcr.org/52aacebf9.html>

<sup>26</sup> Syrian Arab Republic: About the Crisis, OCHA <http://bit.ly/1END1dC>

<sup>27</sup> For more information on Keshmalek, visit their official website: <http://en.keshmalek.org/>

Shewaro said, *“They [state security forces] investigated me more than 20 times and eventually I had visited all government security branches in Aleppo. Though I had church protection somehow I still got threats and my mother actually got shot in the head at a government checkpoint by the Syrian authorities. Every single one of us has a story of loss. Memories of these become a part of us, we start to know where the red lines are and it shows in how we live our daily lives, for instance each school now has an underground shelter. 5 out of 8 schools were hit by barrel bombs. We learn.”*

## **2. White Helmets - FSA regions**

In areas being targeted by airstrikes and where there are no civil defence bodies to help save survivors, the White Helmets began to act as a civil defence organisation. Before the uprising, the volunteers had different lives as salespeople, carpenters, students, teachers and doctors. These women and men have created mechanisms to save the wounded and to deliver first aid and emergency response. Their two biggest challenges are (1) not losing their volunteers in attacks and (2) finding the funding to survive.<sup>28</sup>

*“We were always faced with rebound attacks that targeted those going in to save the people. And many of the individuals working with us have had injuries and sometimes died rescuing [others].”*

## **3. Adeeb Basha – Ghouta**

**Adeeb Basha** has worked in East Ghouta with an organisation named Osus (“bases”) which aims at economic development and delivering food supplies to the people of Ghouta. Ghouta has been under siege for over three years after a chemical attack which left over a thousand people dead. He expresses deep frustration at the lack of response from the international community to what’s happening in the region. “No-one is listening or doing anything to stop the suffering,” he says. Ghouta had always been known for its agricultural richness with lands providing vegetables, fruits and cereals.<sup>29</sup> But after the chemical attack and the siege, the people struggle to live every day and need people like Basha to help facilitate access to their basic needs.

*“It’s been two years since the chemical [Sarin] attack that killed around 1500 people [on 21 August 2013]. The violator is known, and the case is very well documented. Yet there is no accountability and no appropriate reaction. In Ghouta, there are 700,000 people under siege [by pro-government forces] for the past three years; there has been no appropriate international reaction. It’s been more than one year that in Ghouta they live with no electricity. You ask me to give recommendations, but if such incidents couldn’t move the international community into action, how would my recommendations make a difference?”*

## **4. Hanane Halimah – Douma / Ghouta**

**Hanane Halimah** has been working in emergency relief with Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Syria, mainly in Damascus. Halimah accompanied them on their journeys and made sure their basic needs were provided. She has witnessed different attacks and at some point had to leave due to the constant threat of getting caught since, as she says, “Anyone with medical supplies for example, gets executed without question.”

<sup>28</sup> For more information on White Helmets visit their official website: [www.whitehelmets.org](http://www.whitehelmets.org)

<sup>29</sup> Food, Agricultural and Rural Development Policies in a Globalizing World, FAO [http://www.fao.org/farmingsystems/pdf/IFSA/Theme1\\_Food\\_Agricultural\\_Policies.pdf](http://www.fao.org/farmingsystems/pdf/IFSA/Theme1_Food_Agricultural_Policies.pdf)

*“In Douma, the government soldiers went into my aunt’s house and 14 people were killed. Due to fear of killings, people were escaping without taking anything with them. We escaped to Damascus [from Douma] where I assisted IDPs who were escaping in trucks. I had documented violations and protests earlier, so I had to be very careful not to get caught with the IDPs. I was also helping deliver aid to women and children and my activities altogether would have meant a huge risk if I were to be caught, even if I am a woman.”*

#### **5. Mohammad Taher Ghazal - Latakia**

After the death of his friend Molham, who was a humanitarian worker securing emergency relief supplies to specific regions around Latakia, **Mohammad Taher Ghazal** co-founded the NGO Molham which now reaches Syrian people in need of medical and educational emergency funds and other basic needs including fuel during the winter. They face challenges such as accessibility to camps in Turkey for instance, and even accessibility to regions within Syria since many of them (around 100 people working with Molham’s team) had to leave Syria due to the high risk they faced staying there.

*“I’m from Jableh which was the third area to protest in 2011. My brother was arrested for the humanitarian work we were doing. There were many arrests, my cousin was shot and killed because he worked with us. After my brother was released, we both became wanted for our humanitarian work by authorities so we had to leave.”*

#### **6. Mahmoud Al Taweel - Qalamoun (Attention: Graphic Content)**

**Mahmoud Al Taweel** is a humanitarian worker who witnessed the chemical attack on Eastern Ghouta.

He was one of the volunteers who helped survivors out of the rubble and buried the dead in proper graves. His revolutionary thoughts lead to his detention at government centres at the very beginning of the popular uprising and after his release he continued with his humanitarian work in and outside Syria.

*“When I first arrived at Kfar Sousa [government detention] I was taken to what is known as the ‘welcome area.’ There were 35 prisoners in a yard, surrounded by approximately 20 guards. All of us had our arms and legs tied then hosed down with water and beaten. There was a young boy standing behind me. He was taken by the guards and raped by four of them in front of me. We were kept there and tortured for about half a day. I was then given number 36 and was told that my name was no longer Mahmoud.”*

*“Officer Hafez Makhoulf subjected me to 36 hours of continuous interrogation. I was placed under ‘arbitrary order,’ which means the torturer will not be held accountable if I am killed. I was interrogated on five floors of the building. I was subjected to torture four or five times a day, every day.”*

*“When the calamity was done [referring to the chemical attack in Ghouta], the area was almost completely dead. We started putting ice on the dead bodies. And we started thinking to ourselves, what will we do with all these bodies? Even if there were fridges to keep them from decaying, the fridges would not be enough to fit them all.”*

### **III. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The extracts of the testimonies present different voices, but there is consensus about the importance of human rights - primarily the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly and most importantly the right to live.

Syrian HRDs who have responded to the desperate needs of people in the country can't keep on working without a certain amount of support whether it be financial, psychological or physical. Which is why it is important to listen to their own recommendations. GCHR includes their calls unedited and unvarnished as follows:

#### *i) On detained HRDs, prison conditions and due process:*

1. Keeping records, avoiding disappearances and sending fact-finding missions to detect torture: the international community should know what happens to HRDs while they're detained - the details of torture, the names of the prisons, the reasons behind imprisonment and the ways to get them out. Because without these details, they wouldn't be able to support HRDs properly.
2. Ensuring that detention facilities are located in safe weapons-free zones: prisons are sometimes in the middle of battlegrounds; thus missiles and/or violence cause deaths amongst the prisoners especially in the case of Adra prison. These events, mainly based on the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) should not happen anymore.
3. Separating political prisoners from criminal prisoners: putting HRDs with other prisoners sometimes causes attacks on them given their non-violent approach. There should be better prison conditions for HRDs; instead, prison conditions are worse for them because of their work.
4. Putting in place a mechanism to support the families of imprisoned HRDs: whether to find information about the prisoners to know if their family member is alive or dead. One suggestion is by creating and keeping records of the detainees to be released by the authorities. If they are found alive there should be funding to send legal help to the imprisoned HRDs. The government charges people with terrorism and since there is no requirement for the presence of international observers to assure due process, the cases of detained HRDs fall through the cracks.
5. Freeing HRDs in Syria: HRDs should be released and not forgotten. Many names tend to be forgotten and this shouldn't happen. There should also be a mechanism or a safe haven for the HRDs who manage to escape but who are still in danger.
6. Giving the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to the prisons: though they visited twice Adra prison, the prisoners were afraid of retribution so they didn't speak thus they could not have any kind of protection. There should be a more studied mechanism for prison visits by ICRC.

***ii) On humanitarian and emergency response:***

7. Addressing the root causes of the refugee crises: people are talking about the refugee crisis and how to deal with the outflow of refugees without focusing on the main cause behind that crisis. Find the main cause and try to mitigate the main cause rather than the effect.
8. Improving the situation of refugees inside camps: many of those camps' living conditions are shameful and do not comply with basic human standards.
9. Improving and increasing aid-focused support to assist humanitarian efforts: and those offering aid must make serious efforts to ensure it is getting directly to all those in need, not just those under government control.
10. Strategising about the funding aid and Syrian emergency response: the arbitrary nature of the funding is creating chaos within Syrian civil society. There is a need for coordination between funders to use the funding as a means of getting Syrian civil society to coordinate and cooperate together rather than compete. Also, governments/groups doing training/funding should find a way to identify legitimate, credible NGOs and HRDs to fund.
11. Considering a high level of careful selection and security measures when conducting trainings for Syrian HRDs: when providing training to Syrian HRDs, some invitees turn out to be intelligence or infiltrators.
12. Ensuring transparency about the International NGOs' mechanisms of support: however there still is an issue with that mechanism. Many times we spend time going back and forth for months, then we get nothing from them. There should be better management in dealing with cases when it comes to health, education, relocation, emergency response, safety, etc...

***iii) On the international community's pressure points:***

13. The international community should work on lifting the sieges from regions which need humanitarian aid and which have had no access to food, electricity, and basic human needs for months and years.
14. The international community should have a stronger response; there is a weak response to the Syrian situation, even in documented cases. No conflict has ever been as documented as the Syrian conflict, yet accountability seems to be too far to reach.
15. The international community should understand that the main threat is not only Da'esh nor only the government nor only one counterpart. HRDs are under threat by both state and non-state actors.
16. Air strikes by the government on civilians should not be excused. There should be a no-fly zone to help facilitate the work of humanitarian workers, especially the ones trying to provide education for young kids in school. Airstrikes have been the worst situation and humanitarian workers can't set up anything as long as planes are still flying.

17. The focus of the international community should not only be on HRDs, but on freeing all arbitrarily detained political prisoners.

### *UN peace talks*

If the UN peace talks are successfully able to help end the war, GCHR also takes this chance to reiterate the main recommendations from the resolution reached as a result of the talks:

“12. *Calls on* the parties to immediately allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria by most direct routes, allow immediate, humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need, in particular in all besieged and hard-to-reach areas, release any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children, *calls on* ISSG states to use their influence immediately to these ends, and *demands* the full implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and any other applicable resolutions;

“13. *Demands* that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment, *welcomes* the commitment by the ISSG (International Syria Support Group) to press the parties in this regard, and *further demands* that all parties immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable.”

### *Furthermore, GCHR calls for the following recommendations:*

1. The work and efforts of Syrian human rights defenders in and outside Syria should be respected and their freedom to exercise their rights should be guaranteed without fear of reprisal or retribution.
2. Violence against HRDs and other civilians during the ongoing war should be stopped, and the protection of civilians should be guaranteed under international humanitarian law.
3. Negotiations amongst the different factions should be started as soon as possible, and human rights defenders should be taken mostly into account when discussing protection and safety.
4. All detained human rights defenders should be freed and should have guaranteed safety.
5. Conduct immediately an impartial and thorough investigation into all crimes committed against human rights defenders, with a view to bring those responsible to justice in line with local laws and international standards.
6. Make the work of the UNHCR more effective to meet the needs and demands of the Syrian people including human rights defenders, who were forced to flee their own country.