

Public Statement

The Law Society of Upper Canada Expresses Grave Concerns about the Abduction of Human Rights Lawyer Razan Zaitouneh

Toronto – The Law Society of Upper Canada is gravely concerned about the abduction of human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh in Syria.

Reliable reports indicate that on December 9, 2013, award-winning human rights lawyer and writer, Razan Zaitouneh, along with her husband, Wa'el Hamada, and two colleagues, Nazem Hamadi and Samira Khalil, was abducted by unknown individuals from a joint office of the Violations Documentation Centre (VDC) and the Local Development and Small Projects Support (LDSPS) in the Damascus suburb of Douma. (Douma is located in Eastern Ghouta, an area under the control of a number of armed opposition groups that is being besieged by government forces.)

The VDC is an independent non-governmental organization that documents human rights abuses committed by the Syrian government. The LDSPS provides humanitarian assistance.

Razan Zaitouneh has won several awards for her human rights work, including the 2013 International Women of Courage Award and the 2011 Sakhorov Prize for Freedom of Thought. She largely defends political prisoners. Razan Zaitouneh is a co-founder of both the VDC and the LDSPS.

According to reports, in 2011, Razan Zaitouneh was forced into hiding after receiving threats from the Syrian authorities. In recent months, she has received threats from at least one armed opposition group in Eastern Ghouta. Reports indicate that the abduction of Razan Zaitouneh and her colleagues is linked to their human rights work.

The Law Society is deeply concerned about situations where lawyers who work for the protection and respect of human rights are themselves targeted for exercising their freedoms and rights under international law. Article 16 of the *United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers* states that “governments shall ensure that lawyers are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; are able to travel and to consult with their clients freely; and shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards and ethics.”

Therefore, the Law Society of Upper Canada calls on the Syrian authorities to:

- investigate the disappearance of Razan Zaitouneh and her colleagues and secure their immediate release;
- guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Razan Zaitouneh and her colleagues;
- put an end to all acts of harassment and intimidation against Razan Zaitouneh and other human rights defenders in Syria;
- ensure that all lawyers can carry out their peaceful and legitimate activities without fear of physical violence or other human rights violations; and
- ensure in all circumstances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments.

The Law Society of Upper Canada is the governing body for over 46,200 lawyers and 6,000 paralegals in the Province of Ontario, Canada, and the Treasurer is the head of the Law Society. The mandate of the Law Society is to govern the legal profession in the public interest by upholding the independence, integrity and honour of the legal profession for the purpose of advancing the cause of justice and the rule of law.

The Law Society urges the legal community to intervene in support of members of the legal profession in Syria in their effort to advance the respect of human rights and to promote the rule of law.

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