

2022

ANNUAL

REPORT



Table of content

Huquqyat Public Statement	3
Brief history of Huquqyat	4
Our Vision	5
Our Mission	5
Our Strategic Approach	5
Our Structure and membership model	6
Huquqyat work in 2022	7
Community building	7-8
Learning Together	8-9
Investigation	9-10
Advocacy	10-11
The Year Ahead - Priorities for 2023-2024	11-13

Huquqyat Public Statement

After more than a decade of peaceful revolution, women in Syria continue their daily struggle, persistently demanding basic rights despite numerous challenges and barriers under a dictatorship.

More than ever, a feminist network that brings together and connects women in this struggle—a space previously non-existent for Syrian women legal practitioners, who have been ruled by a dictatorship stripping them of their rights for over 50 years—is needed.

Across the globe as well, women are engaged in ongoing struggles for their fundamental rights. In Afghanistan, women face restrictions that limit their access to public spaces, education, and opportunities in public offices and the judiciary. Women in Iran are at the forefront of a revolutionary movement, bravely challenging a repressive dictatorship that subjects them to oppression and violence. We are still living in a time where women are used as weapons of war, where in many countries their “honor” is still recognized by law as legitimate grounds for their killings, and their bodies are still subjected to laws set by men in power.

Huquqyat is creating a space, unbounded by geographies, that aims to work together with women challenging daily injustices in Syria and to increase the participation of self-identifying women in prosecuting war crimes and crimes against humanity within a transformative justice framework.

At Huquqyat, we are inspired by our members' commitment to serving their communities, and to in certain cases choosing to risk their lives and security for a better world and a more just Syria. Being a part of this group of people is humbling. To our members, and to all like-minded women, organisations, advisors, partners and donors who have supported us in planting the seeds for a strong feminist community, we offer our sincere gratitude in our capacity as your dedicated board. Thank you for continuously inspiring and trusting us.

Huquqyat: a brief history and overview

“Huquqyat” is an Arabic word indicating the feminine plural form of lawyers, legal practitioners, or rights activists. Rooted in this concept, Huquqyat as an organisation gathers and builds a community of self-identifying women lawyers and legal practitioners who believe in the transformative power of justice and aim to see forward inclusive and just accountability processes in and related to Syria.

Huquqyat was established in 2020 after its founders met at several legal training sessions across the world. They were brought together by the mutual agreement that, although vital, these trainings—and the legal field more generally—consistently lacked a nuanced gender perspective on how discussed and pursued accountability processes related to Syria impacted and included women.

As with many other fields, the legal profession has throughout history been dominated by men. In Syria, professional and social barriers inhibited women from equal participation in the justice and accountability fields, an inequity that was in some ways further exacerbated during the conflict. It is therefore not surprising that when accountability efforts related to crimes committed in the Syrian context began to emerge outside of the country, particularly in Europe, male-led Syrian organisations were better prepared to influence and lead these processes. The inclusion of Syrian voices leading legal investigations and driving proceedings was a critical and welcome development; however, the largely male-dominated environment had rendered less visible crimes more likely to be committed against women and marginalized communities—and their particular experiences of these crimes—with the occasional exception of sexual and gender-based violence to which women’s experience of violence is all too often reduced. Huquqyat grew out of the understanding that Syrian women legal practitioners must be better supported to pursue and lead accountability efforts for crimes committed during the conflict in Syria.

In line with its vision of equal representation and collective participation, Huquqyat was created as a membership-based organisation with a horizontal governance structure enabling all members to shape the organisation and its work. One year since its official establishment, Huquqyat includes 18 members based in Syria, Europe, and the United States, all carrying diverse backgrounds as lawyers, judges, scholars, and activists. Huquqyat members commit to a horizontal organisational structure dependent on self-driven membership policies, and to fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and respect for each other’s voices, perspectives, and experiences as they continue to grow and shape Huquqyat’s work across countries and continents.

Our vision

Huquqyat envisions a world where perpetrators of crimes committed in Syria since 2011 are held accountable. Huquqyat thrives to bring transformative change to justice and accountability.

Our mission

Our mission is to promote the meaningful participation of Syrian women lawyers and legal practitioners in legal accountability proceedings in Syria and for transformative justice frameworks to be adopted.

Our Strategic approach

Huquqyat strives to build transformative justice strategies for Syria that aim not only to pursue justice for specific harms from a gender-lens but also to recognise and tackle forms of structural violence underpinning gender inequality. Huquqyat works to build gender-transformative cases, research, and advocacy strategies aiming to encourage investigative authorities, courts, and other actors in the accountability field to stay attuned to the myriad ways in which women are affected by violence and conflict—and subsequently included in accountability efforts, throughout legal proceedings. Huquqyat recognizes that certain crimes disproportionately affect individuals based on their gender and other parts of their identity and that analysis of these factors is crucial for comprehensive understanding and an effective response. It therefore aims to investigate cases with key gender or other identity issues that are not prioritised by other organisations and prosecutorial authorities currently leading justice and accountability efforts, hoping to highlight larger and more complex patterns of crimes focusing on the differential ways in which women are affected by violence and war.

Huquqyat seeks to challenge the traditional or often extractive justice paradigm that often re-traumatizes survivors and neglects their agency, working based on a survivor-centred approach to conduct investigations, research, and advocacy with sensitivity, empathy, and respect for survivors' rights and preferences. This involves actively engaging survivors in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices and opinions on remedies and redress are heard, and providing support services to address their physical, psychological, and social needs. It also involves the broader engagement of affected communities, such as community outreach activities focused on identifying witnesses or seeking input from the early stages of any intervention, facilitating ownership of the justice-seeking process.

Huquqyat's investigations and survivor-centred approaches are interdisciplinary and therefore involve collaboration with various stakeholders, including legal experts, psychologists, social workers, and community organisations. As a key part of its work, Huquqyat trains and supports Syrian women lawyers and legal practitioners to contribute to and lead such international investigations and accountability proceedings.

Our structure and membership model

As a membership-based organisation, Huquqyat currently consists of 18 members who participate in the organisation's work on a voluntary basis. The members are the main drivers as well as direct stakeholders of the organisation, and through a horizontal decision-making structure, they are responsible for leading and developing the organisation's work.

The Board of Directors is the governing body of our organisation, holding legal and financial compliance responsibilities as well as a governance and leadership role. According to the Articles of Association, the Board comprises three Huquqyat members elected by the general membership by majority vote and changing every three years.

Huquqyat is committed to creating a safe and welcoming space where all members feel comfortable and supported, ensuring that every member is included and valued and encouraged to share their resources and expertise, ideas, and feedback with other members. Our members are situated in different countries around the world. However, with a shared leadership structure, we can bridge the physical distance and create a united community that comes together to discuss salient issues in the legal field and create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all members, regardless of location. Members also have access to the organisation's resources, including bespoke technical training/s in Arabic, peer-to-peer mentorship, and networking opportunities. Additionally, Huquqyat provides members with access to tailored support to help them design, fund and kick-start their own projects under the organisation's umbrella.

Huquqyat's work in 2022

2022 was the first year of Huquqyat's operations since its establishment in November 2021. During this initial phase, Huquqyat has been working on establishing and developing organisational documents and policies, developing the structure, identity, and culture of the organisation as well as laying the ground to start its first activities.

In 2022, members of Huquqyat came together forming committees to develop work pillars. Huquqyat's achievements in 2022 underline its dedication to responsible and ethical practices, fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and respect.

The impact of Huquqyat's organizational building efforts, including forming committees and developing policies and procedures are significant for the organization and its mission by relying and growing on its members' knowledge, skills, and expertise and involving them in the development of organizational policies and procedures.

Huquqyat's members formed three main committees: 1) a **Membership Committee** to explore and address how membership would function, 2) a **Funding Committee** to work on Huquqyat's financial sustainability, and 3) a **Training Committee** responsible for organizing relevant trainings and workshops to help members connect and develop skills needed for the management of the organisation and its growth. The establishment of these committees, each with its specific responsibilities, leadership and members, allowed Huquqyat to focus on these critical areas of development while remaining inclusive and operating in a transparent and accountable manner. In addition to work conducted across these three committees, full membership meetings were held monthly to ensure transparency and feedback and encourage a participatory approach to decision-making.

Community Building

Key to Huquqyat's first year was the intentional creation of a community among its new membership base, building the foundation for a safe and trusted platform to meet and strategize about their work and the growth of the organisation. Huquqyat aims to foster a space for expression, self- and collective care, participation, and growth of leadership skills where members can also reflect its vision and values in the manner and style of their work. Huquqyat created a code of conduct outlining the organisation's expectations for behaviour, including guidelines on communication, respect, and inclusion.

The Membership Committee plays a central role in the growth and sustainability of our community and in ensuring that all members feel welcome and included. The Membership Committee achieved several milestones towards the end of 2022, including successfully

strengthening our membership base and providing one-to-one support to members wishing to engage more actively with or participate in Huquqyat's activities. The Committee has also welcomed and provided coaching to new members, walking them through our vision and work methods.

Learning together

In 2022, Huquqyat focused on strengthening its membership leadership model and developing internal skills to ensure the implementation of its mission and vision. The objective of the training series was to promote interaction and knowledge-sharing among members, fostering a sense of community within the organization. A dedicated committee, formed by 6 members was formed to gauge members' needs and interests and design a training program that would promote the adoption of non-hierarchical and participatory approaches, the independence of decision-making within committees and working groups as well as knowledge sharing mechanisms and tools.

The Training Committee designed, based on members' needs, the following training sessions:

1. Teamwork and teambuilding (7th of May 2022): An experienced Syrian leader supported members in completing a SWOT analysis designed to identify core strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the work of Huquqyat and working as individual members and as a group within a membership-based organisation as well as identifying members' roles and responsibilities within the organisation.
2. Feminist leadership and Huquqyat's model (4th of June 2022): The session, focused on feminist leadership as a process and practice, aimed to discuss how to share and learn and empower one another. The training enabled members to build alternative power structures that are non-patriarchal and non-hierarchical, while accounting for the challenges and complexities of collective leadership and keeping a structure that enables decision-making and a clear mandate.
3. Non-violent communication (2nd of July 2022): A non-violent communication expert introduced members to the principles of nonviolent communication and a practical exercise on expressing feelings, translating feelings into needs, making a clear and feasible request as well as how to practise empathetic listening. The training sought to enable members to gain a more in-depth understanding of each other's triggers, respect them and provide tools to share feelings, frustrations, suggestions and even disappointments in Huquqyat's community.
4. Conflict management and CRM (6th of August 2022): This session built on the outcomes of the non-violent communication session to discuss the risks, causes, and signs of violent communication to create safe, effective and practical conflict management tools, both between members and externally. Huquqyat worked with members to ensure constructive ways tailored towards the growth of the other and the community we work within are designed and integrated into Huquqyat's grievance response mechanisms and

ensure that appropriate support is available to members involved in violent or aggressive incidents (CRM).

5. Strategic Mapping (3rd of September 2022): This session was held to discuss the concept of membership organisation and reviewing Huquqyat's mission and vision. Following the feedback on the first four sessions and bilateral discussions with members, it was decided to include a more in-depth discussion on the difference between members and beneficiaries and to allocate sufficient time to discuss the current mission and vision and any needed changes in the light of the work done over the past 10 months.
6. Psychosocial support (PSS) workshops (1st of October and 8th of October 2022): These sessions provided a safe and supportive space for members to discuss and learn about mental health, coping strategies, and self-care practices. The workshops aimed to equip members with the necessary tools to manage stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges that may arise in their personal and professional lives. Members learnt how to establish self-care and deal with burnout as well as gaining a better understanding of the impact of secondary trauma and survivors' guilt in investigators' wellbeing.
7. Internal open discussion (5th of November 2022): Members felt the need to have an open discussion on how the organization would address LGBTQ+ issues. Members discussed Huquqyat's role in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and carrying out targeted investigations on human rights violations and war crimes committed against LGBTQ+ persons and communities in Syria
8. A digital security training: A crucial component of Huquqyat's 2022 training program, the digital security training was held over two days, the training was designed to address the increasing risks associated with working in or adjacent to conflict zones or with individuals in these regions, where personal devices are often used for work purposes, and the likelihood of device seizure and data leakage is higher. The training helped Huquqyat's members to improve their digital security practices, making them more equipped to work in challenging environments and to protect themselves, their contacts and communities, and the organisation.

Active participation and shared leadership allowed members to claim ownership over their own organisation and take shared and collective responsibility over the work it does and the ways in which the projects are realised. Within Huquqyat, the very concept of membership-based organisation was a new concept to most members. The training provided an opportunity for members to discuss topics central to Huquqyat's organisation and work and strengthen members' leadership skills within the organisation and outside.

Investigations

The establishment of Huquqyat grew naturally out of the independent investigation-related activities conducted by its founding members. In 2022, as part of Huquqyat, their work resulted in the development of case files documenting crimes committed during the Syrian regime's 2014

siege in the South of Damascus, which were instrumental in an ongoing investigation led by the Dutch war crime unit. In cooperation with CJA, the team carried out a specific investigation into the events referred to by civilians as the “Ali Al-Wahsh” massacre of 5 January 2014. The findings of the Huquqyat team were also submitted to the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM).

In the context of these investigations, Huquqyat members worked to develop a gender-sensitive approach, focusing a specific lens on the underlying gender dynamics as well as impacts of crimes investigated. This methodology involves a consideration of how gender intersects with other aspects of their identities, such as religion, ethnicity to shape the experiences of survivors, and a survivor-centred approach that aimed to place survivors and their wishes at the forefront of the investigative process and prioritized their well-being, dignity, and empowerment. Huquqyat members and legal investigators, Mariana Karkoutly and Leila Sibai, discussed these methodologies in a “Syria Trial” [podcast](#) on the topic of bearing witness and justice during such investigations, which highlighted the perspectives of “legal practitioners who put careful consideration for witnesses at the heart of the case building work that they do.”

Advocacy

Based on a needs assessment conducted by the Advocacy Committee, Huquqyat formed its first advocacy action plan, which included short, medium, and long-term objectives as well as guidelines to ensure equal opportunities for all members to attend trainings, participate in public events, and represent the organisation externally. The Advocacy Committee developed advocacy guidelines and a protocol for reviewing and approving public statements and open letters to ensure all members have equal opportunities to participate in advocacy efforts.

Advocacy conducted by Huquqyat members 2022 and supported by the Advocacy Committee included:

March 15, 2022: United Nations Human Rights Council briefing on Syria

Mariana Karkoutly, co-founder of Huquqyat, was invited as a speaker at the UN Human Rights Council’s informal briefing to discuss human rights violations in Syria. Attendees included experts, lawyers, and human rights activists, who discussed various topics such as military courts, international humanitarian aid, forced starvation, freedom of religion and expression, child protection, and discrimination against women. She offered expert opinions on the topics discussed and answered questions from committee members.

April 2022: UNSC Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict

Huquqyat co-founder Mariana Karkoutly was invited to the thematic Debate on accountability as prevention in ending cycles of sexual violence in conflict at the United Nations Security Council

as a civil society representative from Syria. In her [speech](#), she highlighted the importance of accountability efforts regarding war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.

May 2022: Brussels VI EU Pledging Conference

Huquqyat co-founder Leila Sibai spoke at a side event for the Brussels VI conference, in a panel entitled “*The Manifold Impacts of Enforced Disappearance in Syria*.” Her intervention shed light on the legal challenges faced by families of the disappeared in Syria, such as difficulties in registering death and other administrative hurdles posing far-reaching consequences on property, custody, marriage, and inheritance issues.

5-6 October 2022: Legal Action Worldwide conference

Huquqyat members, Sawsan Naasani, Shaza Kilo and Rasha, participated in a Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) conference on *Reclaiming Dignity: Supporting a Survivor-led Justice Movement in Syria*, held from 5-6 October in Paris, France. They provided input and signed onto a subsequent Action Plan outlining demands to address and prevent sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian context with the interests of survivors at the forefront.

6-7 October 2022: Syrian Women Leading the Change conference

Several Huquqyat members attended a Vienna [convening](#) bringing together numerous Syrian activists and researchers from all over Europe and Syria to exchange their ideas and experiences. Huquqyat member Samar al-Bardan was one of the curators of this gathering. A 6 October panel discussion, “Syrian Women Leading the Change,” was the prelude to the network conference, “Syrian Women in Europe Building the Future,” which took place the following day.

October 2022: Civil Rights Defenders conference

Civil Rights Defenders’ bi-annual event “Defenders Days,” brought together human rights defenders from around the world to share their experiences, build networks, and enhance their work promoting human rights globally. Huquqyat members and co-founders Mariana Karkoutly and Leila Sibai participated in various workshops on criminal investigations, organisational and community-building, and psycho-social support and mental health, exchanging knowledge and expertise regarding their investigatory work with actors from different contexts.

The Year Ahead – Priorities for 2023-2024

Now that the internal structure has been consolidated and committees are able to work independently, Huquqyat is planning to focus on developing strategically towards achieving its long-term objectives.

Alongside the start of a major investigation on the crime of starvation, which will see 5 members coming together and starting this project, in 2023-2024 the focus is to:

- Finalise Huquqyat's 3-years strategy
 - After having identified the main focus areas of Huquqyat's work, members will work together to design a full-fledged 3-year strategy that will guide the organization's work between 2023 and 2025.
- Development of an Advocacy strategy and design of an Advocacy Action Plan based on the findings of the Advocacy Strategy prepared in 2023.
- Fundraising and sustainability
 - Sustainability remains a main concern at this stage, as it is for many Syrian women-led organizations today. Funding for criminal accountability in Syria and/or for feminist organizations have been progressively decreasing with major donors prioritising larger and more established organisations for their projects. This has left newly funded initiatives competing between themselves for survival, rather than collaborating and strategising together. Most funding reaching Syria comes in the form of large project grants given to national governments or international NGOs. They are often focused on short-term emergency response and susceptible to swift changes due to shifting donors' political agenda. Organizations such as Huquqyat are put under increasing pressure to meet donor agendas and showcase long-term impact through narrow projects implemented over a few months, which does not allow for fostering collaborations with other organizations. WILPF core support during this phase will significantly help in reducing the pressure on Huquqyat's fundraising plans until fully established and have capacity to obtain and manage less flexible funding. Such stability would ensure the continued operations of Huquqyat while providing time and capacity for Huquqyat to grow strategically.
- Continued support to our membership
 - This will include strengthening our ability to support current members and help them grow professionally, including preparing tailored technical and practical training in Arabic, as well as peer-to-peer mentorship and networking opportunities, that will support members in successfully achieving their professional aspirations.
 - Support to the Membership Committee in reaching out to like-minded lawyers and legal practitioners interested in joining the organization and providing coaching and onboarding to new members.
 - Outreach and support for our members inside Syria.
 - Huquqyat members inside Syria have expressed the interest in starting to implement a project in North-West Syria by providing pro-bono legal aid to women in the area, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location: By providing legal support centers and pro-bono services, the project aims to address the disparities in accessing legal assistance faced by women in the region. Part of the increased time

capacity of Huquqyat's staff will be allocated to actively mapping possible donors and fundraising for this project.