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ANNUAL

REPORT



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Board of directors statement

Huquqyat was first established due to the need for a network of Syrian women lawyers, legal practitioners and others who work in the Syrian context. After two years since Huquqyat was established, we are grateful and happy to be part of an inspiring group of women jurists who work side by side to challenge daily injustice in Syria and beyond. A group that functions with love and respect.

We are aware that we are working in a difficult time full of significant challenges that defy all international laws and legislations protecting human rights. We know that we are carrying our work within a time where Syrian women and men face daily acts of racism and risks of deportation by neighboring countries. We are still working at a time where civilians are being killed and subjected to siege, starvation and genocide in Gaza. Nevertheless, we will continue our efforts towards justice, emphasizing the importance of holding all perpetrators accountable, and combating impunity.

We are inspired by the commitment of Huquqyat members in serving their communities, and we are humbled by their choice to risk their lives and safety in some cases for a better world in general and justice to prevail in Syria in particular. We are extremely grateful to our members, all women with like-minded visions, organizations, women legal counselors, partners and donors who have supported us in growing a strong feminist community. We thank them all for their continued support and trust in Huquqyat.

We hope that we were able to leave an added value alongside the inspiring efforts done by Syrian women and men around the world, and to the efforts of human rights defenders who continue their daily struggle to demand rights to freedom, justice and dignity.

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 organization 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 training—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 organizations 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 organization with a horizontal governance structure enabling all members to shape the organization 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 organizational 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 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 prioritized by other organizations 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-centered 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-centered approaches are interdisciplinary and therefore involve collaboration with various stakeholders, including legal experts, psychologists, social workers, and community organizations. 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 organization, Huquqyat currently consists of 18 members who participate in the organization's work on a voluntary basis. The members are the main drivers as well as direct stakeholders of the organization, and through a horizontal decision-making structure, they are responsible for leading and developing the organization's work.

The Board of Directors is the governing body of our organization, 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 organization'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 organization's umbrella.

Huquqyat activities 2023

Huquqyat continued to implement its organizational plan in 2023 to achieve its goal of altering justice tracks to be more inclusive of the several ways in which women are exposed to and affected by international crimes. As a result, Huquqyat adopted a gender-sensitive approach during investigations and case building, research, and advocacy. Additionally, Huquqyat started new projects aiming towards raising visibility of its members' expertise and developing the organization's digital security system. Huquqyat also held its launching event in early 2023, followed by the organization's first in-person annual convening for its members in Berlin, Germany by the end of 2023.

1. Investigations and case building

Huquqyat was established after the independent criminal investigation done by a couple of Huquqyat's founding members. In 2022, the independent criminal investigation led to the development of case files of crimes committed during the Syrian regime's siege of the southern Damascus area in 2014.

Huquqyat also worked to develop a gender-sensitive approach in the context of these investigations, focusing on the underlying gender dynamics as well as the impacts of the crimes investigated on members of local communities. Including the gender-sensitive approach in the investigation's methodology considers how gender can intersect with other identity aspects such as religion and ethnicity to shape the experiences of survivors. It also fed in developing a survivor-centered approach that includes survivors in the core of the investigation process through prioritizing their wellbeing, dignity and empowerment.

- **Ali Al-Wahsh investigation**

Initiated in June 2020 with the guidance and support of Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), two Huquqyat members and legal investigators embarked on the Ali Al-Wahsh investigation. Originally part of a broader inquiry into violations against civilians during the siege of South Damascus, the investigation was opened based on accounts from interviewees about the scale and gravity of events in January 2014 at the checkpoint.

Witnesses were only able to capture limited information of the events due to the reported confiscation of personal belongings, including phones, at the checkpoint. Nonetheless, the investigators were able to interview individuals present at or near the checkpoint who would be able to provide crucial firsthand accounts of the incident. The investigation team also interviewed affected families and those turned away at the checkpoint.

The investigation focused on events on January 5, 2014, around a checkpoint or crossing known to residents as Ali al-Wahash. Besieged residents in South Damascus converged on the site upon hearing rumors that the crossing would be opened to civilians hoping to leave.

Interviewees claimed that armed forces believed to be affiliated with pro-government militias were present at the checkpoint. Interviewees also described those in control as having confiscated IDs and belongings from those in the crowd and separating men from women, children, and the elderly. Some interviewees described arbitrary detentions and transporting of men away from the area. The whereabouts of some men who disappeared at or near the checkpoint remain unknown.

With the support of Mnemonic (Syrian Archive), Huquqyat continued to pursue information that could lead to legal accountability for perpetrators, and submitted the investigation's findings with in-depth analysis to various European prosecutors, war crimes units, and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM).

- **Beit Sahm investigation**

The Beit Sahm investigation came as a second part of the original investigation that commenced in June 2020 with the guidance and support of (CJA), where two Huquqyat members and legal investigators investigated the incident of Beit Sahm (called "Beit Sahm massacre" by locals). As part of a broader inquiry into violations against civilians during the siege of South Damascus, the investigation was developed according to witness interviews, where 6 (six) testimonies were documented regarding the incidents of Beit Sahm in 18/12/2013 on Beit Sahm checkpoint during the siege. Additionally, investigators analyzed audio-visual materials obtained from open and closed sources. The investigation's findings were submitted with an in-depth analysis to several European prosecutors, war crimes units, and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), where the submission was integral to their structural investigations as well.

- **Investigation into an ISIS member for crimes committed in south Damascus area during the siege**

The third part of the original investigation that commenced in June 2020 with the guidance and support of (CJA) included an investigation of crimes committed by an ISIS member in South Damascus area during the siege. Witness testimonies and an in-depth analysis of open-source materials were submitted by two Huquqyat members and legal investigators to a European war crime unit who opened the proceedings. The defendant is currently on trial and the case results will be shared as soon as they are released.

2. Research

- **Preliminary paper: “The crime of enforced disappearance in Syria, challenges and obstacles”**

Huquqyat members have worked on a preliminary paper related to enforced disappearance in Syria as a crime and its extended effects on the disappeared, their families, and society as a whole. The paper was created upon researching the crime of enforced disappearance and the possibility of including such crime in the indictments of international crimes committed in Syria before the national courts that apply the principle of Universal Jurisdiction. The paper’s methodology depended on survivors and families of victims, where priority was given to their perspectives, experiences, and opinions on the possibility of prosecuting perpetrators of enforced disappearance before the national courts of European countries that apply Universal Jurisdiction to their laws. Interviews with survivors and families of victims also included collecting their legal inquiries and questions regarding the crime of enforced disappearance, which in return was assessed legally by the research team to come out with suggestions and recommendations.

The team’s general research included the absence of international will to reach a political solution considering that the Syrian revolution entered its thirteenth year, which allows for the continuity of committing all types of war crimes and crimes against humanity including the crime of enforced disappearance of women, children, elderly people and men. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the number of documented cases of enforced disappearance by the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria between March 2011 and August 2022 reached a minimum of 111,907 people (more than 85% of them) were forcefully disappeared by the Syrian regime forces¹. Given the political stagnation and the absence of extensive accountability mechanisms, the principle of Universal Jurisdiction is the legal tool that is currently available to achieve a form of criminal accountability against perpetrators of/complisits in war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria.

The team conducting the research realized that there are differences between individuals who have been forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime and those who were abducted by ISIS members. As a result, interviews were divided into two main categories. The first category included founders and active members of highly influential and active organizations created by survivors and families of victims. The second category included

¹ Syrian Network for Human Rights. “The 11th Annual Report on Enforced Disappearance in Syria”. (2022). <https://snhr.org/?p=58371>

individuals who are trying to uncover the fate of their loved ones without being part of an organization. The research team also focused on the gender aspect of the crime of enforced disappearance and its severe impacts on women and girls. This includes not only the sexual and gender-based violence and gender-related violations women and girls were exposed to as victims of enforced disappearance while in detention centers, but also the stigma and marginalization they suffer after they were released. Stigma and marginalization often creates a double layer of victimhood due to living under a harsh patriarchal society where women and girls could be abandoned by their families whether they are married or single. Additionally, the gender impact extends to the mothers, wives, and daughters of the forcibly disappeared, as they bear psychological, legal, social, economic, and administrative burdens due to the discriminatory and exclusionary constitutions and laws against women in Syria, such as the Penal Code, Personal Status Law, and Labor Law. This also includes legal injustices of inadequate rights for women and when considered as inferior citizens with lesser rights. Moreover, women and girls may face exploitation and abuse while searching for their loved ones.

During conducting interviews, the research team observed a lack of legal information about the crime of enforced disappearance and the possibility of holding proceedings for that crime in Europe. Given the specificity of laws in different European countries, the research team focused its efforts on France and Germany in relation to analyzing the crime of enforced disappearance and its elements, and the potential for including it in indictments in cases that could be brought in Europe based on the principle of Universal Jurisdiction. France was selected by the team not only for its application of the principle of limited universal jurisdiction, but also for the special situation of its courts concerning war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. Additionally, Germany was selected by the research team for its application of comprehensive universal jurisdiction on one hand, and its refusal to include the crime of enforced disappearance in its indictment during the Koblenz trials on the other hand; despite its response in prosecuting international crimes committed in Syria.

The research team noted the positive role of women from families of victims/survivors of enforced disappearance in establishing and managing family and survivor networks. For example, groups of families of victims/survivors in the Truth and Justice Charter (which currently includes 10 (ten) victim and survivor family networks, most of which are led by women) were able to obtain a report from the United Nations Secretary-General recommending the establishment of a new mechanism aiming towards uncovering the fate of all missing and forcibly disappeared persons. Consequently, the team saw the need to study the direct correlation between the number of members in civil society organizations (particularly the families and networks in the Truth and Justice Charter since their work is related to the team's research) and the possible pressure that can be exerted on the international community in support of their cause. This includes the

impact of the families and networks' work on their legal knowledge and methods when attempting to reach influential actors, as well as identifying their needs and the importance of their collaboration with other civil society organizations.

The research team's aims to outline additional areas of research to potentially continue the study in upcoming stages. The areas in which the team wish to expand includes: 1) the legal awareness among the families/associations of victims and how it impacts accountability processes and justice efforts positively or negatively, as well as identifying the legal obstacles that prevent starting proceedings against the crime of enforced disappearance in the national courts of Germany and France; 2) the impact of the jurisprudence of the French Court of Cassation on prosecuting international crimes committed in Syria before French courts; 3) the fundamental role of women in leading civil organizations and networks for families and victims and their contributions to justice and advocacy efforts, which can trigger authorities to assume their responsibility of addressing international crimes such as the crime of enforced disappearance; 4) the differing perspectives and priorities of justice among the families of victims and survivors based on their geographical locations and access to the judiciary; 5) the different legal status of the families of victims, depending whether the families are direct or indirect victims of the crime of enforced disappearance against their loved ones.

- **Report: "Kneel or Starve: on the use of siege and starvation as a method of warfare in South Damascus"**

Huquqyat and the Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research (SCLSR) have published a report in Arabic and English languages revealing the tactics of siege and starvation by the Assad regime against civilians in the southern Damascus area. Two Huquqyat members and authors of the report initiated this research as part of SCLSR's progress in the case of "Moafak, D" and the ongoing Huquqyat's investigation into the events that took place at Ali Al-Wahsh checkpoint. By examining specific violations that were committed during the siege of Yarmouk and southern Damascus, both the Huquqyat and SCLSR deemed it important to produce a comprehensive report that provides a contextual understanding of the siege's impact on local populations. The research also includes a thorough legal analysis supported by Global Rights Compliance (GRC) highlighting the legal aspects of the committed crimes.

The research's methodology depended on witnesses interviews and statements to investigate possible war crimes, which was followed by analyzing the use of siege and starvation against Palestinians refugees residing in Yarmouk and other civilians in South Damascus that were under siege from early 2013 until March 2014. The analysis uncovered how the siege and its direct implications on civilians caused an increasing deterioration of daily life. The research aimed towards supporting the investigations and future

accountability efforts through providing a deeper understanding of siege and starvation in the area of South Damascus.

The investigative team ensured to obtain informed consent from all witnesses whose testimonies were used in the research, and they were informed that their names would not be mentioned to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, witnesses' participation was voluntary, and it was clarified for them that they have the option to withdraw at any stage of the research. All participants were residents of besieged south Damascus during the period that this research covers (December 2012 - March 2014).

Huquqyat members who developed this research worked in collaboration with the legal investigator Amjad Hamoud from (SCLSR). The research depended on 9 (nine) in-depth interviews that were specifically conducted for this study, in addition to 11 (eleven) testimonies documented by (SCLSR) as part of the ongoing criminal investigations into the case of "Moafak, D". The legal investigators made sure to include individuals from diverse backgrounds to achieve a realistic understanding of the various impacts on people, influenced by social and economic considerations such as gender, social status, and place of residence. The legal investigators also emphasized the importance of speaking with a significant number of women to develop a gendered understanding of the events, based on social roles and women's access to financial resources and the necessary infrastructure for survival, as well as their specific needs during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

- **Worksheet: "Legal obstacles faced by women in the North West of Syria"**

Huquqyat members and Syrian lawyers in North West Syria developed a worksheet regarding the legal situation in the North West region of Syria, which was presented and discussed during Huquqyat's first annual convening. The worksheet outlined a timeline of the changing legislation in the region over the past decade, and it was divided into three main phases covering the period from 2013 to 2023.

The different de facto authorities that controlled the region have reflected changes in laws and regulations applied to civilians, which led to different patterns of violations. Additionally, several arbitrary rulings were enforced without adhering to clear laws and regulations. Consequently, North West Syria was divided into two areas that differ from each other legally and administratively: the North West of Syria (Idlib) and the North of Syria (rural Aleppo).

These divisions have posed additional challenges to the current situation, particularly related to difficulties in obtaining official documents, such as proof of lineage, and

challenges in legal representation for cases of minor marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other daily injustices against marginalized groups in society such as women and children.

3. Events

- **Webinar of launching the findings of Ali Al-Wahsh investigation: “on the 9th anniversary of the events of Ali Al-Wahsh: a call for accountability”**

Held in commemoration of the 9th anniversary of the events commonly referred to as the “Ali Al-Wahsh massacre” that occurred on 5 January 2014, the webinar will present the findings of a three-year legal investigation into the events – conducted by two legal investigators from Huquqyat, with the support and mentorship of Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA). Panelists, including local community and legal investigators and practitioners, will also address the situation in South Damascus at the time of the events of Ali Al-Wahsh and the importance of gendered approaches to investigations. The webinar also pointed out that the investigation is originally part of a broader inquiry that was initiated in June 2020 into violations against civilians during the siege of South Damascus, the investigation was opened based on accounts from interviewees about the scale and gravity of events in January 2014 at the checkpoint.

The investigation is ongoing, and legal investigators cannot reveal any final remarks. Huquqyat intends, with the support of Mnemonic (Syrian Archive) to continue pursuing available information that could lead to holding perpetrators accountable for their committed crimes during Ali Al-Wahsh events.

- **Huquqyat organization launching event**

Huquqyat was officially launched in a virtual event in early 2023, where Huquqyat organization, Huquqyat’s members and their expertise were introduced. The launching event also discussed gender-sensitive investigations as the core of the Huquqyat’s legal investigations, as well as the currently available pathways to justice including strategic litigation and its limitations. Participants spoke about the added value of self-identifying women investigators and lawyers in the human rights and legal fields, in addition to Huquqyat’s approach through transformative justice. Finally, the launching event addressed how to effectively engage affected communities in investigations and advocacy.

- **Huquqyat’s first annual convening 2023**

Between October 26 and 29, 2023 Huquqyat held its first annual convening in Berlin, Germany, inviting all its members to attend a hybrid meeting gathering members from

inside and outside of Syria for three days. This was the first time that Huquqyat members met face to face in an event solely dedicated to the organization. All arrangements were made to enable Huquqyat members who were joining virtually to participate effectively in the sessions of the convening. Since Huquqyat is a membership-based organization, its members are involved in shaping its policies and strategies. Recognizing that members' expectations of the organization may differ, the convening aimed to create a safe and encouraging environment for all members to share their important point of views regarding the organizational strategy and the core pillars of the organization's work.

The purpose of the convening was to offer members peer-to-peer sessions on investigations of international core crimes, documentation and advocacy, with significant time dedicated to informal networking, knowledge and information sharing, and team building. In spaces where women lawyers and legal practitioners rarely have the opportunity to come together and take part in participatory training tailored to their needs, Huquqyat is determined to keep acknowledging this gap in the legal field by focusing on raising the visibility and acknowledgment of its members.

The convening allocated a session for representatives from the families of victims, specifically from Families for Freedom organization and the Caesar Families Association. The aim of this session was to benefit from the representatives' expertise regarding the issue of enforced disappearances in Syria. This reflects Huquqyat's belief that its advocacy activities must always include the families of victims, and that the issue of enforced disappearance should be prioritized in all activities related to justice and accountability.

As most sessions of the Annual Convening were led by experts from outside of Huquqyat, the agenda was also developed and planned with Huquqyat's members who have expertise in the topics presented. This included an interactive session led by Huquqyat's members in North West of Syria to discuss their needs and challenges as women lawyers in Syria.

Yasmin Daher, a researcher and director of the February Network, facilitated the sessions of the Annual Convening and successfully created a welcoming and encouraging atmosphere for Huquqyat members to express their thoughts, contributions, feelings regarding the organization's work, and their ability to envision a shared future for Huquqyat. Additionally, Huquqyat collaborated with Amina Sawwan, an advocacy expert, to provide a comprehensive and interactive session on advocacy, focusing on enhancing members' understanding of strategic planning for advocacy campaigns, the dynamics of different authorities, and the creation of impactful messages for an advocacy campaign.

The annual convening was also a great opportunity to thoroughly tackle the first investigation initiated by a couple of Huquqyat members in 2020 about siege and starvation in southern Damascus between 2012 and 2013, leading to starvation against

civilians as a war weapon. Through this case, members got to know about the strategy that was developed according to a gender-based investigation and a survivor-centered approach rather than a perpetrator's driven approach. In addition, the session discussed methods of dealing with various legal and international venues during that investigation. Transparency in explaining the investigative procedure interested members in investigative work, and they expressed their desire to receive further relatable training to build on their experience.

4. Legal Aid project

In late 2023, Huquqyat started preparing for the first phase of the Legal Aid project and designed it in a manner that focuses on a legal representation strategy in northwest Syria, targeting marginalized women and children who are unable to bear the costs of proceedings in courts. Huquqyat identified the geographic areas and types of cases that the project can address, and a work plan has been developed to secure funding that aims to establish three centers in the region and led by Huquqyat members.

5. Advocacy

Huquqyat's Advocacy Committee has conducted a needs assessment that, in turn, developed an action plan and guidelines ensuring equal opportunities for all members to represent Huquqyat through attending training sessions and participating in public events. Additionally, Huquqyat's Advocacy Committee has established a protocol for reviewing and approving public statements and open letters to ensure that all members have equal opportunities to engage in advocacy efforts.

The following is the advocacy efforts that Huquqyat members carried out in 2023 with the support of Huquqyat's Advocacy Committee:

- **Panel: "Eleven Years On: The Path to Accountability in Syria" (March 2023):** A Huquqyat member has participated as a speaker in the panel "Eleven Years On: The Path to Accountability in Syria" that was organized by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP). The panel focused its discussion on pathways for accountability in Syria, and shared reflections on how the Assad regime and other perpetrators can be held responsible for their crimes while considering the role of the international community in supporting Syrians' calls for justice. Additionally, the discussion included Huquqyat's investigation strategy of specific events with the focus on identifying potential judicial links for later stages of the investigation process. Huquqyat's approach in its investigations has some political advantages that can prioritize working on specific cases

in partnership with organizations and individuals who had previously participated in local committees in Syria, which was focusing on documentation or media work, as well as relevant witnesses.

- **United Nations Human Rights Council (UNSC) Briefing on Syria (March 2023):** A Huquqyat member was invited as a speaker at the informal briefing session of the UNSC to discuss the situation of human rights violations in Syria. The session addressed the work of military courts, the misuse of international humanitarian aid, and the use of forced starvation of civilians as a war. Moreover, the discussion tackled issues related to freedom of religion and expression, child protection measures in Syria, armed conflict and the prohibition of child recruitment, and discrimination against women.
- **Discussion on the Importance of Judicial Independence in Rural Aleppo (May 2023):** During a demonstration before one of the courthouses in North West Syria, a Huquqyat member participated and discussed the importance of the independence of the Sharia court from Turkish coordination in the region. There were also calls for the Turkish government to prevent the Turkish coordinator from participating in legal issues in courts.
- **Annual Collaborative Program on Forced Migration in Lebanon (May 2023):** the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship has invited one of Huquqyat members to attend the Annual Collaborative Program on Forced Migration in Beirut to discuss challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Furthermore, the event presented several ongoing activities related to enhancing communication efforts, training, advocacy, justice, research, and support for Syrian women.
- **Launch Conference of Civil Society in Paris (June 2023):** Two Huquqyat members were invited to attend the launching conference of the Civil Society Network in Paris that included several civil society organizations and policymakers. Huquqyat was part of a panel discussion on justice and accountability.

- **Briefing on Violations and War Crimes Against Women in North West Syria (June 2023):** A member from Huquqyat was invited by Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) to present a briefing regarding the violations and war crimes committed against women in North West Syria. Additionally, the keynote introduced Huquqyat's strategy and framework through the lens of transformative justice in Syria that focuses on equal representation and participation of Syrian women. Furthermore, the briefing introduced the work of Huquqyat members in several European countries in developing cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria under the principle of Universal Jurisdiction. The keynote compared justice efforts by Syrian women lawyers outside and inside Syria, highlighting the difficulties in pursuing such cases due to a lack of potential jurisdiction, possible risks for victims and witnesses, and the capacity to ensure their protection. Therefore, Huquqyat members in North West Syria strive to support women who have, in many cases, been direct or indirect victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- **7th Brussels Conference: Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region (June 2023):** A Huquqyat member was invited as a rapporteur for the session on justice and accountability during the Dialogue Day and the Ministerial Meeting of the 7th Brussels Conference: supporting the future of Syria and the region. Additionally, the invited Huquqyat member has a significant discussion with the Canadian minister on the importance of including gender-based analysis and investigations in the joint case brought by Canada and the Netherlands against the Syrian Arab Republic in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the alleged violation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT).
- **Revolutionaire Conference: the Importance of the Gender-Based Approach and the Role of Civil Society Organizations in Justice Processes in Europe (October 2023):** A Huquqyat member was invited by Revolutionaire to participate as a speaker in its conference that addressed the importance of following a gender-based approach and the active role of civil society organizations in justice processes in Europe. The keynote highlighted Huquqyat's commitment in seeking justice for victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity and in advocating for accountability efforts.

Additionally, the keynote presented cases that Huquqyat is currently focusing on to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity that were committed in South Damascus, including the deliberate siege and starvation of civilians. The Huquqyat member also discussed the organization's approaches of gender-sensitive investigations and survivor-centered methods when implementing activities, prioritizing the dignity and rights of victims. Moreover, the keynote addressed the role of civil society organizations in the broader context of justice processes taking place in several European countries, emphasizing that our participation as CSOs in this role is not limited to advocacy efforts but also actively shaping the discourse on accountability, supporting survivors, and collaborating with international bodies to combat impunity.

- **Madaniya's International Engagement Program 2023: Developments in Syria as a Catalyst for Advancing Resolution 2254 (October 2023):** A Huquqyat member was invited to participate as a speaker as part of Madaniya's International Engagement Program that organized a roundtable discussion with the European External Action Service -Middle East and North Africa- (EEAS-MENA) in Brussels. The discussion brought together delegates of Syrian Civil Society Organisation (CSOs) in the EU along with senior representatives from the primary divisions of the EU and its Member States.

Huquqyat's keynote highlighted the gaps in the path to justice and accountability despite previous international efforts and support, and it included important measures such as supporting the newly established Independent Institution for Missing Persons (IIMP), establishing a special court for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and implementing an effective witness protection system. The keynote also focused on emphasizing the need to investigate and prosecute all perpetrators of sexual violence and ensure that women's rights are at the core of all accountability processes. Huquqyat also called for a full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in all ongoing and future political processes, peace negotiations, and reconciliation efforts, and stressed prioritizing survivor-centered and human rights-based approaches to prevent and mitigate gender-based violence.

The panel's discussion also addressed the need for the international community to keep the Syrian file as a priority, and called for a clear strategy to implement Resolution 2245 and combat normalization with the Syrian regime.

- **The 10th meeting of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism for Syria with Syrian Civil Society Organizations and Affected Communities in Lausanne Platform: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) related crimes in Syria (December 2023):** Two Huquqyat members were invited to attend the IIIM's second in-person engagements of 2023 with Syrian CSOs and affected community organizations. This engagement was dedicated to consult and discuss the IIIM's work on ISIL related crimes, which included exploring ways for the IIIM to strengthen its accountability efforts. Huquqyat members presented the investigation strategy developed by the organization, and also discussed the organization's Legal Aid Project in North West Syria.

Huquqyat membership updates

- **Emergency Response Following the Earthquake in South Türkiye and North Syria**

On the 6th of February 2023, Syrian civilians were devastated after an earthquake struck South Türkiye and North Syria at 04:00 AM local time with a magnitude of 7.8, followed by another earthquake with a magnitude of 7.7 and several aftershocks. Victim numbers increased per hour and reached killing over 59,000 and injuring over 120,000 people², which led to declaring the North West of Syria as a "devastated area". Huquqyat was in contact with its colleagues to ensure their safety, yet some of them lost their homes or suffered significant damage. As a result, Huquqyat created an emergency response for its affected members and assessed their needs to collect donations that can support them and their families. Huquqyat expressed solidarity with all those affected by the earthquake in its official statement, urging the support for victims and their families through donating to the White Helmets, who have been working tirelessly to rescue civilians and provide immediate relief to the victims.

² Delegation of the European Union to Syria. "Op-ed: one-year anniversary of Syria's February 2023 earthquakes". (2024): <https://shorturl.at/TWu3x>