

## Statement

# The Start of the Trial of the Two Former Officers Khaled al-Halabi and Musab Abu Rukba in Austria Represents

an Advanced Step on the Path of Accountability  
for the Gross Violations Committed in Syria,  
and It Affirms the Importance of the Long-Term  
Documentation of International Crimes

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SNHR Documented  
**124 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest and Four Cases**  
of Enforced Disappearance during al-Halabi's Period  
of Heading the State Security Branch

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

On 1 June 2026, the Regional Court in Vienna, Austria, opened the first sessions of the trial of the former Brigadier General Khaled al-Halabi, the former head of the State Security Branch (Branch 335) in Raqqa Governorate, alongside the former officer Musab Abu Rukba, who held the position of head of the investigations division in the criminal police in Raqqa Governorate, this being within the framework of applying the principle of universal jurisdiction to the gross international crimes committed in Syria.

This case is considered among the most prominent cases connected to accountability for the violations committed in Syria before the European courts, given the functional positions that the two defendants held within the security apparatus in Raqqa Governorate during the period extending between 2011 and 2013. It also acquires a special importance for the fact that it includes the trial of Khaled al-Halabi, who is considered among the most senior former Syrian security officials to have appeared before the European judiciary against the background of accusations relating to gross human rights violations committed during the Syrian conflict. It is likewise considered among the first cases in Austria in which the principle of universal jurisdiction is applied to foreign security officials accused of committing gross violations outside Austrian territory, which makes it an important legal precedent on the path of holding accountable those responsible for the violations in Syria.

The court is examining accusations relating to torture, coercion, sexual violence, and the causing of serious bodily harm against detainees and civilians in Raqqa Governorate during the period extending between 2011 and 2013. The two defendants pleaded not guilty to the charges attributed to them during the opening session, while the case is built on a wide file of evidence, testimonies, and documents that were gathered over years of investigations.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights affirms that this trial constitutes an important milestone in the international efforts aimed at combating impunity and achieving justice for the Syrian victims, and it also affirms the importance of continuing to pursue the officials in the Assad regime suspected of involvement in committing the crimes of torture, enforced disappearance, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest, and other gross violations that were committed in Syria since March 2011, which are crimes that are not extinguished by the statute of limitations. It also affirms that the preservation of evidence and the documentation of violations in a professional and independent manner remain two decisive factors in enabling the judicial authorities to pursue those responsible for them, even after the passage of many years since their commission.

## First: A Background on the Two Defendants and Their Position Within the Syrian Security Structure

The Brigadier General Khaled al-Halabi, who is from the city of as-Suwayda, held the position of head of the State Security Branch (Branch 335, which is affiliated with the General Intelligence Directorate) in Raqqa Governorate since 2008, and he continued in this position until March 2013. The branch that he administered was part of the system of Syrian security agencies that undertook a pivotal role in the operations of arrest, security pursuit, and the interrogation of opponents, activists, and demonstrators during the period that followed the outbreak of the protests in March 2011. The State Security Branch in Raqqa was also part of a central security system subject to the General Intelligence Directorate in Damascus.

The documented data indicate that the violations that occurred inside the detention centers in Raqqa Governorate during the period that is the subject of the accusation were connected to the hierarchical structure of the Syrian security agencies, and to multiple roles that included the levels of command, supervision, and execution. The ongoing investigations are built on the principle of individual criminal responsibility in international criminal law, including the principle of “command responsibility” or “superior responsibility” with respect to the officials in command positions, in addition to direct criminal responsibility or responsibility by contribution to the criminal acts with respect to the personnel who assumed executive or investigative roles, this being in accordance with what the competent court will establish.

According to the data documented at the Syrian Network for Human Rights, no successor was appointed to al-Halabi in the headship of the branch after he left his position in March 2013, as a result of Raqqa Governorate moving out of the control of the Assad regime forces.

As for the Lieutenant Colonel Musab Abu Rukba, he held the position of head of the investigations division in the criminal police in Raqqa Governorate during the same period. His functional duties were connected to the operations of investigation and interrogation within the scope of the work of the criminal police in the governorate, in the context of the security structure that was in place in Raqqa during the period extending between 2011 and 2013.

During that stage, Raqqa Governorate witnessed an escalation in the operations of arrest and security pursuit that targeted demonstrators, political activists, media workers, human rights defenders, and others among the participants in the popular movement, this being in the context of the security policies that the regime followed in confronting the protests.

## Second: The Legal Context of the Trial

The roots of the case go back to documentation and investigation efforts that extended over several years since 2016, and that included the gathering and analysis of the information relating to the alleged violations connected to the State Security Branch in Raqqa Governorate during the period extending between 2011 and 2013. These efforts included the tracking of the professional trajectories of a number of former officials in the Syrian security agencies, among them Khaled al-Halabi and Musab Abu Rukba, after their departure from Syria, and the gathering and analysis of the testimonies of survivors, witnesses, and former insiders into the working mechanisms of the security agencies, in addition to the study of the patterns of the violations and their institutional contexts.

These efforts led to the opening of judicial investigations in Austria on the basis of the principle of universal jurisdiction. Within the framework of those investigations, the Austrian authorities arrested Khaled al-Halabi in late 2024, and they also arrested Musab Abu Rukba, on suspicion of their involvement in gross violations that are alleged to have been committed in Raqqa Governorate during the period covered by the investigation. The arrest of the two defendants constituted an essential step on the path of the case, which allowed the judicial authorities to complete the procedures of investigation, the gathering of evidence, and the hearing of the witnesses and victims.

The subsequent investigations relied on a set of evidence and official documents, in addition to the testimonies of survivors, witnesses, and experts knowledgeable about the work of the Syrian security agencies. In November 2025, the Austrian Public Prosecution announced the bringing of a formal indictment against each of Khaled al-Halabi and Musab Abu Rukba, after the completion of the investigations and the evaluation of the available evidence, so that the file was later referred to the Regional Court in Vienna to consider it in accordance with the adopted judicial procedures.

The Regional Court in Vienna opened the first sessions of the trial on 1 June 2026. The case is built on the principle of universal jurisdiction, which permits the national judicial authorities to pursue certain gross international crimes committed outside the territory of the state, including the crimes of torture, the crimes against humanity, and the war crimes.

According to the Austrian Public Prosecution, the case relates to incidents that are alleged to have been committed in Raqqa Governorate during the period extending between April 2011 and March 2013, and it includes accusations of torture, aggravated coercion, sexual violence, and the causing of serious bodily harm against persons who were detained against the background of their political activity or their participation in the protests.

The prosecution documents indicate that the file of the case includes allegations relating to no fewer than 21 victims who were subjected to violations that fall within the scope of the accusations, with a difference in the nature of the acts attributed to each of the two defendants according to the functional role of each of them, whether in terms of command and supervision or in terms of participation in the operations of investigation and interrogation.

The two defendants pleaded not guilty during the opening session, and it is expected that the court will, during the upcoming sessions, listen to the testimonies of the victims, witnesses, and experts, in addition to discussing the evidence and documents that were gathered during the various stages of the investigation.

### Third: The Contribution of the Syrian Network for Human Rights

Since 2011, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has worked on the documentation of the violations committed in Syria according to a methodology that is built on the gathering of testimonies, the cross-verification of the sources, and the preservation of the data in cumulative information databases.

With respect to Raqqa Governorate and the period during which Khaled al-Halabi assumed the headship of the State Security Branch, the Network documented no fewer than **124 cases of arbitrary arrest** carried out by the State Security Branch in the governorate, whose subjects were later released, in addition to no fewer than **4 cases of enforced disappearance** that were attributed to the same branch during the same period.

The Network also gathered testimonies of survivors of detention that document recurrent patterns of torture, ill-treatment, and violations inside the detention centers affiliated with the security agencies in Raqqa, and it preserved this data within its documentation databases that are used to support the efforts of accountability and justice.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights also supported investigative journalistic efforts that addressed the file of the violations connected to the Syrian security agencies, through the provision of documented information and data relating to the institutional structure, the contexts of work, and the systematic violations.

**The information that the Network documented concerning the State Security Branch in Raqqa Governorate during al-Halabi's period of headship included the following:**

- No successor was appointed to him in the position of head of the branch after 2013, as a result of Raqqa moving out of the control of the Assad regime forces.
- The documentation of the patterns of arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance inside the branch's centers.
- The recording of the statements of survivors about the conditions of detention, torture, and ill-treatment.

The Network affirms that its role is limited to documentation, the preservation of evidence, and the provision of reliable information, while the final legal characterization of criminal responsibility remains within the competence of the judiciary exclusively. The Network considers that the fundamental value of this effort is not limited to the documentation of the violations for the purposes of historical monitoring, but rather it extends to enabling the bodies of investigation and prosecution and the national and international courts to reach reliable sources of information that help in revealing the truth and determining the individual and institutional responsibilities.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights affirms that accountability for the crimes of torture, enforced disappearance, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killing represents an inherent right of the victims and an essential pillar among the pillars of transitional justice and the rule of law.

The Network calls upon the judicial authorities in the various states that adopt universal jurisdiction to continue the investigation of the crimes committed in Syria, to strengthen international and national judicial cooperation, and to guarantee the effective and safe participation of the victims in the litigation procedures, in a manner that contributes to the achievement of justice, the redress of the victims, and the entrenchment of the principle of non-impunity.



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*No justice without accountability*

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