

The Hague Court Recognises Sexual Violence in Syria as a Crime Against Humanity in Landmark Judgement

On 15 June 2026, the District Court in The Hague convicted R.A., a former National Defence Forces (NDF) investigator in Salamiyah, and sentenced him to 26 years' imprisonment for complicity in torture, torture as a crime against humanity, and sexual violence as a crime against humanity. In a landmark judgement, the Court recognised conflict-related sexual violence in Syria as a crime against humanity for the first time. R.A. was convicted of 19 international crimes in relation to 8 of the 9 survivors and acquitted in relation to the ninth victim.

The Nuhanovic Foundation and Huquqyat Organization welcome this landmark judgement as an important step towards justice, recognition, and accountability for survivors.

The significance of this ruling extends far beyond the individual case. By recognising conflict-related sexual violence as a crime against humanity, the Court affirmed that such violence was not a series of isolated acts, but part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population.

This recognition matters. It acknowledges the experiences of survivors and confirms what many have long known: that sexual violence in Syria's detention system formed part of a broader pattern of crimes against humanity. The Court also found the survivors' testimonies to be credible, affirming the truth of their experiences and the significance of their decision to come forward. For many survivors, this affirmation is itself an important form of redress.

Above all, this judgement belongs to the women and men whose testimonies brought this case from Syria to a courtroom in The Hague. Their courage and perseverance made this outcome possible.

This outcome underscores the vital role that domestic courts continue to play in the pursuit of accountability for international crimes committed in Syria. For many survivors, courts in Europe have been among the few places where their experiences could be heard and recognised. Yet justice in Europe can never replace justice in Syria itself.

The court also ruled that all compensation claims brought by survivors were inadmissible, as the Court found that the defendant was entitled to invoke immunity from jurisdiction under customary international law. For survivors who sought not only recognition but reparation, this is a painful outcome and a reminder that a criminal conviction, however significant, cannot on its own deliver the full measure of justice.

Survivors deserve truth, acknowledgement, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence. Ultimately, these goals can only be fully achieved through a Syrian-led process of accountability and transitional justice.

We call on European States to continue investigating and prosecuting crimes committed in Syria under the principle of universal jurisdiction, while maintaining attention to

violations that have often been under-investigated or under-recognised, including sexual violence and enforced disappearance.

While this judgement marks an important step forward in the pursuit of justice for Syria, it represents only one step on a much longer path. For survivors and victims, the pursuit of truth, justice, accountability, reparations, and non-recurrence continues.

About the Case

- The defendant was arrested in the town of Druten, the Netherlands, in December 2023, after having obtained a temporary asylum residence permit.
- According to the indictment, he served as head of the investigations unit of the National Defence Forces in Salamiyah between 2013 and 2014.
- He faced 25 charges across three indictments, including complicity in torture, torture as a crime against humanity, and sexual violence as a crime against humanity against nine victims.
- Several survivors travelled to the Netherlands to testify before the Court in person, while the testimony of two others was presented through their lawyer.
- The substantive hearings took place before the District Court in The Hague between April and May 2026.

About the Signatory Organisations

The Nuhanovic Foundation: For more than a decade, The Nuhanovic Foundation has been facilitating access to justice for victims, survivors and witnesses of international crimes with a connection to the Netherlands. We focus on strategic litigation, advocacy and research to drive legal change. Through our efforts, we address impunity and ensure that those responsible for international crimes are held accountable.

Huquqyat Organisation is a civil society organisation set up in recognition of the absence of meaningful justice efforts for grave crimes and human rights violations committed in Syria since the uprising in 2011. The meaning of the word "Huquqyat" in Arabic embodies the essence of the organisation's work, which is: "women legal practitioners." Today, Huquqyat strives to work to achieve justice and accountability in Syria and across the SWANA region.