

Syria: The National Union of Syrian Students as a Tool of Repression in Syrian Universities



■ From a Student Syndicate to a Security Apparatus: The Union's Responsibility for Serious Violations Against Students During the Uprising and a Call for Comprehensive Accountability Within Syria's Transitional Justice Process



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1. Introduction

This brief report by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documents the pivotal role played by numerous members of the National Union of Syrian Students (NUS) in suppressing dissenting voices against the Assad regime, particularly during the first three years following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011. The Union, originally established to represent students' interests, transformed into a de facto security arm that actively contributed to creating a climate of fear on university campuses; surveilling students, reporting them to the authorities, and took part not only in the arrests of students but also in subjecting them to severe physical and psychological torture.

Testimonies collected by STJ reveal that numerous Union members operated as informants for Syria's security agencies, deliberately targeting politically active students and drawing them into confrontations –either on campus or in dormitories– with the intent of facilitating their handover to intelligence branches. Several of these members were reportedly involved in beating students with electric batons and shoes, subjecting them to verbal abuse, conducting invasive body searches, and accompanying them to detention sites, acting entirely outside the bounds of legal procedure.

This report is grounded in five in-depth interviews conducted by researchers at STJ with students who were either arrested or subjected to persecution by members of the Union. These interviews were conducted via secure communication channels, with full informed consent obtained from all participants; each of whom requested anonymity to protect their safety.¹ In addition to the testimonies, the report draws upon a range of human rights publications issued by organizations that have documented the Union's role in repression and rights violations within Syrian universities.

2. From a Student Union to an Auxiliary Security Apparatus

The [NUS previously defined itself](#) on its [official website](#)² as a “Popular organization, [established on 23 April 1966](#), comprising students of public and private Syrian universities, as well as higher and technical institutes, with branches inside and outside Syria.” However, this definition omits the structural relationship between the Union and the ruling Ba’ath Party; one that transformed the NUS into an instrument of authoritarian control rather than an independent student syndicate that represents students' interests and defends their rights both on and off campus, free from political party dominance or interference by the executive branch.

¹ For this reason, STJ has used pseudonyms for all the witnesses interviewed for this report.

² On 26 December 2024, the Ministry of Higher Education issued an official [decision](#) to freeze the activities of the NUS. [The official description](#) on its website was subsequently updated to read: “An independent, non-profit student syndicate representing Syrian students around the world. It focuses on current and future issues facing Syrian students, and seeks to prepare an educated Syrian generation to contribute to the transition towards a modern national state. The syndicate supports Syrian students through service-oriented and empowerment programs and projects. It organizes activities, conducts dialogues, and launches initiatives. It aspires to serve as an umbrella for all Syrian students, grounded in the values of the Syrian revolution: freedom, democracy, justice, human rights, and citizenship.”

The NUS emerged as part of the Ba'ath Party's broader project to engineer a controlled and surveilled society. It was integrated into the framework of "popular organizations and unions" structurally and ideologically tied to the ruling party.³ From its inception, the Union adopted the party's rhetoric and was subordinated to its administrative hierarchy, with its leadership appointed directly by the Ba'ath Party's Regional Command. It thus functioned as a mobilization tool within universities, tasked with disciplining students and ensuring their political loyalty.⁴

Prior to the uprising, the Syrian regime used the NUS as a vehicle for disseminating party propaganda and dismantling any independent or oppositional student organizing efforts. After the outbreak of the revolution in 2011, the Union's role as a security proxy was explicitly activated. It took part in monitoring student activities, collecting information for security agencies, and directly engaging in interrogations and arbitrary arrests.⁵

Moreover, testimonies gathered by STJ –as presented in this report– demonstrate how Union offices on university campuses were used as unofficial detention and interrogation sites, underscoring the Union's systemic involvement in human rights violations. It operated not as an independent student body, but as an auxiliary branch of the state security apparatus.⁶

The role and level of involvement of the NUS varied by university. For example, at the University of Aleppo, the Union aligned more closely with the regime's militarized and security-driven response to dissent, employing excessive force against student protests and facilitating the expulsion of students who participated in demonstrations. In contrast, its operations were less structured at the universities of Damascus, al-Baath, and Tishreen. In these institutions, the arming of students was selective, largely based on sectarian or geographic affiliations. NUS members engaged in monitoring their peers, luring them into traps, [arresting them](#), and in some cases, [torturing them](#) in collaboration with security agencies.

Testimonies collected by STJ also confirm that NUS offices across multiple campuses were repeatedly used as unofficial detention and interrogation centers, further illustrating the Union's entrenched and systematic role in abuses. Far from functioning as a representative student body, the NUS operated as an auxiliary arm of the security services.

3. Student Testimonies on the Union's Role in Violations

This section presents detailed testimonies from university students –both male and female– who were subjected to arrest, torture, threats, or arbitrary dismissal at the hands of members of the NUS, either directly or in coordination with security agencies. While the testimonies

³ For more on the structural linkage between popular organizations and unions and the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, see for example: Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–1970*.

⁴ Omran Strategic Studies. [Soft Tools of the Assad Regime: The National Union of Syrian Students as a Model](#). 21 September 2023.

⁵ Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. [The National Union of Syrian Students: A Biography of Violations](#). December 2023.

⁶ Omran Strategic Studies. [Soft Tools of the Assad Regime: The National Union of Syrian Students as a Model](#). 21 September 2023.

included in this report pertain exclusively to students from universities in Damascus, several other human rights reports and independent studies have documented similar patterns of violations at universities across Syria –particularly in Aleppo, Latakia, and Homs– where Union branches employed comparable methods of repression in collaboration with security services.⁷

3.1. Testimony of Majd – Faculty of Architecture, University of Damascus (He was severely assaulted by Union-affiliated students following rumors of an impending sit-in)

In January 2012, two students were assaulted at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Damascus, following the spread of rumors that a sit-in was being planned inside the faculty building.

One of the two students, “Majd,” gave the following testimony to STJ:

“After the rumors spread, our faculty was flooded with students affiliated with the Administrative Committee of the National Union of Syrian Students, coming from various colleges and universities. They arrived armed with electric batons and metal chains, positioning themselves in the faculty lobby to prevent any sit-ins. I was studying with a friend in one of the classrooms. As the situation grew tense, we decided to separate, only to be violently attacked by members of the Administrative Committee. The assault was led by a student named 'Malek S.'⁸ from the Faculty of Economics, and his brother 'Maher' also participated, along with a large group of students carrying electric batons and chains. They stormed into one of the design studios and beat us with their hands and batons. One of them even attempted to strike my friend on the head with a wooden chair.”

Following the intervention of the faculty dean, Dr. Pierre Nano, Majd and his friend were taken to the Dean’s Office, where they were subjected to questioning by the university’s vice president and a security officer. Majd added:

“We were interrogated as though we were the perpetrators, with no regard for the fact that we were clearly the victims of a physical assault. Our phones were searched, and we were accused of inciting unrest. None of the assailants were held accountable. Later, as part of the disciplinary action, we were temporarily expelled, and our academic records were withheld. Subsequently, we were referred to a disciplinary board, where we were informed that the incident would be treated as a formal warning, along with threats of more severe penalties should any so-called ‘violations’ be repeated.”

⁷ Syrian British Consortium. [Crimes of the National Union of Syrian Students at Damascus University](#). 19 June 2024.

⁸ In this report, and in accordance with professional and legal standards, STJ provides only the first name and the initial of the last name of suspects, while confirming that the full identities are securely documented in its internal database.

3.2. Testimony of Anas – University Dormitory, University of Damascus (He was subjected to a group beating following chants of solidarity, arrested, tortured, and as a result, suffered strokes and partial paralysis. His brother was later killed under torture based on a report filed by a member of the NUS)

In May 2011, Anas was residing in Dormitory Unit One of the university campus in the Mezzeh district of Damascus. During that period, he began coordinating with a number of students to organize a limited peaceful demonstration in solidarity with the governorate of Daraa.

Anas recounted the following in his testimony to STJ:

“Together with several students from the faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy, we started planning a simple peaceful demonstration in solidarity with Daraa, such as chanting ‘freedom’ from the balconies. A few days before the demonstration, I encountered two students from the Union, one of whom was from my hometown. They offered me an electric baton and said it would be used against the ‘infiltrators.’ I objected to their words, and one of them responded with a veiled threat. Despite the tension, we went ahead with the plan.”

He continued:

“On the agreed night, we cut the electricity and chanted slogans. Security forces, members of the NUS, and regime-affiliated students stormed the dormitories, beating us and raiding rooms. I was arrested along with several others and taken to a security branch, where we were beaten and humiliated. I heard sounds of torture and saw women being summoned for interrogation. Although one officer intervened to stop the beatings by hand, they were replaced with kicking and being struck with shoes.”

Anas went on to describe the detention conditions, noting that the cell he was held in was overcrowded and filthy, with 41 detainees crammed into a space that did not allow for sleeping. He added:

“After we were released, I emerged with a swollen face and body. Later, I developed an arteriovenous fistula, which caused seven strokes and temporary paralysis on one side of my body; an injury I still suffer from.”

The violations extended beyond Anas himself. He revealed the tragic fate of his brother, who fell victim to a malicious report filed by a member of the Union, leading to his death under torture:

“My brother was abducted from al-Baath University and falsely accused, based on a report by a member of the NUS, of stealing a tank. He died under torture at Branch 215. We received his death certificate in 2014.”

3.3. Testimony of Yasser – Faculty of Medicine, University of Damascus (He was subjected to brutal torture by members of the NUS over anti-regime posts and was taken to the Ba’ath Party building)

On 6 February 2013, while Yasser, a student at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Damascus, was leaving the faculty library, he was approached by three young men who introduced themselves as members of the Administrative Committee of the NUS. Among them was an individual named “Ashraf S.” the head of the committee at the time. They asked him to present his student ID.

Yasser recounted the following in his testimony to STJ:

“They asked for my student ID, then called someone who later turned out to be a university security officer, though I don’t remember his name. After that, they came back and forcibly arrested me along with others.”

Yasser was then taken to the fourth floor of the administration building, where the abuse began, as he described:

“When we arrived, the beatings and degrading insults began, carried out by Ashraf S. and two others, one of whom was from the Faculty of Arts. They used their hands and then a baton. They searched my bag, confiscated my mobile phone, and forced me to unlock it. They then reviewed my anti-regime posts on Facebook while I was forced to open the account.”

He continued:

“They went into a frenzy of rage upon seeing my activities. They blindfolded and handcuffed me, then took me to the Ba’ath Party headquarters. There, the torture escalated to direct death threats. They had tools like batons, knives, and clubs. A real firearm was pointed at me, and a blank round was fired to terrorize me, while they insisted on extracting forced confessions to things I had not done.”

The fact that a student was taken to the Ba’ath Party headquarters reinforces the evidence of the Union’s structural connection to the ruling party, not as an independent syndicate, but as an operative arm of the regime’s machinery of repression. Yasser concluded his testimony by stating:

“After the interrogation, I was handed over to the Political Security Branch in Al-Maysat, from which I was released a few hours later. Throughout this entire ordeal, I realized how the National Union of Syrian Students functioned as an auxiliary security apparatus of the Syrian regime, conducting arrests, beatings, and interrogations entirely outside any legal or academic framework.”

3.4. Testimony of Malek – Faculty of Economics, University of Damascus (He was arrested and tortured inside the university dormitory after being targeted for his peaceful Facebook activism)

In his testimony to STJ, Malek, a student and peaceful activist from Douma in Rural Damascus, described how the Damascus university campus was transformed into a closed security zone, where arrests and interrogations were carried out entirely outside any legal framework.

Malek stated:

“Members of the Union played the roles of informants, interrogators, and at times, even torturers. They collaborated with security agencies to track and pursue students active in peaceful protests, participated in their interrogation and torture, and most of the arrests were carried out either on campus or in the university dormitories, often with the direct assistance of students affiliated with the Ba’ath Party or regime-aligned groups such as Hezbollah.”

He continued:

“I was involved in coordinating demonstrations and civil activism. I used my real name on Facebook to post strike calls and follow coordination pages. In late 2011, members of the Union began stopping students at the university gates and checking their accounts. I was warned that they were asking about me, so I created a new account, but that didn’t stop them from arresting me.”

According to Malek, he was apprehended near a library on campus by security agents accompanied by a Hezbollah-affiliated student who had identified him:

“They took me to an interrogation room in the university dormitory, where I was beaten and tortured by several members of the Union, most notably ‘Ashraf S.’ who was a medical student at the time. During the process, I tried to stall so my friends could shut down my original account, but the agents managed to access it. I was then accused of incitement and collaboration with ‘terrorists.’”

He added:

“Later, one of the interrogators offered me to cooperate with them and maintain contact in the future. They kept my student and national IDs. I agreed just to be released, and indeed, they let me go without referring me to any security branch.”

He concluded:

“I decided to stop going to university, especially after one of the security agents threatened to break my legs if I returned. I barely managed to complete my exams that semester, after my mother and aunt recovered my personal documents. I expected to meet the same fate as many of my friends, but I survived. After graduation, I moved to Eastern Ghouta, where I continued my activism and

stopped entering Damascus altogether because of the danger associated with my identity.”

3.5. Testimony of Mariam – Faculty of Economics, University of Damascus (She was arrested for expressing solidarity with her professor and beaten by Union-affiliated students over Facebook content)

Political activism was not a prerequisite for students to become targets of persecution and arrest within Syrian universities. In her testimony to STJ, Mariam, a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Economics, University of Damascus, recounts how a spontaneous act of solidarity turned into a humiliating experience of arrest.

Mariam stated:

“I was working on my master’s thesis at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Damascus. I was in the library when I heard a commotion outside. I went to see what was happening and witnessed the arrest of my professor because she recited Surat al-Fatiha for the souls of the martyrs. I couldn’t contain myself and reacted with angry words. One of the shabiha tried to question me. I ran toward the campus, where the campus guards stopped me, confiscated my ID and phone, and began interrogating me in a closed room.”

According to Mariam, the university had become a stage for systematic violence, not only by security forces but also by fellow students who took part in the abuse:

“Later, a group of female students loyal to the regime, who had participated in the assault on the professor, came in. They began beating and questioning me. They searched my laptop and claimed its contents were evidence of my opposition. They insulted me because of my political stance. I was then secretly transported in a car to the university dormitory, and no one knew my whereabouts for three days. The interrogations and beatings continued there. Some of the perpetrators were Shabiha from the Student Union. They insisted on knowing my Facebook account and the location of a USB stick I had swallowed to hide its contents.”

Mariam told STJ that private conversations between her and another girl who had been interrogated earlier were printed out. They confronted her with what was in the messages, including her suggestion to hang pictures of the president in the bathrooms, which they took as “evidence of conspiracy.”

She concluded:

“After being transferred to the Khatib Branch and then to the State Security Branch, I overheard someone mocking me, saying: ‘We caught the account owner,’ as if they had arrested a dangerous criminal. I was later released from Adra Prison on bail, thanks to my uncle, who was the former professor of the judge handling my case.”

3.6. The Case of Ayham Ghazoul – Master’s Student in Dentistry, University of Damascus (Arrested on campus and handed over to security forces by Union members, resulting in death under torture)

While the preceding testimonies document direct instances of grave violations committed by members of the NUS against university students during the early years of the Syrian revolution, they represent only a small portion of the broader and more systematic patterns of abuse. One particularly emblematic case – though not documented through direct witness interviews in this report – is that of Ayham Ghazoul. STJ relied on external human rights reports to reconstruct the details of his case.⁹ Notably, Ayham’s image was later identified among the leaked “Caesar” photographs.

Ayham Ghazoul’s case stands out as one of the most severe violations involving the NUS, due to the direct participation of Union members in acts of torture that led to his death. Ayham, a master’s student in dentistry and a peaceful human rights advocate, was arrested on 5 November 2012, shortly after leaving a lecture. He was apprehended by a Union member named Ashraf S., along with two other individuals, and taken to an office affiliated with the Union’s Administrative Committee at the Faculty of Medicine.

There, multiple members of NUS subjected Ayham to brutal physical abuse, including beating, the extraction of his fingernails, and the pouring of boiling water over his body. He was subsequently transferred to Military Intelligence Branch 215. He remained there for five days before succumbing to the injuries inflicted under torture.

This case demonstrates the Union’s instrumental role as an operational extension of the state’s repressive apparatus, functioning not merely as a complicit body but as an active perpetrator of gross human rights violations.

4. Legal Assessment

The testimonies and facts presented in this report indicate that the National Union of Syrian Students was transformed from a student organization meant to represent the interests of students into a repressive arm of the Syrian security apparatus. Its members engaged in arbitrary arrests and acts of torture, and carried out functions beyond their lawful authority, including searches, interrogations, and the handover of students to security agencies. These actions constitute violations of fundamental provisions of Syrian domestic law, as well as Syria’s binding obligations under international law.

4.1. Under Syrian Law

These acts constitute crimes punishable under Syrian law. The unlawful arrest of an individual by an unauthorized party is classified as the crime of unlawful deprivation of liberty, as defined in Article 555 of the [Syrian Penal Code No. 148 of 1949](#). The penalty is increased if the deprivation of liberty is accompanied by physical or psychological torture. Additionally, acts of

⁹ See for example: Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. [The National Union of Syrian Students: A Biography of Violations](#). December 2023.

beating and torture fall under the category of intentional harm as set forth in Article 540 and subsequent articles of the Penal Code. The severity of the punishment increases progressively depending on the duration of the victim's inability to work caused by the harm, or if the act results in a permanent disability.

Furthermore, Article 391 of the Penal Code states: "Anyone who subjects another person to acts of force not permitted by law with the intent of obtaining a confession to a crime or information related thereto shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of three months to three years. If the violence results in illness or injury, the minimum sentence shall be one year." Although the article does not explicitly use the term "torture," Syrian judicial practice has consistently interpreted the phrase "acts of force" as encompassing torture.¹⁰

In addition, acts of beating and torture fall within the definition of torture provided in [Anti-Torture Law No. 16 of 2022](#), which defines torture as any act that intentionally causes severe physical or psychological pain for the purpose of obtaining a confession, punishing an individual, or intimidating them. This includes acts committed with motives of discrimination or revenge, whether perpetrated by an official or by a person acting in an official capacity.

It is also worth noting that international law does not limit liability to official state actors; it also applies to individuals who act with the instigation, consent, or acquiescence of public authorities;¹¹ a principle that applies directly to members of the NUS in these cases.

4.2.Under International Treaties and Conventions

At the international level, these violations contravene a number of core human rights instruments, most notably the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948), which states in Article 5 that: "*No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.*" This principle is reaffirmed in Article 7 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (1966).

The arrest and torture of students based on their political activities or opinions opposing the ruling regime at the time constitute a clear violation of their rights to freedom of expression, opinion, and peaceful assembly, as guaranteed by Articles 9, 19, and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Articles 9, 19, and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These actions also violate the [United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (1984), which imposes a binding legal obligation to investigate acts of torture and hold perpetrators accountable.

Furthermore, targeting students on the basis of their political opinions violates Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits all forms of discrimination. It also constitutes a breach of Article 13 of the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and](#)

¹⁰ Syrians for Truth and Justice. [Syria: Anti-Torture Law Issued 35 Years After the Convention against Torture Went Effective](#). 12 July 2022.

¹¹ United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – Article 1

[Cultural Rights](#), which provides that access to higher education shall be based on merit and free from discrimination.

Additionally, and based on the testimonies presented in this report and other human rights documentation, these violations were not isolated or random incidents. Rather, they were committed as part of a widespread and systematic policy across Syrian universities. This systematic nature is reinforced by the involvement of university deans and deputy deans in overseeing interrogations, threats of academic expulsion against victims, the arming of Union members by security services, and the use of Ba'ath Party buildings as sites for interrogation and torture.

Accordingly, the systematic character of these abuses may elevate them to the level of crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#), particularly under provisions relating to “*imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty*,” “*torture*,” “*persecution*,” and “*other inhumane acts causing great suffering*.”

In this context, the principle of command responsibility under international criminal law is applicable.¹² This principle holds military and civilian leaders accountable for unlawful acts committed by their subordinates if they knew or should have known about them and failed to take adequate measures to prevent the violations or punish those responsible. This principle applies to the leadership of the NUS, as well as to state and party officials who allowed these abuses to persist.

5. Recommendations

To ensure freedom of opinion and expression within Syrian academic institutions, and to uphold the rule of law and accountability for perpetrators, Syrians for Truth and Justice recommends that the transitional Syrian government take the following measures:

- **Launch an independent and transparent investigation** into the violations attributed to the National Union of Syrian Students, under the supervision of an impartial judicial authority, and ensure that all those found responsible are held to account in accordance with due legal process.
- **Restructure student union activity** by dissolving the Union in its current form and allowing for the establishment of an independent student body that genuinely represents students, safeguards their freedom of association, and defends their interests without political or security interference.
- **Undertake comprehensive reform of the university system**, including the review and amendment of internal regulations to guarantee academic freedoms and freedom of expression, and to prevent security agencies from interfering in campus life.
- **Integrate human rights principles** into university curricula, and provide training for academic and administrative staff on respecting and applying these principles, in order to foster a culture of human rights within academic environments.

¹² European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights. [Command responsibility](#).

- **Enable civil society organizations**, especially those involved in documenting violations, to safely access university campuses, and guarantee their ability to monitor and report without obstruction or threats, while also ensuring protection for witnesses and whistleblowers.
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ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.