



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير
Navenda Sûriyayî ya Ragihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression

The National Union of Syrian Students

A Biography of Violations



The National Union of Syrian Students: A Biography of Violations

Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) is an independent non-governmental non-profit organization. We seek to build a society that guarantees freedom of expression and belief, human rights, and justice. Our vision is a democratic world based on justice, freedom, equality and respect for human rights and dignity.

Since SCM was founded in 2004, we work to defend oppressed individuals due to their beliefs or opinions, as well as promoting human rights and supporting and developing independent, critical, and professional media. SCM is in special consultative status with the UN ECOSOC since 2011.

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Summary

The SCM report, “National Union of Syrian Students: a Biography of Violations” traces the path of the Union, the only official representative of higher education students in Syria. It analyses its structure and relationship with the ruling authorities, as well as the roles it played/ is playing in oppressing students and how it changed during the years of conflict. From mobilization and support for the Syrian government and its narrative, to committing international crimes against university students and teaching staff.

This report examines the violations and crimes committed by the Union, based on interviews with university students, former university staff and experts, SCM and other rights groups documentations and publicly available data. It concludes that National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS) have committed massive and widespread violations against Syrian students that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, as the main agency and organized structure in universities and university and higher education facilities in Syria and abroad.

This report also sheds light on the popular organizations and the NUSS as an auxiliary organization of the Arab Socialist Baath Party and their position in the governance structure designed by Hafez al-Assad, which continues to this day. It also extends on the Baath Brigades militia, which was established in 2012 as auxiliary forces and its relation and work with the NUSS.

It presents Aleppo University as a case study to examine the governmental strategies to control and suppress students through the NUSS. It also extends to private universities and the NUSS control in those universities, and its violations.

Methodology

SCM adopted the descriptive analytical approach to map the structure and activities of the “National Union of Syrian Students-NUSS”, and to explain the circumstances surrounding its work, and its interrelationship with the ruling political party and the executive authority as well. SCM used monitoring tools and historical research to draw the general framework in which NUSS operates, and legal references to provide a description and preliminary analysis of responsibility for violations of arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, murder, extrajudicial execution, torture and inhuman treatment, and assault on students perpetrated by members of NUSS inside and outside the university campus. The report is also based on 30 interviews conducted by the SCM team with Syrian university students who were subjected to violations by NUSS.

SCM also interviewed former university employees who are familiar with the role of NUSS and the mechanisms of intervention and decision-making in university and the educational process as well, and the additional roles NUSS played since the year 2011.

The report also used publicly available data and reports on violations committed solely by NUSS, or jointly with security services, as a means of more understanding of the facts and information collected from the students who were interviewed, in compliance with the recommendation in the OHCHR Manual: “the most commonly applied rule of reliability in human rights fact-finding is the principle that information should be consistent with material

collected from independent sources”¹ and that secondary sources should also be credible. Public data included circulars, administrative instructions and decisions of the disciplinary committees in Syrian universities, and a set of legislation and laws that gave the union powers related to higher education, the educational process and the independence of universities.

With regard to the interview, the SCM team adhered to the professional rules and regulations governing scientific research that impose professional and ethical obligations and responsibility in the processes of transcribing and recording, and adhered to complete impartiality and objectivity in the process of asking and selecting questions. All interviews were conducted after the monitoring and documentation team explained the objective of the interviews. SCM obtained consent to use the information the interviewees provided in the report, their names were withheld at the request of some or based on the assessment of SCM that revealing them would jeopardize their security. The testimonies were shortened and any indication of the interviewee identity was excluded. The focus was only on the violations and the facts related to them.

Challenges

The scarce research and studies about the auxiliary organizations of “the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party”, specifically the “National Union of Syrian Students”.

The difficulty of determining responsibility due to the complicated overlapping mandate of government agencies and institutions, and the overlapping scope of their work, especially after 2011, when the executive authority and Baath party organizations participated in suppressing protests, at various levels.

Legal framework:

The Syrian government practices through the National Union of Syrian Students violate international law, including several legally binding treaties. Those practices should be reported to the relevant UN bodies and special rapporteurs, including by submitting individual or collective complaints to them. Those practices and violations that may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity should be included in Syria periodic review at the United Nations.

The right to higher education and academic freedom in international law

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 26 that “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”

Following the Declaration, several treaties and conventions, some of which are legally binding, guaranteed the right to higher education as a basic right for human beings and expanded on its explanation.

In 1950, in its conference that created the International Association of Universities, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared three basic principles to be applied by each higher education institute, including tolerance towards different opinions and points of view, and freedom from political interference.

1 Guide: Documenting Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Violations in Syria

<https://docplayer.ae/116376796-%D8%AF%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-0.html>

The 1960 UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education which is ratified by Syria, legally binds state parties to "make higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity."

In its 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, UNESCO expressed its concern regarding the vulnerability of the academic community to untoward political pressures which could undermine academic freedom, and stated that "the right to education, teaching and research can only be fully enjoyed in an atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education".

UNESCO member states, including Syria that has a permanent delegation in Paris headed by Lamia Chakkour, "are under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source." UNESCO also states in its Recommendation that "Member states and higher education institutions should take all feasible steps to apply the provisions...to give effect, within their respective territories, to the principles set forth in this Recommendation."

The International Covenant on Economic and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted in 1966, to which Syria is a state party, states in its Article 13 that "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity".

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, that interprets the provisions of ICESCR, said in its General Comment No. 13 that "staff and students in higher education are especially vulnerable to political and other pressures which undermine academic freedom." The Committee concluded that "the right to education can only be enjoyed if accompanied by the academic freedom of staff and students." It also said that the enjoyment of academic freedom requires the autonomy of institutions of higher education:

Members of the academic community, individually or collectively, are free to pursue, develop and transmit knowledge and ideas, through research, teaching, study, discussion, documentation, production, creation or writing. Academic freedom includes the liberty of individuals to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which they work, to fulfil their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the State or any other actor, to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.

UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel and Lima Declaration establish and confirm academic freedom as a necessary measure to abide by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In 1988, the Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education confirmed that "that the universities and academic communities have an obligation to pursue the fulfilment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights of the people," and defined 'academic freedom' as "the freedom of members of the academic community, individually or collectively, in the pursuit, development and transmission of knowledge, through research, study, discussion, documentation, production, creation, teaching, lecturing and writing."

The Lima Declaration also defined 'Autonomy' as "the independence of institutions of higher education from the State and all other forces of society, to make decisions regarding its internal government, finance, administration, and to establish its policies of education, research, extension work and other related activities." It also said that every state should guarantee the right to education without discrimination of any kind as to ... political or other opinion."

The most prominent violations by the National Union of Syrian Students that may constitute

war crimes and crimes against Humanity:

As part of its campaign to suppress the popular movement demanding freedoms and rights, the Syrian government used the National Union of Syrian Students as its executive tool mainly in universities and its campuses. NUSS by itself or with the assistance of the security forces and the Syrian army, implemented wide campaigns against university students and staff, which included serious violations that may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, the most prominent of which are:

- * Execution or extrajudicial killing
- * Gender-based violence
- * Arbitrary arrest, torture and inhuman treatment.

Execution or extrajudicial killing violates the right to life, the most fundamental right, that is guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Geneva Conventions, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Syria is a state party.

Gender-based violence violates international law including the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, to which Syria is a state party.

Arbitrary arrest, torture and inhuman treatment violates international law including Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Syria is a state party.

Introduction

The ruling regime in Syria worked on framing society and dividing it into regimes loyal to or directly affiliated with it. Popular organizations were established to break up national ties, suppress the vitality of society, and oppose any social entity parallel to or alternative to state/authorities' institutions. The ruling Arab Socialist Baath Party was the only actor to whom the affairs of the state and society were delegated, through auxiliary organizations to the party, some of which Syrian students belonged to automatically or semi-automatically, once they entered educational institutions, such as the Vanguard of the Baath Organization in the elementary schools, and the Revolutionary Youth Union in preparatory and secondary school. As well as the National Union of Syrian Students-NUSS in Higher Education. NUSS functions as an arm of the executive authority in universities and a tool for tightening control over students and teachers, popularizing Baathist ideology and consolidating the security power that escalated in the eighties and nineties of the last century. Universities lost their previous scientific and social roles.

In addition to the role of NUSS in militarizing universities, and the human rights violations mentioned in this report, NUSS played an offensive role in the independence and level of higher education, and the activity of intellectuals and academics in society. The NUSS security function, its organic relationship with the authorities, and being the only obligatory path of organization and assembly in universities transformed the student movement in Syria into a movement affiliated with the authority. The student movement was blocked from developing into a positive movement outside the university walls. The normalization of relations of declared or hidden violence within its walls, the disruption of the means of expression and dialogue, and the lack of consideration for the values of equality, human dignity and free will, have weakened the vitality of society as a whole and the ability of Syrians

today to produce a social contract or a common perception among its various components throughout a decade since the outbreak of the revolution. This was mainly a result of the absence of a cultural and social reality occupied by elites, education, respect for the spirit of law and tolerance, the values that were absent from political action and its sources, especially universities.

NUSS also played its role in social exclusion and ideologizing students within the framework of the Baath ideology in the educational curricula to devote the “cult of the leader” and the leader’s political, social and cultural views, as the theoretical compass that everyone should follow. This trapped Syrians in a state of almost complete disconnection from the cultures of the outside world and the waves of democracy. Free thinking and criticism were absent from the educational process, in favor of indoctrination, single vision, suppression of the critical mind, and the dedication of nationalist propaganda and exclusionary and ideological discourse. As a result, generations were deprived of quality education, and the development and perpetuation of narrow-mindedness and intolerance was the alternative, while the world continued its progress on the paths of openness and globalization.

With the start of the uprising, security presence was heavy, and networks of informants were widespread. NUSS contributed in recruiting informants to collect information and report their colleagues to the authorities in order to suppress, monitor, and expel them from their universities. However, students engaged in peaceful protests in public and private universities and were subjected to repression, raids, live shootings, and killing. Some of the universities were turned into military barracks after hundreds of students were expelled from university dormitories, which were used as centers for launching rockets and missiles at neighborhoods opposed to the government. As in Al-Baath University in Homs, from which rockets were fired at Baba Amr neighborhood near the area, while NUSS turned into a security apparatus partner to other security agencies in suppressing demonstrations, in addition to spying on students and educational entities, while its branches abroad monitor the movements and activities of Syrian students there, censoring them or prosecuting them upon their return to the country. With the escalation of protests and spread in universities, especially in the University of Aleppo, NUSS turned into an armed militia whose members were involved independently or through the Baath Party Brigades in grave human rights violations with physical attacks in the demonstrators. Thousands of students were prosecuted and arrested, a large number of whom were subjected to torture to death, enforced disappearance, forms of violence and ill-treatment, and a group of wide-ranging violations that we will discuss successively in the chapters of this report.



Popular Organizations and the Siege of Society

The National Union of Syrian Students and its position in the state structure presents an example of the formula adopted by Hafez al-Assad to ensure his continuity in power, which was completely restored in the face of the uprising in 2011. The Party institution, civil society organizations, and auxiliary military organizations formed one of the bases of this formula.

Since his seizure of power in 1970, al-Assad's plan to control public life in Syria began by weakening society and denying any relations that arise between its members away from the path and control of the authorities, with an excess of violence on the one hand, and by planting and spreading networks of favoritism and relationships based on clientelism in the state and its institutions. Relying on the party structures that invaded the joints of the state and on a huge number of popular organizations to frame society and divide it according to the North Korean pattern that Hafez al-Assad was briefed on during his visit to North Korea in 1974. Hafez al-Assad expressed his great admiration for the iron fist of the Korean leader and his influence on his performance and theory of social organization, and his intention to implement it in Syria.

The Baath party was tasked with founding popular organizations or re-establishing existing ones and expanding their bases. The Women's Union monopolized the representation of Syrian women, and Unions of workers, peasants and professionals controlled the highly vital segment of workers and prevented them from the rights to demonstrate, strike and demand struggle. As for the unions of journalists, writers and artists, they were to produce culture according to the definition and concept of the authorities, and to recruit the cultural, artistic and intellectual elites, and put them all in the position of subordinate to the authority, which extended to control the free unions later in the early eighties. In order to raise future generations on the ideology of the Baath and on loyalty and subordination to its Secretary General, the beginning was with organizations linked to the educational system.²

The Baath Vanguard Organization (Syrian Pioneers), (Syrian Youth organization), (Tala' albaath), (The National Organization for Syrian Childhood)

² Heydemann, Steven, *Authoritarianism in Syria, Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970*, Dar Al Rayes - Beirut, 2011. pp. 371-374

It was established in 1974 by a decision of the Baath Party's regional leadership to include all elementary school pupils. It defines itself as: "one of the many fruitage of the blessed Correctionist Movement and a gift granted by our father the great leader «Hafez AL Assad» to the children of our country" and that it was established to be an educational and doctrinal school for the coming generation, the ideology of the party will be learnt by the children."³

Revolutionary Youth Union (Ittihad Shabibat ath-Thawra) (Revolution Youth Union)

It was established in 1968 as a political educational organization concerned with educating boys and girls aged 12-18 years, raising their awareness of the ideology of the Baath Party and preparing them to join its membership. During the tenth year of the school stage, applications for active membership in the Baath Party are accepted after - at least - three years of ideological preparation in the Union, whose rules of procedure provide for "educating the young generation in the country, developing their energies and organizing them in collective work, training and qualifying them, and preparing young people to contribute to protecting the revolution led by the party." This Union replaced the youth and scout associations that were banned in Syria after the Baath party coup in 1963.

The National Union of Syrian Students

The union was first established under the name of the Syrian Students Union as an organization working to organize Baathist students in universities and higher institutes in 1950. Its powers expanded with the coup of 1963 until the issuance of Legislative Decree No. 130 of 1966, which stipulated naming the National Union of Syrian Students as the sole representative of all students of higher education based on the decision of the temporary regional leadership of the Arab Socialist Baath Party No. /2/ dated 25/2/1966 to be one of the auxiliary entities of the Party and affiliated to the Central Committee of the Party and among its goals: Belief in the goals of the Arab nation in Arab unity, intellectual freedom, coexistence and strengthening the spirit of belonging to the students masses to the homeland, loyalty to its leader, deepening the spirit of patriotism and fully contributing to strengthening the building of national unity.

The popular organizations are organically linked to the Baath Party, and although the internal structure of the National Union of Syrian Students does not define the union as an affiliated or even auxiliary organization to the party, the Union and other organizations directly follow the decisions of the party leadership. The organizations were fully funded by the Party's budget with the exception of the Sports Union Organization which was established in 1971 by Decree no. 38 and the Olympic Committee later, whose funding was from the allocations of the Ministry of Education until the issuance of Decree 7 in 2005, according to which independent allocations to the Union were from the general budget through the Ministry of Local Administration. Even after amending Article 8 of the Constitution, the Party retained its powers, and its members and affiliates superficially transferred to be employers of the state, without losing control of it or relinquishing its monopoly on the public sphere in general. The Syrian president, the Secretary general of the Party issued a decree in 1 February 2021, approving the decision of the Party regional leadership to transfer workers in the Baath Party and popular organizations to the state's cadres instead the Ba'ath Party or one of its affiliates, stating: "The workers in the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and popular organizations who are not elected or assigned to leadership tasks are appointed in vacancies created only for this purpose and with the wages they have reached, while maintaining their seniority in employment that qualifies them for promotion."

3 The Baath Vanguard's Organization website, <http://www.syrianpioneers.org.sy/node/24>.

The association of the popular organizations with the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, and the latter's association or fusion with the executive authority - the President of the Republic, who forms and directs the institutions of the state according to his desire, led to that any attempt to remove the Party as an attack on the state and its institutions and the popular sectors associated with it. Michel Seurat described this as building the Syrian state, in a way that makes it opposite to society and in a permanent defensive position against it. The existing political structure and the overlap between the authority and the Party as a result of decades of its control over the state and its expansion in its joints, structures and institutions vertically and horizontally, unified their destiny. The demise of the authority or the end of its security grip, means the demise of the Party and its decline and the submission of its leaders to prosecution and perhaps uprooting, as happened with its Iraqi branch. It also means the end of the auxiliary organizations and the gains of their members, which explains the party's recruitment of its cadres and affiliated organizations to stand in 2011 against the Syrians to protect its existence, in a battle in which members of the Student Union formed an undeclared security branch and declared military battalions to control student life and ensure loyalty to the authority/family.

Their common destiny also explains the alignment of the party leaders around Assad, and the cohesion of his state structure despite the great rifts that affected its ranks, and its organizational fragility. It also explains the escalating emergence of the Party in public life with new roles related to providing direct aid and services to citizens in the complete absence of any organizations or civil actors. In the extraordinary meeting held by the Party's Central Committee in April 2017, its leaders reiterated the features of its new policy to restore its base, and the structures and relations that ruled the country in previous decades, as expressed in the editorial of the official Al-Baath daily newspaper on April 7, 2017, that younger members must be inspired and remember the history of Baath to meet the challenges facing the country today, noting that it is the responsibility of the older Baathists to inspire and renew the meaning of the Party's history in the present. As well as activating the Party's cadres in Syrian universities, and finding ways to mobilize the youth and the various youth organizations that control them, such as the National Student Union, the Revolutionary Youth Union, and the General Sports Union.⁴

Under the supervision of the party and in coordination with its central command, the local branches of all organizations, unions were reconstituted, and then activated, specifically in areas that the government had retaken from opposition control, with a focus on the organizations of the Baath Vanguard, the Revolutionary Youth Union and the Syrian Students Union. In 2020, Ashraf Bashouri, the Secretary of the Baath Party in Hama informed all managers and officials of state institutions in the governorate to return to work, on condition that appointment of any official or any person in a leadership position is exclusively for members of the Baath Party, and who attends periodic party meetings through party teams in each government institution. In addition, the condition of "working membership" in any leadership position has been fulfilled. The Baath Party hastened to issue a decision through the Central Youth Office in the regional leadership to the National Union of Syrian Students and the Revolutionary Youth Union to place the papers of applications to join the Baath Party within the registration papers in universities, and impose it on university students as an essential paper. In addition to directing all secondary schools to place and include their male and female students in the party ranks.⁵

4 The official daily Al-Baath newspaper, 7 April 2017 - Syria.

5 Yazan Shahdawi, "The return of the Baath in Syria..Reviving the glories of the "Shabiha" - Al-Modon, [عودة البعث في سوريا..إحياء أمجاد «الشبيحة»](#)

Paramilitary organizations



With the spread of popular protests from Daraa to other Syrian cities in the summer of 2011, and the impossibility of deploying members of the regular army to all the locations of the protests. The army was around 220 thousand most of which were conscripts with obligatory service. With the escalation number of deserters and defectors in the army and security forces, the authority moved to reconsider the confrontation policies to harness all possible energies for the battle, starting with the pre-existing paramilitary organizations such as the Baath Brigades, then the shabiha militias that emerged from the smuggling, extortion and bribery networks that operated under the protection of the Syrian government. Dozens of militias founded by influential loyalists and businessmen close to the authority. These organizations appeared with the Baath Party's seizure of power and expanded after the coup of 1970 when Hafez al-Assad began arming civil society organizations and unions to mobilize the masses to support his leadership, considering that party cadres are an extension of the security services. Despite their later integration into the Popular Army to serve as forces to combat internal disturbances, some of them kept some level of independence, such as the Baathist Workers' Brigades, which was founded by Izz al-Din al-Nasser, head of the General Federation of Trade Unions in 1977, which was an armed militia against the citizens, and a security apparatus to frame the workers and prevent them from standing against the "employer". It also had a prominent role in suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in the eighties. After that, it started organizing hundreds of thousands of workers and taking them to the streets in pro-government rallies to support the authorities in any decision they issued, whether it was in the interest of the working class or not. With the outbreak of the uprising in March 2011, the General Federation of Trade Unions engaged in government crackdowns in an attempt to restore the experience of the Baathist Workers' Brigades, where the head of the Damascus Workers Union forced the workers (janitors and governorate employees) and all those he has the authority over to carry batons and chase demonstrators in front of the mosques and beat them. The workers who refused were either dismissed from their work, or reported to security forces and taken to prisons or forcibly disappeared.⁶

⁶ In universities, came the Baath Brigades and the Baath University Brigades.

6 Naser Ali, "From the comrade to the shabiha.. who ate and dispersed the working class in Syria!", Eqtsad, <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/13400/>

The Baath Brigades (Kataib al-Baath), (Baath Battalions)

It was formed at the end of the sixties and reactivated with the beginning of the second year of the uprising to support the government forces. In Aleppo it was under the leadership of Hilal Hilal, the current assistant regional secretary of the party, after the opposition forces entered the eastern half of the city in the summer of 2012. It was tasked with guarding government buildings such as universities, university housing and other major facilities in Aleppo. Later its tasks developed to participate in the hostilities and became famous with a series of successes in many offensive operations on the areas controlled by the armed opposition, including in neighborhoods of Old Aleppo, Al-Layramoun, Sheikh Saeed, Sheikh Maqsood and Salah al-Din. It was operated ahead of the regular army units, especially those that consist mainly of conscripts. The Brigades expanded later in Lattakia and Tartus. At the end of 2013, it began to spread in Damascus.

Al-Baath University Brigades: Ammar Saati, the former head of the National Union of Syrian Students adopted Hilal Al-Hilal methods and implemented it in Syrian universities. By announcing the "Baath Brigades in Universities" and opening special offices for volunteering in the brigades in all branches of the Union in the Syrian governorates. Saati and Hilal appeared several times alongside the "Baathist student fighters" as the students took the oath necessary to enroll in the brigades. In return, the volunteer students received a set of incentives such as deducting the time spent in the brigades from the period of compulsory military service, and free treatment in military hospitals in case of injury. The university also facilitated their administrative promotion, in addition to allocating them to separate rooms in the crowded university housing, and giving them priority in supplies and aid received by the university according to the interviews conducted by SCM. They were also handed security ID cards to facilitate their passage at checkpoints, and allowed them to carry weapons and show them inside the university campus as well.

A report by Al-Jazeera TV, quoting university students in Homs, mentioned testimonies that documented that the Baath Brigades harassed and monitored university students coming from the besieged neighborhoods of Homs in the early years of the uprising. The Student Union in Homs was described as the fifth security branch in the city due to its heavy involvement in the violence that took place during that period. The militia in Homs had approximately 3500 student members, of whom only 200 were trained.⁷ The Brigades continued to grow and attract members in the subsequent years until mid-2018, when the Syrian government began dissolving the Baath Brigades, as well as other militias, and integrating parts of them into the Syrian army. The Baath Battalions that are affiliated with the Fifth Corps of the Syrian Army consisted of volunteers from the Baath Brigades.

Under international law, the Syrian government bears responsibility for international crimes committed by militia groups if it can be shown that the state has "overall control" over them. This criterion applies regardless of whether militia members are involved in, or formally associated with the government. Whether they were the Popular Defense Forces or other "official" paramilitary forces, or local militias loosely connected to the government that coordinates their activity while remaining operating under the direct command of local commanders.

7 Yazan Shahdawi, "Al-Baath Brigades..University Students at the Service of the Regime", Aljazeera Net, [«كتائب البعث»..جامعيون في خدمة النظام | أخبار تقارير وحوارات | الجزيرة نت](#)

In the Tadic decision, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) responded to the question of the degree of state control required to show “overall control” as follows:

In order to attribute the acts of a military or paramilitary group to a State, it must be proved that the State wields overall control over the group, not only by equipping and financing the group, but also by coordinating or helping in the general planning of its military activity. Only then can the State be held internationally accountable for any misconduct of the group. However, it is not necessary that, in addition, the State should also issue, either to the head or to members of the group, instructions for the commission of specific acts contrary to international law. (para.131)⁸

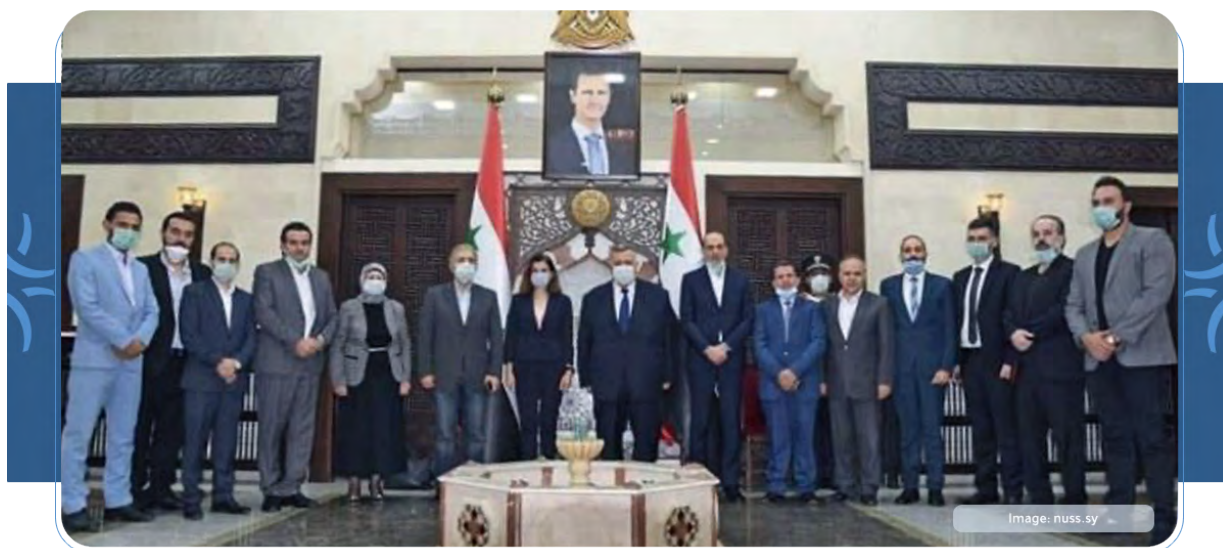
The Court also said:

The existence of the control that international law speaks of can be determined when the state (or a party to the conflict within the framework of an armed conflict) has a role in organizing, coordinating or planning the military actions of the militia group, in addition to financing, training, equipping or providing them with operational support. At that time, the actions carried out by the group or its members can be considered as acts issued by a state agency, regardless of the presence of specific orders issued by the state related to the commission of each of these acts in particular. (para. 137)⁹

8 “Entrenching Impunity Government Responsibility for International Crimes in Darfur”, December 2005, Human Rights Watch, [Entrenching Impunity](#)

9 [Tadic case: the Judgement procedure. | International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia](#)

The Organization of the National Union of Syrian Students



The National Union of Syrian Students-NUSS was established in 1950, as an organization for Baathist students. Hafez al-Assad presided over its first conference in Lattakia. Its base expanded with the March coup of 1963, when NUSS became the only representative of higher education students in Syria under Legislative Decree No. 130 of 1966 based on the decision of the temporary regional leadership of the Baath Party No. /2/ dated 25/2/1966. According to its website, NUSS is “a popular organization that includes students of Syrian public and private universities and higher and professional institutes. It has branches inside and outside Syria”. The NUSS reports directly to the central leadership of the Baath Party and abides by its instructions. In 2011, the pro-government newspaper “Al-Watan” interviewed Ammar Saati, the former NUSS head on his participation in the consultative meeting in Damascus that brought together representatives of the opposition and the Syrian government. Saati said in the interview: “I am Baathist, I lived as Baathist and will die as Baathist. I will defend this Party even inside the Party itself, if there were views that do not take into account the young Baathist view of this party.” He added, “We categorically reject the abolition of Article 8 of the constitution... I am speaking on behalf of hundreds of thousands of Baathist students who refuse categorically to engage in any issue that would undermine our achievements and gains over tens of years by the Baath revolution.”¹⁰

This view was achieved after the Party did not relinquish its powers, and despite its removal from the leadership of the state and society in the 2012 constitution, and stripping it of the powers of supervision or control over popular organizations, the central leadership of the Baath Party issued Resolution No. 227, 7/29/2020 naming the members of NUSS Executive Office, without having the legal authority to issue it, violating Article 10 of the current constitution, which states that the state guarantees the independence of popular organizations, professional unions and associations, and guarantees the exercise of its popular control and participation in the various sectors and councils specified in the laws.

Since 1963, when the Baath Party’s seizure of power in Syria, NUSS has been the Party’s tool for monopolizing higher education. The Party leadership linked the Party’s branches in universities to the “Higher Education Office for the University Education” ending the university’s social and political role, and its presidency was exclusively handed over to

¹⁰ “The head of the Syrian Students Union attacks Tayeb Tizini and refuses to abolish Article 8”, 19 July 2011, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/20462>

Baathists. NUSS also played a pivotal role in the policies of assimilation that were promoted under the slogan of “democratic education,” which Hafez al-Assad summarized in a speech to NUSS in the spring of 1980: “We in the Party and the state must manage each and every student. The Party and the state must be for every male and female student like a father and a mother. On this basis, we decided years ago to find a place in a college or institute for every student, and we implemented this decision.”¹¹ This strategy ended universities as a hub for knowledge production, by practices of what is known as “exceptional enrolment” in colleges that are known to be difficult to join, such as medical and engineering colleges. These practices allowed to enrol students who are not eligible but are linked to the dominant regime, through several channels including the sect, the popular organizations, military youth organization, that are affiliated with the Party. This impeded the work of the university institutions and undermined its scientific credibility.¹²

Throughout its history, NUSS was not representative of students despite the formally elected administrative bodies and the presence of a student representative in the council of each college and the NUSS participation in the University Council, which was approved in 1968. However, these entities lost the students’ interest and respect because they were emptied of their actual tasks. Especially that those in charge of them were often undistinguished or with less intellectual abilities in meaningless institutions. Over the past decades, NUSS has been one of the tools of power to militarize university life through military training classes, summer camps and the spread of armed security detachments in colleges and informant students who report their colleagues.

Apart from clientelism and services that NUSS members provide to some students on the basis of loyalty and following orders, NUSS did not show fairness to the students or an orientation towards the independence of the university and the independence of its decision. Instead, it had a prominent role in the decline of the university and the abolition of its social and scientific role. The NUSS is not alone responsible for the general decline in Syrian universities, as much as it is the responsibility of an entire system of political leadership, security services and the ruling Arab Socialist Baath Party with its cadres, of which the Union constitutes the largest part in the higher education sector. The Teachers Syndicate also played the role of Baath auxiliary union, which is practically under the Party’s control, and does not represent university professors who were prevented from forming their own union to represent and defend themselves, as in other countries.

In addition to the administrative, educational and partisan tasks assigned to it, NUSS played security roles in coordination with the security services even before the 2011 uprising. NUSS members committed physical violence, attacks on demonstrators and arbitrary arrests, at the behest of the security services and in coordination with them.

11 Seurat, Michel, Syria: The Barbarian State, Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 1st edition, Beirut 2017, p 40.

12 The functioning of ten Arab public universities - Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 1st edition Qatar, 2018.

Testimony of an NUSS former member:

Those who are considered representatives of students in the faculties were asked to attend a special meeting in which Ammar Saati, the NUSS was present. Saati told the audience that a group of traitors and agents of Israel are demonstrating against the state and demanding negotiations with Israel and American intervention in Syria.

He said: "Your duty is to teach them a lesson they will never forget. We will take you to where they sit in front of the Justice Palace and you have to beat them severely". He uttered many obscene words, of course, during that. One of the students asked: "What about the police, are they going to arrest us?" Saati replied: "No, no one will touch you. I will be responsible for you and will be in contact with the police." Of course, NUSS officials distributed to each student a long stick with a small flag at the end to serve as a disguise that what the students carry are flags and not sticks for beating. Some banners were distributed with pictures of President Bashar. The students were taken by buses there. When the convoys of students arrived, one of the officers approached a protester and said to him: "Stop this man, since the morning you have been deafening us saying you want freedom and democracy." Of course, the officer said that to guide the students to whom they should be beaten. Many students attacked the protesters with sticks and started beating them, so the protesters fled to Marjah Square. The students followed them with sticks and continued beating the protesters until the sit-in ended. Of course, in the midst of that, some students, under the guidance of NUSS leadership members, stole cameras and tapes of journalists who were present to cover the news, and that's how the matter ended.¹³

13 The reality of the pro-Syrian marches, the Syrian Human Rights Committee, 12 March 2005, <https://www.shrc.org/?cat=11>

The legal and organizational framework of the National Union of Syrian Students



Ammar Saati, the former NUSS head, stated in 2011: “We are an essential partner in the education process and in decision-making related to students’ lives. This is guaranteed to us by the decrees and laws in force. Therefore, we exist by virtue of the Universities Organizing Law that defines our role in all university councils, from the Higher Education Council down to the smallest administrative body in the country’s colleges or institutes.”¹⁴

- * According to Article 121 of the Executive Regulations of the Universities Organizing Law issued by Decree No. 250 of 2006:

Universities work in cooperation with the National Union of Syrian Students in accordance with the provisions of Decree 429 of 17 February 1968 and its amendments to raise the level of university cultural, artistic and sports life for students through: Establishing university campuses, restaurants, clubs, halls, theaters, sports stadiums, swimming pools and their necessary facilities.

This gave NUSS wide powers and financial capabilities, as well as more authority and control over the needs of students, foremost of which is low-cost university campuses.

- * Legislative Decree No. 87 of 2010, which states: “The educational institutions established by Legislative Decree No. 36 of 2001, in cooperation with the National Union of Syrian Students, work to raise the level of social, cultural, artistic and sports life for students and all that would contribute to national projects of social and voluntary service.”
- * Article 7 of the university’s internal regulations issued by the decision of the Ministry of Higher Education No. 1683/29 August 1988: One of the tasks of the Directorate of Student Activities at the university in its three departments, Sports Activity, Artistic Activity, and Cultural and Social Activity is to work in cooperation with the National Union of Syrian Students on taking care of students socially, culturally and athletically

¹⁴ Head of the National Union of Syrian Students to Thawra Newspaper, 10 December 2011.

- * Disciplinary and grievance regulations in universities grant exceptional powers to NUSS, and place the NUSS activities in the same way as university laws and regulations. They impose disciplinary measures up to the final dismissal from the college or from the university in general, and even if the penalties do not reach the dismissal, they severely affect the lives and stability of students. For example, one of the conditions for obtaining a university campus residence permit is that the student's original residence should be 40 km or more away from the city, registered in its university, and that the student was not subject to any disciplinary or administrative penalty or dismissal.

Article 2 of the disciplinary regulations states that any breach of university laws and regulations and of the various student activities undertaken by NUSS is considered a violation that requires disciplinary measures. Among those breaches:

- * Participation in acts of a political nature in contravention of the laws and regulations in force.
- * Organizing or affiliating with associations within the university or participating in its work without prior permission from the university or the NUSS.
- * Carrying out actions contrary to morals or due respect for official entities.
- * Distributing flyers, issuing wall newspapers, placing advertisements in any form, or collecting signatures inside the university or its affiliated areas without prior permission from the university presidency or the NUSS.

Article 5 provides for the membership of a representative from NUSS in the disciplinary committees. The committees consists of Vice President for Student Affairs and Administrative Affairs as a "chairman", and the membership of each of the:

- * Vice Dean of the College for Student Affairs and Administrative Affairs,
- * A member of the specialized college council named by the college council,
- * A representative of the Teachers Syndicate named by the relevant branch office,
- * A representative of the National Union of Syrian Students named by the Administrative Office.

The structure of the National Student Union inside and outside Syria



The NUSS Executive Bureau is the highest authority in NUSS, although it implements the decisions and recommendations of the General Conference. The General Conference reports to the Office of Higher Education for University Education in the central leadership of the Baath Party in Damascus, the highest authority in the Baath party and state structures. The mechanisms for decision-making and policy implementation within NUSS run in a hierarchical order, similar to the structures of other popular organizations associated with the Baath Party when it comes to control and monopoly from the highest level to the smallest unit in the organization. The structure is designed to be observed vertically and horizontally within universities and higher education institutions. The Executive Office supervises the activities of university and institute students through its branch offices within the educational facilities. It has eleven offices and is headed by the Executive Director who heads NUSS. The decision-making levels in NUSS are divided according to the following:

- * The General Conference, the highest authority in NUSS. It consists of representatives of the elected internal and external branches as well as members of the former Central Council. The conference is held every five years.
- * The Central Council, the highest authority in the absence of the Conference. It is elected by the General Conference, and consists of seventy members. Among the most prominent tasks of the Council is the election of the Executive Office, and setting the general policy of NUSS in the absence of the General Conference.
- * The Executive Office: Elected by the Central Council from among its members. It is the highest executive leadership in NUSS, and implements the decisions and recommendations of the General Conference and the Central Council.
- * At the branch level, there are branch conferences, and student unit conferences. The branches are led by the elected administrative offices from the branch conferences and administrative bodies at the colleges and institutes level. NUSS includes 15 branches in Syria and 28 abroad.
- * The Administrative Board: It is a group of students of different years who form the so-called "student body" (12 students). The administrative board is elected once every

two years. It is concerned with student affairs within the college and represents NUSS.

- * The Administrative Board leads student committees. For each academic year, a student committee consists of 14 members who are elected annually from among the students of the same academic year. Every student has the right to run for the administrative committee and also every student has the right to vote. Members of these committees are entitled to vote in the Board's elections.

NUSS is currently headed by Dareen Abdel Salam Suleiman, and includes the following offices:

- * The Office of External Relations, managed by Ali Barakat
- * The Foreign Branch Office, managed by Amer Tlass
- * The Office of Studies and Student Issues, managed by Imad Al-Omar
- * The Bureau of Culture, Information and Publishing, managed by Omar Jabai
- * Informatics office
- * The Office of Special Education is managed by Fayez Estefan
- * The Sports Activity Office, managed by Iyad Talab
- * The Office of Forums, National and Voluntary Work, managed by Ayman Shaher
- * The Organization and Rehabilitation Office, managed by Ammar Al-Kaadah
- * The Office of Institutes and Student Issues, managed by Khaled Bakdash
- * The Artistic and Social Activity Office, managed by Ghazwan Al-Zaeem

NUSS was the first popular organization in the Baath state to adopt the election mechanism to select its members in 1994. This, according to some, came within a security perception after the authorities imposed full control over Syrian society, and got rid of all its opponents following the Muslim Brotherhood's rebellion in the eighties, and the liquidation of Syndicate and political work and the elimination of the last pockets of opposition represented by the Communist Labor Party in the early nineties. The state began to deal with its potential opponents, i.e. the students, the very lively group, the most receptive to ideas and theories and the most enthusiastic to defend them as well. Therefore, universities had to be immunized from any ideology, organization or political programs that may infiltrate its ranks, regardless of its size. Therefore, student elections were allowed at the first level to consolidate regional, sectarian, and economic identities and affiliations, which by their nature contradict any comprehensive national project that could disrupt the party/family monopoly in the future. This came also to empty the energies of young people and their need for political action in an electoral process with a pre-decided outcome. The authority maintained the party leadership's approval of those who succeeded in the administrative body elections to advance to higher positions.

The NUSS main office is located in Damascus, Al-MazzeH Highway, near the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

It is worth noting that the appointment of the last executive office, which was formed on 29-07-2020 by a decision issued by the Central Committee of the ruling Arab Socialist Baath Party in Syria, bears the signature of Assistant Secretary-General Hilal Hilal. This came after elections took place within NUSS in which the NUSS central council was elected and included 81 members, 11 of which were named to the executive office. Some members who ran NUSS for a long time were disqualified by an order issued by the leadership of the Baath party, which included not allowing “any member of the central council over the age of forty-five years old to run for office.” This meant that Ammar Saati, the former NUSS head, Bassem Sudan, Arshid Sayasna, and Bashar Al-Mutlaq were excluded. Noting that the predecessor of Saati, Haitham Dwaihi was at NUSS head when he was nearly sixty years old.

Branches of the National Union of Syrian Students abroad



Branches for NUSS have been established in every country that has a Syrian embassy. These offices and branches practice security tasks in coordination with the intelligence services and the embassy’s security services to track down Syrians abroad and harass and monitor. In addition, those branches practice public relations activities in support of the government, and promoting its narrative about the war on terrorism, which resonates with the right-wing parties and the far-left parties that support the Syrian government in Europe in particular. In Europe, the NUSS branches organized many activities over the past years that included organizing sit-ins and marches to support government forces and demands to lift the sanctions imposed on officials and political and military leaders, accused of being responsible for violations of human rights. In October 2017, the NUSS branches in Slovakia, Germany, France, Hungary, Romania and Czechia organized protests to denounce what they described as the crimes of terrorist organizations and the forces supporting them under the title “Syrian Day of Rage” to support government forces and “the victories of the Syrian Arab Army against terrorism and terrorists.”

In France: A Facebook page, “the National Union of Syrian Students, France branch”, with 346 members, created on 06-21-2012. The information listed on the page indicates that there was a special tab for the France branch within NUSS, but it has been deleted or concealed later. The page is run by Saleh Salah Mualla who studied civil engineering at Tishreen University and began studying for a master’s degree at CY Cergy Paris University in 2018 and is currently residing in Paris. The activities mentioned by NUSS website in France were mostly solidarity

rallies with the Syrian government organized by NUSS protests against what they described as the policies of countries that support conspiracy and terrorism. Some of the people that were mentioned to have participated in those events: Dr. Rima Khleifaoui and Nicolas Berbhan, who gave a speech on behalf of NUSS in a celebration entitled “The Syrian Mother.” In 2014, Nadine Ali took became the head of NUSS branch in France.

In Lebanon, where there are a large proportion of Syrian students who are refugees from Syria or residing for the purpose of study only, the NUSS office is the official body for following up on the affairs of Syrian students at the Syrian Embassy in Lebanon. NUSS branch in Lebanon is headed by Rasha Fadel, whose strong relationship with the leader of Al-Ba’ath Brigades and member of the Syrian parliament Basim Swedan, as indicated in media reports. Swedan who runs most of the spy networks inside NUSS has a close relationship with Ali Abdul Karim, the Syrian ambassador to Lebanon. According to Orient Net, Ola Badawi, Muhammad Al-Shaqra, Yahya Al-Chalabi, Adnan Al-Mohammed and Ghiath Al-Sheikh, and other members of NUSS who are deployed in various Lebanese universities perform a security function by monitoring and collecting information on Syrian students, in addition to intimidating Syrian students and forcing them to participate in activities and seminars supportive of the Syrian government in cooperation with Lebanese parties and groups loyal to it. They even put pressure on the various Lebanese educational cadres in order to help Syrian students who are loyal to them to pass exams, especially in the Lebanese Governmental University, which is mostly dominated by the Shiite duo (Amal and Hezbollah).¹⁵

In addition to censorship and spying on students, NUSS offices abroad have engaged in criminal activities. Reporters Without Borders in a statement published in July 2020 regarding the safety of freelance journalist Sam Alebrahim:

Sam Alebrahim’s reporting has not gone unnoticed. and, in particular, has annoyed the local branch of the pro-government National Union of Syrian Students, whose members behave like “shabiha,” the armed volunteers in Syria who threaten and persecute those opposed to Assad. The journalist was attacked in the street and forced to move his residence three times. One day he received a photo of his front door on WhatsApp, accompanied by the following message: “Just so you know that we are very, very close to you, traitor”.¹⁶

Some NUSS heads and members abroad

- * Firas Youssef Mahfoud, Romania Branch
- * Amer Al-Maqt, Hungary Branch
- * Ali Asaad, Slovakia Branch
- * Louay Abdullah, Russia Branch
- * Orwa Mahmoud, Cuba Branch

15 “The National Union of Syrian Students in Lebanon: Espionage activities with a sectarian flavour, pressures for the success of loyal students and intimidation of professors”, 21 February 2021, Orient Net, https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/188121

16 “Syrian journalist threatened by Assad supporters in Kuala Lumpur”, 1 July 2020, Reporters Without Borders, <https://rsf.org/en/news/syrian-journalist-threatened-assad-supporters-kuala-lumpur>

- * William Al-Moallem, Egypt branch. Members of the Executive Office members: Abdullah Al-Junaid, Murhaf Al-Jani, and Fayyad Al-Ali
- * Yusuf Abdul Rahman, Bulgaria Branch
- * Hossam Salameh, Iran Branch
- * Zulfiqar Abbas, India Branch
- * Mustafa Dahrouj, Sudan Branch
- * Safi Ayoush, Australia Branch

Chapter II: The National Union of Syrian Students: Ten Years of Violations



The first demonstration took place at Damascus University/Faculty of Science on 04 November 2011, and was preceded by demonstrations at the International University for Science and Technology March. However, the demonstration of the Faculty of Science was considered the starting sign for the student movement at the university, as it is in the center of the capital, Damascus, a few meters away from the headquarters of the university's presidency and the party leadership. After the demonstration was dispersed, pro-Syrian government Facebook pages boasted about the Syrian Students Union's storming of the demonstration and its suppression, and the arrest of a number of its participants, describing them as vandals, and celebrating its suppression while chanting slogans in support of President Al-Assad. The Dean of the Faculty of Science at Damascus University, Dr. Muhammad Saeed Mahasni, denied that there was a demonstration calling for freedom and solidarity with Daraa, rather, according to him, a group of students gathered in front of the faculty building and chanted national slogans, expressing their support for the comprehensive reform process led by President Bashar al-Assad, and their rejection and denunciation of attempts to create chaos and destabilizing the security and stability that Syria enjoys. In parallel with the denial by the university president, the security decision, in coordination with NUSS, was taken to suppress protests at various levels, whatever its human legal cost was, relying on NUSS, whose practices ranged from mobilization and support for the

government to murders. Several reports were published at the time about the NUSS role in arresting and beating students opposed to the Syrian government and handing them over to the security branches. "Free Syria Students Union-Homs Branch " published a report on 27 December 2012 describing the methods of arrest that spread widely in the university and included male and female students who were first taken to the NUSS offices, and then transferred to the political or military security branches. Other reports and films provided evidence against NUSS.

Section I: The National Union of Syrian Students after 2011



With the start of the uprising, NUSS started mobilization and support for the government and forced students to go out in supportive rallies by various means. Its role also emerged as an undeclared security branch to control student life and ensure loyalty to the authority, and it moved from a framework of soft power with absolute loyalty to the authority to a security force that actively participates in repression directly. NUSS provided its members with electric sticks and batons to disperse and suppress demonstrations, and straps on the wrist to help the security forces in distinguishing them and to not attack them by mistake in the demonstrations, in which some of them infiltrated to suppress their colleagues from behind. Members of the Executive Office, officials, and secretaries of Baath Party branches were also armed with pistols similar to armed militias. Despite the presence of detachments affiliated with Syrian intelligence branches within all colleges and universities, the spread of NUSS members made it a lot easier for the security branches in monitoring and imposing control operations, especially since all NUSS offices members are students who have become the eye and arm of the security services inside universities and campuses. It should be noted here that armaments in universities were not restricted to Baathist students and NUSS members to face of the protests. The government decided to activate the military arms of loyal political parties such as the Syrian National Party and the Communist Party - Khaled Bakdash, to strengthen its local authorities, and to make them a partner security force that links them with the central force for benefit and common interest. The Syrian Communist Youth Union-Khalid Bakdash was armed with sticks, batons and swords at the University of Aleppo to counter the demonstrations.¹⁷

17 "The Syrian Students Union is Maher al-Assad's security arm to suppress university students", 20 August 2021, Syria TV, [اتحاد طلبة سوريا «ذراع الأسد الأمنية لقمع طلاب الجامعات»](#)

A. J., a female student at the University of Aleppo in 2011, said in her testimony to SCM:

The Union members' only task was to monitor students and submit reports to the intelligence even before the revolution, they reported many students. I believe that the ugliest branch of the Students' Union, which has been proven criminal and barbaric is the branch of Aleppo University. Perhaps, due to the university students' activity at the beginning of the revolution, the peaceful movement. NUSS members were the fiercest. The role of the government in the university was not limited to spreading security and intelligence members, but they brought the Students Union members and other students who had no problem going out, and sent them into supportive rallies inside the campus to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. At the Faculty's back door there was a very large yard, they used to go out there, not exceeding 20 persons and raised pictures of Bashar al-Assad and Party flags. They were always present at the university and we saw lecturers and professors shamelessly joining them in those rallies.

In addition to its role on the ground, NUSS has representatives in the disciplinary boards and disciplinary committees. NUSS is supposed to take the side of the students and represent the Union to defend their rights, especially if the disciplinary records relate to the exercise of one of the basic rights such as the right to expression, assembly and peaceful demonstration. However, NUSS took the prosecutor's side alongside the Syrian government, and in the presence of NUSS representatives, along with the faculty or department professors, in addition to representatives from the security branches, the disciplinary committees issued dismissal decisions against students, according to security and Baath Party reports that consider them "saboteurs and rioters at the university." The number of dismissed students increased dramatically after 2011. Hundreds were dismissed, including Yaman Al-Qadri, a medical student, after she was detained in one of the security branches for 23 days. Others included, Alaa Juha also from the Faculty of Medicine, Ahmed Qaziz from the Faculty of Pharmacy, Lama Al-Aysami, Kanan Al-Quwatli, Wael Kikhia and May Rostom from the Faculty of Architecture, and Uday Al-Sayed and Khaled Marwa from the Faculty of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. The decisions of dismissal on political charges also included 298 male and female students at the University of Aleppo, in 2012, including Jakkarkhwin Mulla from the College of Civil Engineering, Jihan Al-Rayes, Siham Hout and Fadia Naoua from the College of Arts and Humanities, Sawsan Aker and Jihad Ahmed from the College of Sciences and others.

S.A., a former employee at Al-Furat University in Deir ez-Zor, described to SCM the NUSS role at the university:

The role of the National Union of Syrian Students and its arms, “Administrative Boards” was limited at the beginning of the protests to coordination with the Party branch, then its members later participated in attacking demonstrations with sticks and batons. Based on instructions from the Military Security Branch, the NUSS offices worked in coordination with the Baath Party branch in the university presidency and Party groups in colleges and institutes. In the Faculty of Economics in which I worked, they coordinated with Dr. Amer Majid Agha, the Vice Dean for Administrative Affairs and Secretary of the Party branch. He was one of the Shabbiha since the beginning of the events in Syria. In 2014, there was coordination with the security directly, especially the Military Security, which I witnessed when I went to Deir ez-Zor at the beginning of 2014 and stayed for two weeks there. I was able to see the extent to which they are linked to the military security, and the extent of the military security’s interference in the affairs of university exams.”

At the beginning of June 2012, about a week after the Houla massacre in Homs, demonstrations took place inside the campuses of the Faculties of Law and Economics, which are close to Al-Tala’a Camp, which was a camp for Shiite militias at the time. Groups from the camp attacked the college building and assaulted the students and the administrative and teaching staff, including me. The role of the NUSS members “Administrative Boards” was to coordinate with the security by instructing them on the students who encouraged, coordinated and chanted in the demonstration, with NUSS help, 11 students were arrested from the Faculty of Economics and 15 students from the Faculty of Law.

A. J., a female student at the University of Aleppo in 2011, said to SCM:

I used to see every time someone was watching us before the security forces stormed the university. Those persons were NUSS members or agents. I do not know their names. They were Baathist students “working members” who occupied administrative offices in universities, but during the revolution they expanded, and there were people among them who used to enter the college and walk in it like gangs and mostly they were not from the students of that college. When the students went out in the demonstrations they stood on the stairs in front of each park. We felt the change by the presence of new faces of NUSS members.

Over the years of the uprising, members of the Administrative Boards in the university, in addition to NUSS members, practiced provocative actions inside the university campus, such as wearing military clothes inside the college or forcing students to go out in government loyal rallies, especially inside university campus. They also accompanied security forces when raiding colleges and participated in the arrest of some students from on study benches.

¹⁸ NUSS headquarters turned into temporary detention centers until the detainees are

18 Student unions fragment Syrian universities and turn into detention and torture centers - their members have wide powers, and are rewarded for their services with marks of success, 4 February 2013, Asharq AL-awsat.

handed over to the security services. Those temporary detention centers were supervised by NUSS officials, in which students were tortured and humiliated. One of the students who was interrogated at the NUSS office at Al-Baath University in Homs described how these offices had turned into security branches. According to the testimonies received by SCM, militarization appeared in an unprecedented way during the uprising, as entire buildings or floors were allocated in the university dormitory to Alawite students from who were armed, including the third floor of the university dormitory in Barzeh area in Damascus. Some pro-government faculty members and NUSS members also began to openly carry weapons on campus.

S.S., a student at the Faculty of Political Science at Damascus University said to SCM:

Union members put pressure on the students to join loyalist rallies. They told the students that there is a rally, and that it is an official notification, and the student who does not go out in the rally will be put on the black list for penalties, including "failing in a course subject or subjects - dismissal from college and so on." This behavior created a state of fear and terror among some students, and they were forced to go out in these loyalist rallies to avoid the evils of the members of the Union. I knew that NUSS now has its own law and is considered a parallel force. It owns the keys to universities in Syria, and it has been a security arm since its establishment and performs several tasks, including "arrest - combat.

A.N., a former administrative employee at Al-Furat University in Deir ez-Zor said to SCM:

One of the tasks of the NUSS members was also to trap their fellow opponent students or students from the governorates that revolted against the government. They called for student activities on national and partisan occasions, and persecute and prosecute those who were absent for accusations of being Anti-government, whether they were students or faculty staff, such as Dr. Samer Basmaji the Faculty of Science - Department of Chemistry, who was from Aleppo and arrested because of his support for the sit-in at the Faculty of Science, on 20 December 2013 after he was reported to security by NUSS.

H. B., a student at the Faculty of Law between 2008-2011, said to SCM:

I had no interest in NUSS before the beginning of the Syrian revolution, and even after it started, until NUSS showed themselves to me. They were spread in faculties of Damascus university which were located in Al-Baramkeh, openly carrying batons and sticks, standing at the gates of the colleges and searching the students. I witnessed their assault on students with beatings and insults, and the arrest of students in a demonstration. I never came back to the university after that incident.

H. Q., a student at Faculty of Economics, Damascus University, 2008-2012 said to SCM:

They were like an internal security branch in the faculty during the revolution. They attacked the demonstrations in the university campus and outside it. They searched students and their phones and handed over many of them to the security branches in Damascus, because of their peaceful activism or even suspicion of their opposition to the regime. They took up arms since the first months of the revolution, and I was twice beaten and once arrested by them.”

A. T., a Master’s student at the Faculty of Science, University of Damascus in 2012, said to SCM:

Previously, the NUSS role was to represent students before the faculty and the deanship of the faculty, but after 2011 their role became to monitor students and university employees, including teachers. They had a role in arresting students and handing them over to the security authorities and the Party branch at the university. They have powers that may sometimes be higher than those of the college dean and the teaching staff, for example, in 2012, two NUSS members wrote phrases on the walls of the Faculty of Natural Sciences in Damascus that included abuse and exaggerated show of strength. When I informed the college dean, his response was: “There is no power or strength except in God.” The phrases remained on the walls, and I do not know whether they were removed after my departure from Syria in 2013.

In conjunction with the intense security activity on the ground, NUSS members tracked the students in the virtual space. With the expansion of protests in Syria, the activity of the Syrian Electronic Army began. This group carried out attacks on news websites and blogs that publish opinions opposed to the Syrian government, and monitored the pages of the Syrian opposition and its public publications, and trapped all those who support them and handed them over to the security branches. According to a statement by the director of the Syrian Electronic Army website to one of the local newspapers, the technical staff on the site is about 150 people, and the administration is eight people, most of whom are university youth who do not belong to any party.¹⁹ Since the largest segment of Internet users and social networking accounts are students, NUSS, in cooperation with the Electronic Army, monitored university students accounts and tracked opponent students and for the purpose of arresting them. University cities (university dormitories) in Syria became hotbeds of the spread of tracking teams affiliated with the Syrian Electronic Army, to monitor any protest movements or demonstrations inside universities. Perhaps, the most prominent tactics practiced by NUSS in coordination with the Electronic Army was hacking specific accounts of opposition students living in the university dormitory and calling for night demonstrations. NUSS distributed its members at the gates of the dormitory buildings and at the planned gathering place, so that the participants would be arrested directly, as in the College of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering and the College of Pharmacy in Damascus in 2013.

19 Mohamed Zaid Mesto, 7 October 2011, “The Syrian Electronic Army..a means of suppressing Syrian activists on the Internet.” AlArabiya Net. 10 April 2012

Over the years of the uprising, NUSS continued its previous policy of promoting the government's discourse and launching campaigns of support for the Syrian armed forces,²⁰ including the continuous campaigns to donate blood for government forces, visits to military checkpoints and the wounded of the army, as well as entrusting its members with tasks related to distributing bread to civilians in light of the bread crisis in areas under the control of government forces. NUSS offices and the Baath Brigades centers in the governorates were among exclusive distribution centers from which Syrians get their daily need of bread.

Later, after the Syrian government controlled more areas, NUSS played political roles following the government directions. NUSS, which has long been proud of its affiliation with the secular Baath Party, held an alliance with the "religious youth team" that was established in April 2016. This religious youth team was organized to be the arm of the Ministry of Endowments (awqaf) It extends to the young segments of society. Especially after receiving support from Bashar al-Assad, when he met them in February 2017. Al-Assad considered them at the time as one of his tools to change the religious discourse he directed to society. This alliance resulted in many joint activities, including the forum "The Role of Young Elites in Drafting a Contemporary Religious Discourse" under the auspices of the Ministry of Endowments and NUSS in Tartous in 2016, and in Damascus in 2015. In return for the previous tasks, the NUSS members enjoy many advantages and benefits financially and in education, as well as political or administrative advancement in the future.

Y. Z., a student at the International University of Science and Technology in 2011 said to SCM:

Students affiliated with NUSS can always not attend lectures under the pretext of attending "Party meeting" and none of the teachers can discuss this matter with them. For example, in faculties of applied sciences, such as engineering and medicine, there are practical lectures that the student must attend, and cannot sit for the final exam or succeed except by completing the required percentage of attendance. But for the NUSS members, the matter is easy, as they justify their absence with a paper called "the Party meeting" and the teacher has no right to ban them from exams, if he dares at all to discuss the matter!

S.A., a former employee at Al-Furat State University in Deir ez-Zor, said to SCM:

NUSS members are treated differently from other students, as they often benefited before the events [March 2011] from coordinating the exam schedule in a way that is more suitable for NUSS members. During the events, they practiced pressure even on faculty staff to succeed in their subjects, and exploited some administrators and students during the examination process through open and public cheating, and changing exam rooms without supervision, and so on.

20 <https://www.facebook.com/syrian.students/posts/449034648448870> 19/08/2013/25/06/2012 <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=syrian.students.hama&set=a.207597572739643>

R.A., a female student at the University of Aleppo in 2011, said to SCM:

Lubaba, an NUSS member, a supervisor of the tenth Unit building [students residence], is a student in the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. Despite she reached the maximum number of failures, she remained at the university continuing her education because of her position in NUSS, and her leadership role, coordinating supportive marches between male and female students and organizing parties inside the university campus. She used to shout chants and poetry for Bashar al-Assad. She lived in the twenty Unit within the university campus, which is called the Guest House, which is a housing equipped for lecturers and university doctors. She lived there with her sister, who was studying at the Faculty of History or the Department of Arabic Language, I cannot remember.

M. H., a student at the University of Aleppo, said to SCM:

“The NUSS members enjoy many advantages over other students, and with the revolution and the outbreak of protests in universities, they gained advantages on the basis of the services they provided, and I cannot mention exact numbers, but what I know is that they were getting paid for it, and they were also getting help with their exams”.

It is also worth to mention the obvious Iranian support for NUSS after 2011, through many memoranda of understanding and student exchanges, and the Iranian embassy’s sponsorship of many activities and the empowerment of many loyalists to Tehran in NUSS, to create a society loyal to it, and to the Lebanese Hezbollah in universities. Iranian role in NUSS was not limited to activities, but also encouraged the studies carried out by students, including those researching the history of Syria and the region. Through many cultural centers and institutions, it is reformulating Syrian history in line with its project in the region.

S. S., a student at the Faculty of Political Science at Damascus University who was arrested in 2012, said to SCM:

Iranian students in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities who are taught by graduate students, could be originally fighters. I could suggest this through something that happened in the college, where a person registered with us in 2011, with a long chin, large muscles and a huge build. He was 40 years old or more, which does not suggest that he is a student, and this is what I verified on his personal page and conducted a search for him, and found that he is a Shabih and a fighter, and his name was Ali Naem and his nickname was Abu Hamza.

R. A., a female student at the University of Aleppo in 2014, said to SCM:

Female students from Shiite areas were treated differently. There were special training camps for them to use weapons, using rifles, shooting and sniping. All of this was in cooperation and coordination between NUSS with the military authority that conducts and supervises the training. During training, NUSS officials wore military uniforms, and they also wore it during support rallies.

R. A. also highlighted the discriminatory relief aid provided by UN agencies:

After 2011, I and all the students from Idlib governorate became outcasts at the university, as we could not obtain the right to university housing without the mediation of one of the influential or the military officials who had pressure on university officials. Therefore, we were forced to live in rented houses at our expense. During my time at the university, there were organizations on campus that helped students by distributing relief baskets, meals, and cash, such as UNICEF, WHICH and WFB. However, we, the students who came from the areas controlled by the Free Army and the areas of the countryside of Aleppo, did not receive any of this aid. The aid was only for Shiite students from the areas of Nubbul and Zahraa. They also had private suites in the university residence and were given special treatment in terms of the constant availability of water, electricity and meals.”

Section II: The most prominent patterns of violations by the National Union of Syrian Students



Execution or extrajudicial killing

In its July 2013 report, “Syrian Government violations against university student”,²¹ the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the killing of 1629 university students, including 137 female students, at least 98 of whom were killed due to torture in detention.

The description of the killings by NUSS members as murder, extrajudicial execution, unintentional killing, or as a result of practices that led to death varies from case to case and is within the jurisdiction of the judiciary that meets the requirements of a fair trial. But some of the facts and testimonies shows probable elements of a execution or extrajudicial killing, i.e. killings committed by state authorities or de facto forces outside the judicial or legal framework, on the condition of intentionality and persistence and that the death of the victim is the ultimate goal of premeditated killing, unlike the case in which death is an accidental result of an operation with different purposes. The Human Rights Committee commented on Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, concerning the right to life, stressing that State parties have the duty to prevent arbitrary killings by their own security forces and that the deprivation of life by state authorities is very dangerous. Therefore, the law must impose strict control and limit the circumstances that may make it possible to deprive a person of their life at the hands of these authorities.

Ayham Ghazoul’s mother who resides in Germany, described to SCM how her son was arrested and tortured by NUSS members according to a witness:

Ayham Ghazoul, a Master’s student at the Faculty of Dentistry in Damascus University in 2012, was leaving a lecture on 11-05-2012, Ashraf Saleh, an NUSS member and two Shabbiha members arrested him in front of the students and took him to a room belonging to the NUSS Administrative Board in the nearby Faculty of Human Medicine, which is usually used for torture. In the room, Ayham was beaten and severely tortured, his nails were pulled out, and boiling water was poured on him by NUSS members

²¹ “Syrian Government violations against university student”, 20 July 2013, Syrian Network for Human Rights, <https://sn4hr.org/blog/2013/07/20/syrian-government-violations-against-university-student-like-kill-torture-to-death-arrest-threaten-and-expelled-of-university/>

including Ali Khairbek, Nader Siwar, Iyad Talab (currently managing the Office of Sports Activity in the NUSS Executive Office) and Ashraf Saleh. Then Ayham was handed over to a patrol of the Military Intelligence Branch, the Raiding and Storming Brigade known as Branch 215. Students arrested in the Faculty of Medicine were routinely handed over to this Branch. Ayham remained in the Branch for five days, then died as a result of severe beatings and severe torture by NUSS members.

Gender-based violence

In September 2014, a Syrian girl committed suicide in Aleppo countryside by throwing herself from a building's third floor, eight months after she was released from a Military Security branch. She was pregnant after being raped in the Branch. Doctors refused to abort the child, whose father was unknown. The third-year student at Aleppo University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, was arrested while filming security forces near the university campus in the city. She was detained in the Military Security branch for a whole year, during which she was repeatedly tortured and raped.²² This girl is one of the many unknown numbers of cases of women and girls in Syria who faced all kinds of violations in addition to acts of sexual violence by the Syrian government forces for the most part to under arbitrary detention to extract confessions during the investigation stage, or within the daily practices of torture that take a punitive and retaliatory nature against female detainees. Or during raids and at checkpoints and others. Women are often more vulnerable to conflict-related sexual violence, and among women there are groups who are more vulnerable than others, such as detainees or those who are relatives, for example, to the armed forces or armed groups, or who belong to a region with a majority opposition to the government in the Syrian case.

In addition to the difficulties imposed by the armed conflict, the social and religious beliefs surrounding women compound the effects of the detention experience in general, due to the social stigma associated with it, which places women with the burdens of family and community honor, and sometimes tends to blame the victim for the violence she was subjected to instead of blaming the perpetrators. According to the testimonies received by SCM, NUSS members practiced acts of gender-based violence to a high degree. The practices varied between acts of sexual violence, assault and sexual harassment. It was practiced systematically without the majority of cases being reported or documented due to the prevailing culture that pushes not to talk about the subject and to cover the experience with secrecy. Gender-based violence is defined as any harmful act that targets individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of their gender. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.²³ Sexual violence is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It could be rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.²⁴

22 Al-Quds Al-Arabi: A university student committed suicide in Aleppo after being raped by the Syrian regime forces in the Military Security building, 14 September 2014 <https://www.alquds.co.uk>

23 Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings, The Inter-Agency Standing Committee, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/the-inter-agency-standing-committee> . See also, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation 19 (1992).

24 Analytical and conceptual framing of conflict-related sexual violence, Addressing the global challenge of violence, in particular against women and girls, 6 December 2013, WHO.

Sexual assault: can take many forms, including rape or attempted rape, any unwanted sexual act or any threats. Sexual assault usually occurs when a person touches another person's body parts in a sexual manner and without their consent. The United Nations Population Fund in Lebanon defines sexual assault as: a Sexual act directed against a person forcibly and/or against that person's will, or not forcibly when the victim is incapable of giving consent because of his/her temporary or permanent mental or physical incapability.

Sexual harassment: encompasses non-consensual physical contact, like grabbing, pinching, slapping, or rubbing against another person in a sexual way. It also includes non-physical forms, such as catcalls, sexual comments about a person's body or appearance, demands for sexual favors, sexually suggestive staring, stalking, and exposing one's sex organs.²⁵

N. T., a female Master's student at the Faculty of Economics, Damascus University in 2012, said to SCM:

On May 29, 2012, I was arrested at the main gate of Damascus University in Al-Baramkeh. They took me into the guard room, which is a small room next to the gate. Then three female students entered, and I later learned that they were from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, far from the colleges in Al-Baramkeh. They were shabiha students. They started to interrogate me and opened my laptop. It contained some videos about the demonstrations and the revolution. They started beating me, and I had not been beaten by anyone before. I spoke to them and told them that I was at their age and that we could be friends. They told me: "You do not deserve to be our friend. Mr. President made you graduate from university and gave you your diploma! But the diploma will be withdrawn from you, you do not deserve it." They kept beating me. They brought a big wooden stick, and started to beat me by the stick and their hands too.

N. T. added:

Then they took me by car to the NUSS center in Mezzeh campus, which I recognized from the shape of the buildings. I stayed there until the evening, when they interrogated me. The same girls and a guy from NUSS who told me that he is from my city. I told him: I am from the same city as yours, so he said, "You do not deserve [to be from my city]", and slapped me in the face. I did not know their names, but I remember their faces well, and the man's surname is "Al-Haw" but I did not know his first name. I noticed that the room was fully equipped as if it was their own interrogation room where there was a table, chairs, a sink and a small room that seemed to be for interrogation in the NUSS in Mezzeh.

I was then taken to the interrogation room, where the girls took off my clothes and started searching my whole body, my hair and everything. They were telling me dirty words. The girls had gone when the Branch members came and then put me in a car and took me to Al-Khatib Branch. In comparison, the girls' torture was harder and more terrifying. Even Today, when I attend psychological support sessions, I express my fear of shabiha girls more than young men, even when I lived in Lebanon for a while and used to pass at the checkpoints if there were girls, I was very afraid, while

25 Frequently asked questions: Types of violence against women and girls, UN Women, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence>

the presence of young men was a normal thing for me and did not terrify me. What the girls did to me was unmatched, and no one did it to me in any other Branch. I went through Al-Khatib Branch, State Security Branch, Military Police, Military Judiciary, Civil Judiciary and Adra Prison, all of which had lesser impact on me than the psychological and physical harm these girls had caused me.

M. N., a female student at the Faculty of Media & Journalism, Damascus University in 2012, said to SCM:

On 09 December 2012, I was interrogated and then arrested by NUSS, after a decision was issued to refer me to a disciplinary board to consider my dismissal from the university without a legal reason, but based on a slander and my family affiliation and the region from which I come. During the interrogation, the male members summoned an NUSS girl member to beat me as they would not beat me since they were males. At that time, a huge girl in military clothes spoke in a strange way and her words were full of insults. She hit me a lot at the time and said to me: He is our leader (i.e. Bashar al-Assad), he stepped on our heads, and that we did not understand anything, and in addition to the insults, I was subjected to violence, and most of the physical violence was on my face.

M. N. added:

I stayed in the NUSS office for two or three hours. My face became very red for the next two days from the severity of the beatings, and because of the shock at that moment I did not feel the beating. She was angry because I did not seem to feel pain while she was beating me, but it was something that provoked her, as she considered it a cold reaction from me, which made her beat me more severely. I was in disbelief at what was happening to me, and felt the pain of the beating after leaving the office, when I was transferred to the Military Security Branch (227).

The most difficult thing in the prison was hearing the detainees' screams while they were being tortured. It was a great psychological torture for us, and I was not personally subjected to physical torture. I was only beaten while I was in the NUSS office. The most severe shock was in the bathroom of the prison. A barrel of water where they were torturing the male detainees. I saw one of them in that barrel filled with very cold water, and I will never forget this scene. The weight of the young man was no more than 30 kilos, he looked like a ghost, shivering inside the water without clothes. He had no hair, a chin, or mustaches, and his appearance was very painful, as I and other female detainees remained shocked for several days from that scene.

A. J., a female student at the University of Aleppo in 2011, said to SCM:

On the day when a UN delegation, “international observers” visited the university. A colleague and I agreed to go to the university square, waiting for what might happen. We sat down on the side of the grass. A car stopped in front of us, and a young man I knew was sitting in its back seat. He was an NUSS member from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities who used to come to our faculty, and I know his face and features well. Two officers got out of the car and spoke to us in Alawite dialect and asked for our IDs. When one of them saw my ID asked me: Were you born in Al-Bayada? I said to him: Yes, he said to me: Al-Bayada of Tartous? I said no, and told him that I am from an old area in Aleppo, and we argued about this issue. I was shocked when he slapped me in the face, as I should have answered his question: “Where are you from?” with “I am a Syrian from Aleppo”. The strength of the slap made me fall to the ground. When I stood on my feet, he was swearing at me with offensive insults to the girls, then he asked me what I was doing here. I told him that I am a university student, and he asked me if I participated in the demonstration. I told him that we had nothing to do with it. When he turned his back on his friend, he said to him: “drag them, they are infiltrators”. In the meantime, my colleague was carrying a leather bag for men containing a sum of money. He opened the bag and said that that money was his salary for teaching French, and that they can take it all, and that we had nothing to do with anyone and begged him to leave us alone. The officer took the whole bag with the money inside and told his colleague to get in the car, and when they got in the car, he told us that if he saw us here after 60 seconds, we will never see the light again, and they drove away.

Arbitrary arrest, torture and inhuman treatment

In its July 2013 report, “Syrian Government violations against university student”, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the arrest of 35 thousand university students, including 4 thousand female students, at least 98 of whom were killed due to torture in detention.

According to the Homs Branch of the “Free Students Union”, about 524 arrests were documented until mid-2014, noting by the branch that these numbers are incomplete due to the large number of detainees and the difficulty of being able to count them, and that the total numbers are estimated in the thousands.

Throughout the years of the uprising and conflict, NUSS members accompanied the security forces in raids, storming and searches, and they acted as guides or informants against their colleagues. They committed physical and verbal attacks against students and practiced acts of looting and robbery, such as those practiced by government forces and their affiliated militias. The NUSS members also carried out raids and arrests campaigns on their own, all of which are arbitrary arrests due to the absence of legal capacity or jurisdiction. The arrest is considered arbitrary in the absence of any legal justification for the deprivation of freedom, and if the authorities apply it as a punishment for the victim’s exercise of one of the basic rights or freedoms such as the right to freedom of opinion, expression and peaceful assembly. Every deprivation of freedom is also considered arbitrary if tainted by a lack of full or partial respect for the right to a fair trial enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments.

All arrests were accompanied by forms of inhuman or degrading treatment, which generally amounted to torture and torture leading to death. The United Nations “Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment” defines torture as:

any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession, punishing him for an act he has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating him or other persons. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions to the extent consistent with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.²⁶

W. Y., a student in the Faculty of Electronic Engineering - University of Aleppo 2012, said to SCM:

In April 2012, I participated in organizing a demonstration in the square of the Faculty of Electronic Engineering with my friend (M. M.). As in the previous demonstrations, the security forces and law enforcement forces were not late to come, so they stormed the faculty and surrounded it. I remember at the time that they exceeded 60 armed officers from the intelligence and other security forces, and they threw tear gas canisters and then attacked us. So, we fled to the auditoriums. They entered the auditorium and sent female students out. They took our university cards and then made us lie on the study benches at gunpoint and trampled on us with their feet” and then severely beat us and insulted us. At that time, 3 NUSS members participated. NUSS members used to guide the security forces to the places where the protesting students had fled. Some of NUSS members were in the demonstrations to find out who was in them.

S. S., a student in the Faculty of Political Science at Damascus University in 2011, said to SCM:

During the first months of 2012, the violence and attacks by NUSS members against students escalated. A group of NUSS members, without Security forces participation, stormed a student’s room in the university campus at about four o’clock in the morning and pulled him out of his bed. They took him into the tunnel of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and beat him and broke his glasses over his eyes. That student’s name is SH.A from Hama Governorate, and he has a problem in his eyes because of this accident. I also saw an NUSS member whom I personally know, hitting a student with his fist in a demonstration, and that was in front of the restaurant the Political Sciences Faculty. I also remember that a student named A.K from Idlib was arrested at the faculty gate. Although I was not sure whether it was NUSS members who arrested him or the army and security, it was highly probable that they were NUSS members because they were present at the faculty gate permanently and monitored the students’ movements

26 UN General Assembly, Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 9 December 1975, A/RES/3452(XXX), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f1c030.html> [accessed 23 December 2021]

carefully, harassed them, and search, loot and arrest them. A.k died later under torture in detention in Branch 215. After the demonstration of the Faculty of Science in May 2012, armed men, in addition to NUSS shabiha, “members of the committees’ attacked the faculty and stormed it, so the majority of the students fled. Within the faculty campus, these armed men stormed the residence and broke and vandalized the students’ rooms and looted the students’ phones, money and supplies. They wrote on the walls of the university campus curses and insulting phrases for those who go out in demonstrations, as well as expressions in support of President al-Assad and the armed forces, such as: From here, the Assad soldiers passed”. After that, the faculty was transferred to Mazzeh, in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities’ building.

Mansour Omari, the former supervisor of VDC Detainees Department in 2012, spoke to SCM about his cellmate, who was murdered in detention:

When I was detained in 2012 for my work with VDC, several university students were imprisoned with me. Ahmad (pseudonym), was a fourth-year student at Damascus University in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. He described the day he was arrested. In May 2012 NUSS members attacked Ahmad inside the University campus, beat him and then handed him to the intelligence forces. In detention, Ahmad was subjected to severe torture and deprivation of sleep and food. He lost a significant amount of weight, so much so that his skin hung from his body and rippled whenever he moved.

After I was released in 2013, I smuggled Ahmad’ name and other cellmates’ names written on cloth hidden in a shirt. As I kept tracking and following the news of those named on the fabric, I learned from his family that they obtained a death certificate for him in 2020.²⁷

A student at the Faculty of Economics, University of Damascus in Baramkeh area said to SCM that he was beaten by NUSS members twice during peaceful demonstrations that took place at Damascus University in Baramkeh. The first time was in the Faculty of Science after a demonstration in which the students went out on 11 April 2011. He was arrested by NUSS members of the administrative board in NUSS room in the building of the Faculty of Chemistry. He was handed over to a person named Majd Khoury, who is the head of the administrative board at the Faculty of Economics, and another person named Abu Alhakam from NUSS. Then he was helped by the demonstrators while being led towards the Faculty of Economics and was able to escape. The second time, he was in a demonstration in front of the Faculty of Economics in Baramkeh on 30 June 2011, where a student demonstration took place in front of its gate. Members of the NUSS administrative board of the faculty, including Majd Khoury and Abu Alhakam, called security forces in the buses that were located in the vicinity of the Baramkeh area to come to suppress the demonstration. Members of the board, in cooperation with the security forces beat the demonstrators and assaulted the interviewee with a sharp object. This resulted in a head wound. Members of the board also arrested the student, M.D and hit his head on the sidewalk and handed him over to the

27 Victims of Assad’s notorious Students’ Union speak out - but the UN is not listening, 29 Sep 2021, Mansour Omari, Amnesty International UK Blogs, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/campaigns-blog/victims-assads-notorious-students-union-speak-out-un-not-listening>

security forces to be arrested along with several other students.

A Master's student, at the Faculty of Science at Damascus University in Al-Baramkeh in 2012, was contacted by the faculty in May 2012 and was asked to come to the university - the Faculty of Science - for registration issues. He went to the faculty and entered the registration office, followed by members of the Baath Party, an NUSS member and University Security officials. He was taken to the Party Branch building within the campus of the Faculty of Law at Damascus University, which is the building next to the NUSS building in Baramkeh area in central Damascus. He waited for a while until a car belonging to the Political Security came and he was handed over to the patrol that took him to the Maysat branch or what is known as the Jubbah branch. He remained there for a while before being transferred to State Security Branch 285, where he was subjected to torture, ill-treatment, and deprivation of health care and food. He was later released without being brought before the judiciary or being tried.

A student at the Institute of Civil Engineering at Damascus University in al-Baramkeh area was searched on 12 December 2012 while entering the gate of the Faculty of Civil Engineering in Damascus by students who stood guard at the gate. They found a Thuraya satellite communication device in his bag. They arrested him and took him to the NUSS branch near the Faculty of Law, where many students witnessed the incident without one of them being able to do anything about the situation. When he arrived at the NUSS building, he was taken down to the basement and interrogated in one of the offices by a person whom he could not confirm his status as to whether he was a security officer or a student. Then he was beaten by that person and asked to go out to the corridor in front of the office to be beaten by students passing in the corridor between the rooms and he recognized some of them as members in the administrative board of the Faculty of Civil Engineering. One of them was known in the university and he always bragged about carrying a rifle, AK-47, during the suppression of the demonstrations. The person in the NUSS building stole money from the victim and obtained by force the password of his iPad, then handed it over to the Political Security branch near Al-Maysat, or what is known as the Jubbah branch. There he was interrogated and the interrogators in the branch used the help of the person who was in the NUSS building. This person came to the branch and told the interrogators in the branch the password for the device, which he had obtained from the witness and they opened it. The victim was transferred between several branches during which he was subjected to severe torture, until he was released after being transferred to the Terrorism Court on 10 March 2015.

S.S., a student at the Faculty of Political Science at Damascus University in 2011, said to SCM:

I was arrested from the house by the Raid Squad of Branch 215, where a person collaborating with NUSS came to us. He was neither a shabbih, nor went out in demonstrations. He was with NUSS in order to take advantage of their influence in passing his subjects. That person came to the house where I lived with seven of my colleagues before my arrest at night. He carried a message from NUSS in the faculty that we had to go back to college and work as usual, including the dismissed ones whose situation will be reconciled. We stopped going to class due to the crackdown on the demonstration that took place in the faculty in May 2012 and then the Faculty of Political Science was transferred to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Mezze. The next day, members of the Raid Squad raided our house, and I can confirm that that person who visited us was the one who told them our whereabouts. We were seven people in the house when they took us to detention. One of us died as a result of torture after being released from detention. In general, NUSS shifted in its cooperation with the Security services from just reporting and putting pressure on students to an actor who makes arrests and participates in armed military activity. I started to see pictures of some NUSS members on their Facebook and other accounts, as they go to fight in other cities, such as Hama, Deir ez-Zor, and others. We were arrested on 9 June 2012, and I was released in mid-September 2012.

I joined Tishreen University, Faculty of Education, Department of Classes Teacher in 2011. I lived in the seventh housing Unit within the university dormitory, and there were three young men “students” from Hama governorate with me in the room, one of whom was an active member of NUSS and his father was also a member of The Baath Party in Hama. On 12 December 2011, my colleague, the NUSS member, came into our room in the evening and told us that the person in charge of the Unit was calling for us and that there had been a theft incident and that they wanted to verify the matter and take information from us. When my two roommates and I got down, we found two young men at the door of the Unit. They told us we will go to the university security detachment to complete the required information and come back. They had a minibus with them. We got on the minibus and I sat behind, and one of the young men sat behind me in the last seat. Suddenly the minibus came outside the university campus, and the young man behind me said to me loudly, “Look down, you animal.” He started cursing at me.

Later, the car stopped, and we didn’t know where we were?! They got us out of the car while they beat us, then they took us to a place that looked like a hall, and a huge young man named Abu Jaafar came out and they told him: “Take those men.” There, they blindfolded and handcuffed us, and made us turn to the wall. Abu Jaafar put the paper on the shoulder of each one of us, and started taking his information, and he beat us before any question. Then they began to bring us one by one into the interrogation room, to find out later that we are in the Military Security Branch, and that the NUSS member who lives with us in the room was the one who informed the Security. Months later, we were transferred to the judiciary on charges of forming a terrorist cell, planning to bomb the university, and staging demonstrations. We were released in April 2012, after denying all the charges and not having a conviction against us.

University of Aleppo after 2011, the University of the Revolution



The protest movements began to reach Aleppo city, which was late in catching up with the revolting Syrian cities from all sides due to the demographic extensions between the revolting Aleppo countryside and the peripheral and impoverished neighborhoods of the city. Demonstrations started at the beginning of 2012 in the neighborhoods of Salah al-Din, al-Sukari, Bustan al-Basha, al-Halk and al-Sakhour, which exceeded 200,000 demonstrators, before the “Free Army” entered the city. In parallel, the movement of the city center through the sit-ins of the Lawyers and Doctors Syndicates in Aleppo, and the student protests that grew daily inside the University of Aleppo, showed the participation of the middle and educated groups in the uprising and their role in motivating other segments of the city to participate.²⁸ There was 27 colleges and 20 institutes, including basic colleges in Aleppo, and affiliated colleges in Idlib governorate, with an estimated student population of 200,000 students. 80,000 students in formal education, and 120,000 students in the open education program, according to statements by the President of Aleppo University, Mustafa Afioni.²⁹

A timeline of the most prominent protests in Aleppo University

With the start of the revolution, the University of Aleppo was one of the main corners of the peaceful movement in the governorate, until activists called it the “University of the Revolution” as a result of its activities since the beginning of the Syrian uprising.

A. J., a student at the University of Aleppo in 2011, said to SCM:

The university campus and residence has changed during 2011 and beyond, as many factors affected the lives of students some of whom were arrested and some of them left .NUSS had begun to infiltrate the university dormitory and began to be present in lectures, with the aim of monitoring, spying and reporting. They even interfered sometimes in the examination process. They assigned students to spy on other students who went out in the demonstrations, by photographing them and recognizing their

28 Bishara, Azmi: Syria's Path of Pain towards Freedom, 1st ed 182.

29 Dozens Killed as Explosions Hit Syrian University, the New York Times, 16 January 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/16/world/middleeast/syria-violence.html>

faces, especially in small demonstrations that were directly suppressed by the security forces. There have always been violent arrest campaigns inside the university campus or in the university dormitory, in which NUSS members participated with the security forces.

- * On 13 April 2011 a student demonstration at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities took place in support of Daraa and Baniyas. Security forces and students recruited by NUSS responded violently with orders from the head of the Aleppo NUSS branch. NUSS members and members of Baath Party offices in the faculties of Arts and Humanities, Mechanics, Informatics and Education participated with the coaches in the Basil Al-Assad Club for Taekwondo and Bodybuilding affiliated with NUSS. They beat the students with their fists and kicked them with their feet, and many students were arrested.
- * Also on 13 April 2011, a massive arrest campaign took place in Aleppo university residence after dozens of students gathered and chanted for freedom and martyrs. The rooms of students from Daraa, Latakia and Baniyas were stormed and they were beaten with whips and sticks during the arrest, with the support of the university's security branches.³⁰
- * On 4 May 2011, hundreds of Aleppo University students gathered in the center of the university residence at 9 pm, and marched in front of the residence units in solidarity with the protests and demonstrations of the Syrian cities. NUSS members and the various security forces confronted the gathering with beatings, use of tear gas and many arrests. Live bullets were also fired, wounding some students.
- * On 17 May 2011, after the demonstrators managed to raise the independence flag over one of the university buildings, the security forces stormed the university residence, and arrested dozens of students. NUSS members accompanied them in the raids, and broke the doors of the rooms, took off the lockers of the cupboards and scattered the contents. During the raids, computers and phones were confiscated from students.
- * Dozens of students were expelled from the university residence permanently. According to the records, the university residence administration meeting - sessions / 6, 7, 8 / on 15, 17, 18 / May 2011, headed by Dr. Ahmed Abdel-Dayem/the Secretary of the University, and the membership of: - Eng. Muhammad Salloum/Director of the University Residence, Mustafa Gharibi/Head of the Aleppo NUSS Branch, Dr. Ali Melhem/Vice Dean of the Faculty of Law for Administrative Affairs and Ahmed Al-Baz, Director of Student Affairs, the meeting discussed the following topics:
 - 1 - Implementation of the decision of the security plan in the university and the university residence,
 - 2 - Presenting the names of the violator students, evacuating them from the university residence, and referring them to the Disciplinary Committee.³¹

30 Demonstration In The Faculty Of Literature - University Of Aleppo - 13 April 2011, the Syrian Creative Memory, [مظاهرة كلية الآداب - جامعة حلب 13 نيسان 2011 - الذكرة الإبداعية للثورة السورية](#)

31 The Crimes of the Police Regime, 19 May 2011, Welatê Me, [Welatê Me - جرائم النظام الأمني في جامعة حلب](#)

- * In June 2011, around three months on the beginning of the protests, the Syrian security forces referred to the judiciary about 400 students, who were arrested for participating in the protest demonstrations, on charges of “rioting, violating protest laws and insulting the head of state. Most of them were arrested during a campaign by the security forces in the university city of Aleppo”.³²
- * On 6 and 7 December 2011, student demonstrations took place inside the university campus in the square of the Faculty of Economics and Electrical Engineering. The security forces, backed by some members of the NUSS administrative boards and security members in civilian clothes from outside the campus, used excessive violence to suppress peaceful demonstrators, which led to the serious injury and fractures by using batons, and dozens of them were arrested.
- * On 3 May 2012, after the number of student demonstrators exceeded five thousand, the security forces stormed the university and fired live bullets, killing 4 students and wounded 28 others. They arrested more than 200 students and burned several residential units in retaliation. Hundreds of university students were expelled from the residence units. Some of those units were turned into military barracks, and the university was temporarily closed by a decision issued by its president.
- * On May 17, 2012, one of the largest demonstrations took place in Aleppo university. The organizers thought that the presence of the Arab observers would deter government forces and agencies from targeting them, so several demonstrations took place inside and outside Aleppo University, all of which met inside the square of the Faculty of Medicine and in the vicinity of the university campus. However, despite the presence of observers the security forces shot some protesters inside, while NUSS members were deployed among the demonstrators, and they carried out stabbing attacks with knives in the back rows.
- * On 15 January 2013, a missile exploded on Al-Amarah roundabout, near the Faculty of Architecture at the university, on the first day of the university exams. Another missile hit the university residence building, which was crowded with internally displaced people from the eastern areas of Aleppo. Dozens of students and IDPs were killed and hundreds were injured. The horrific massacre claimed the lives of 82 male and female students, according to the “Free Syrian Students Union”.

32 Referral of 400 students from Aleppo University to court on charges of “rioting and insulting the head of state”, 27 June 2011, France 24, [إحالة 400 طالب من جامعة طرب أمام القضاء بتهمة « الشغب وتحقير رئيس الدولة »](#)

The National Union of Syrian Students in Aleppo University

In 2011, with the start of the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia and then Egypt, Syrian security forces began preparing plans to confront potential protests, whatever their size and whoever advocated them. At Aleppo University, the plan began in Damascus-Aleppo and vice versa with security and organizational coordination with the NUSS central office and the security services. The preparations were directed mainly to contain and suppress any possible Kurdish or Islamic student movements. The scenario of popular protests was not on the table at the time; however, pro-government rallies began even before the protests in the context of a security policy to intimidate those who think of opposing the authority and to display its complete control over the public space. This was by orders from the NUSS Executive Office in Damascus to its Aleppo branch in institutes and colleges, that includes “student committees” with about 350 active members.

With the beginning of the protests in 2011, NUSS allocated an open budget for the pro-government rallies, in which it was lavishly spent to spread flags, banners, pictures of Assad and loudspeakers, in addition to the availability of free transportation to transport students to the rallies. In conjunction with the roles of mobilization and support, NUSS participated early in suppressing the protests, where it emerged. NUSS emerged as a paramilitary organization even before the announcement of the Baath Brigades in 2012, and its violations spread outside the university campus along with other paramilitary family and tribal organizations such as Al-Bari clan, and groups financed by businessmen close to the authority.

M. H., a student at the University of Aleppo, said to SCM:

The violations committed by NUSS went beyond the university campus, so that its members participated in the suppression of a demonstration of the Umayyad Mosque. The demonstration was announced on Facebook. A group of young people came and chanted inside the mosque. The security forces and NUSS members were stationed outside the mosque, and attacked the demonstrators. NUSS members attacked them with sticks.

In mid-2012, NUSS in Aleppo was the first organization to adopt the idea of the Baath Brigades within the university, whose members were mainly Baathist students. They engaged in a number of combat missions on the conflict fronts, in addition to their heavy deployment in the cities, at checkpoints. This assisted the army and security services devote themselves to military operations in areas outside government control. In an interview with the former Secretary of the Baath Party branch at the University of Aleppo, he said, “It is possible that the group called the Baath Brigades will become the main ‘university security force’, and he expressed his confidence in the success of the experiment due primarily to the internal knowledge of NUSS members and Baath members who will easily point their fingers at the “spoilers”.³³

33 A lifeline, Syrian Students Union: Maher al-Assad’s security arm to suppress university students 20 August 2021, Syria TV.

M.H., said to SCM:

The role of NUSS in the beginning was to participate in the direct suppression of the demonstrations. NUSS members were handed batons and were fully equipped to suppress the demonstrations of the students. Baath Party Branch was the direct and executive body directing NUSS which has a building inside the university, which is directly responsible for NUSS. Later, a riot battalion was deployed inside the university to suppress it. The intelligence and police of al-Shahba district were outside the university campus. At that time the role of NUSS was to inform and report on students who participated in demonstrations in every college so that they could be summoned, punished, or expelled. The Baath branch would summon students, interrogate them, threaten them to send them to the intelligence branches, and so on.

NUSS practices were conducted in direct coordination with the security services in Aleppo, where the head of Air Force Intelligence, Major General Adeb Salameh, called on a group of members of the NUSS administrative office in Aleppo to organize cooperation in confronting "the conspiracy" shortly after the introduction of a security detachment to the Baath branch at Aleppo University with six members of State security to provide direct reports from within the university. This procedure was also in part to supervise and empower informants on campus.

A. N., said to SCM:

With the beginning of the protests, NUSS of Aleppo, headed by Mustafa Gharibi, a science student from Idlib governorate, al-Shofani village, committed to what can be described as neutrality, and its members did not engage in the security missions entrusted to them later. Which led to summoning Gharibi to the Air Force Intelligence branch, and interrogating him, ending with the decision to fire him and the members of the Administrative Office. A doctoral student at the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Wajih Samani, was appointed as the head of the new administrative office, and he, in turn, chose the new members of the office, who were entrusted by the security services forces the tasks of following up on dissent students, prosecuting them and submitting reports to the security authorities. This continued until 2013 with the appointment of the architecture student, Ammar Kaadh, as head of NUSS, during whose reign NUSS's violations took a more public form, and Kaadah personally supervised the arrest of some students and handed them over to the security branches.

According to A. N., a former administrative employee at the University of the Euphrates - Deir ez-Zor, one of the tasks of NUSS members was also to trap their fellow students whether opponents or from the rebellious governorates against the government, by calling for student activities on national and partisan occasions, and accusing those who were absent and prosecuting them on charges of being anti-government, whether they were students or members of the teaching staff. Such as the case of the doctor in the Faculty of Science - Department of Chemistry Samer Basmaji from Aleppo city, because of his support for the sit-in at the Faculty of Science. Basmaji was arrested on 20 December 2013 after he was reported by NUSS.

In February 2012, as protests continued at the university. Omar al-Aroub, a member of the NUSS executive office at the time and a member of the leadership branch of NUSS in Aleppo met with officials and supervisors of the housing units for female students in Aleppo university, and told them: "If you felt that any girl has any opinions or inclination towards the opposition in the university housing, throw her from the fifth floor, and whoever tries to question you, tell him to come and ask me."³⁴

A. S., a student at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Aleppo University in 2012, said to SCM:

The university changed completely after 2011, so that I was trying to reduce my presence in the college as much as possible, to avoid random arrest or watching the assault on one of the students without being able to provide assistance. NUSS members at the main gate of the university arresting students and dragging them on the ground, beating them from the moment of arrest until the closing of the door of the NUSS detachment became one of the daily scenes at the university. I later learned from one of the former detainees that the beatings, insults and abuse by the NUSS continued until a security patrol arrived to take the student to the security branch, which sometimes lasted for hours.

In order to handle the university housing, the most protesting spot in Aleppo between 2011-2013, in which about twenty thousand students resided, the NUSS leadership circulated to its members to inspect and monitor rooms regularly to report any suspicious gatherings, with an additional focus on the students from Daraa and Homs governorates. Those students were easy to identify, and find their rooms by NUSS members who were granted the advantages of the security services in terms of their access to the student's records the whereabouts of active students, inside the university housing. According to the information they could access, they participate effectively in the frequent raids of the university housing, in which they robbed students' property during room searches. One was the raid following a night demonstration on 2 May 2012, in which two students were killed and 50 others were wounded by security forces. Following this demonstration, the university housing was evacuated on the morning of 3 May, and banned students from attendance in the university's colleges and institutes until the 13 May.

34 Ibid.

Private Universities after 2011



In 2011, International University for Science and Technology was the first university to have protests against the government.

Y. Z., said to SCM:

Because of its location and the proportion of the people of Daraa governorate, which exceeds 20% of its students, protests went out in the university and coincided with the government forces' storming of Daraa city at the end of March 2011. Demonstrators in the University were arrested and security launched campaigns since the beginning of the revolution. Several students were arrested, including the young man, Ahmed Abu Houran (a third-year architecture student), who was later killed. His brother, Mohammed Abu Houran, was arrested by NUSS at the Faculty of Dentistry.

The security campaigns extended to include educational institutions in the area, where The Arab International University was stormed. The security operations impacted all educational institutions located on the Damascus-Daraa international road between September and November 2011, with the exception of the Syrian University, which was owned by Rami Makhlouf due to the presence of a large number of loyalists to the government, according to Y. Z.

In private universities, NUSS members also went far in their violations and their authority extended unchecked due to the absolute support of the security forces. They intimidated the teaching staff, and used violence during the inspection of students at the university entrances. They were even more violent and abusive than security checkpoints sometimes, as arbitrary arrest and exposing students to torture and deprivation of freedom became a daily routine encountered by students.

Y. Z. also told SCM:

After 2011, the university guards were changed. The old ones were dismissed, and NUSS members were put in their place, so students were being searched by their colleagues! In 2021, a student was arrested by NUSS members, for having in his bag the book, "The Nature of Tyranny" by Abdul Rahman Al-Kawakibi. The student was arrested and remained in detention for about a month.

NUSS also participated directly in the suppression of students, without coordination or referring to the security services, so that it turned into an independent security branch, practicing arrest and various violations, and it is possible to distinguish between two tracks in the process of arresting students:

The first: If a student was reported, they would arrest him and hand him to the security branch and there was no other procedure. But NUSS was keen to not hand most of the students who took part in demonstrations inside the universities, to a security branch. They detained them for days and sometimes weeks in the Mezzeh university residence, where they were assaulted and then sent out. Students were tortured in the university housing on an almost daily basis, sometimes by their colleagues. Dareen Suleiman, who is currently the NUSS head, witnessed the torture sometimes.

Second: Students who were reported and did not participate in activities inside the university, but only outside it, were directly handed over to the security branches.

As for the University of Kalamoon, on Wednesday 16 November 2011, around hundreds of students, (500 according to media reports) gathered, dressed in black, in solidarity with the victims. Their gathering turned into a demonstration inside the campus for about an hour before the security forces stormed the university campus with five SUV vehicles carrying full-equipped soldiers, 4 old buses and a 24-passenger bus carrying NUSS members from Damascus University who came among the security forces that entered the university. NUSS members at Kalamoon University cooperated with them by directly participating in the attack on students with sticks, batons and electric sticks. They also assaulted faculty teaching staff and employees, some of whom were injured during the storming of the teachers' halls. Despite the injuries and cases of fainting, the Red Crescent was prevented from entering the university.

During the storming, the students were gathered, verbally insulted and assaulted with batons, while all those who wore black were arrested and everyone who forgot his identity card or was not a Syrian citizen. As for the students from Homs and Hama, they were treated was more violent and humiliation. The university administration suspended work until 11 December and called for the university housing to be vacated within less than an hour.³⁵

35 <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/content/print/209683.html>

M. B., a student at the University of Kalamoon, who was arrested on 16 November 2011, said to SCM:

In the afternoon of 11 November 2011 there were large demonstrations at the University of Kalamoon and many students were arrested from the university. There was a large presence of security forces, and others standing next to them. It turned out that they were NUSS members from the University of Damascus. Buses contained cartoon boards with NUSS names on it. The security forces had a list of the names of the wanted persons which was provided by NUSS members in Qalamoun University. These wanted persons were the ones who participated in the demonstrations or organized them. I thought at that time that my name was not on the wanted lists, especially when I was allowed to enter the university campus. I witnessed students, arrested, beaten and dragged. I was dragged on the ground, and I was taken to the Nabek police station and from there to the Mezzeh airport, where I was detained there for two or three days and then released on 20 November 2011, for economic and social considerations. My name was not included in the security wanted lists on the day of the demonstration, but I was arrested because my colleague who studies with me in the same branch, told them that I am from Inshaat area in Homs and that he was sure that I had something to do with these demonstrations.

M.B., added that it was later confirmed that the buses containing cartoon boards bearing the name of NUSS were carrying NUSS members from Damascus university who were trained by the security forces. They were elite trained groups to be sent to universities - the security depended on these groups to attack students instead of direct intervention.

In November 2011, the private Arab International University mentioned its internal system of violations, and warned the students in an announcement it posted on its website that demonstrating, distributing leaflets and collecting donations are reasons for dismissal from the university. Students considered this a clear indication of the involvement of private universities after the governmental universities in the suppression of the revolution. The private International University for Science and Technology and other universities published the announcement and other warning statements after the recent demonstrations. The University of Kalamoun issued a statement in which it considered the demonstration that took place in it as an unfortunate accident aimed at spoiling the safe atmosphere that enhances the university's character and the Qalamoun region as a whole. It also said the in statement: "The university condemns any work that takes place in its premises other than knowledge and learning, as it affirms that it is nothing but an educational edifice in which students receive knowledge, and is not a political platform. It also denounces the circulation of offensive language and slander in writing or verbally, by anyone."

Despite the severe security restrictions, the demonstrations at the International University of Science and Technology, Yarmouk University, and the Arab International University (formerly European International University) did not stop at the end of 2011.

In addition to the repeated raids by the security forces with the participation of NUSS members, the security forces practiced almost daily collective punishment of students by the Air Force Intelligence checkpoint in al-Kiswah city by stopping university buses (International University of Science and Arab and Yarmouk universities only) heading towards Damascus. Security forces and NUSS members got into the buses on almost daily basis to insult, threaten and shout at students, then leave the buses at the checkpoint for hours before allowing them to pass. In 2012, the student opponent activities in universities located on the Damascus-Daraa road ended in 2012 after the universities moved to temporary headquarters in Damascus, due to the impossibility of studying there, because of the military operations in the governorates of Daraa and Damascus countryside.

M. H., said to SCM:

Government forces and groups of Damascus University students affiliated with NUSS were stationed in the area separating the Arab University and the International University of Science. They stopped the International University buses, allowed those heading to Damascus and stopped those heading to Daraa. They took the students from there to the University yard and beat them and forced them to lie on the ground. Then they trampled on them, and beat and insulted them. Also, NUSS students burned the hair of a 19-year-old student (currently in Jordan) and wounded his back with a sharp blade. He was arrested and remained for 4 months in detention. And after his release he appeared to be unconscious, and when he returned to college, his health was very bad and he showed signs of torture. They pulled out the students' phones, took their SIM cards, broke some phones, and arrested students from Daraa (some of them were organizers of demonstrations and student movement inside the college). They were later released.

As for the University of Qalamoun, its administration was directly involved in the suppression of students and the practice of violations against them. Salim Daaboul was also involved in opening all of his facilities in the Qalamoun region including the university to house the shabiha and security forces, and help them in the pursuit and liquidation of anyone accused of smuggling weapons from Lebanon to the "Free Army". Daaboul provided information that resulted in the liquidation or arrest of many young people from Homs, most of whom were university students, on various charges such as protesting or communicating with foreign parties including communicating with media outlets.³⁶

36 Who is Salim Daboul, Zamanalwsl, 10 July 2012, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/28389/>

Recommendations

To United Nations Agencies Working in Syria

- * Respect human rights in Syria, and UN commitment to its principles regulating its work, including the Parameters and Principles of United Nations Assistance in Syria.
- * Ensure UN agencies in Syria, including the UNDP commit to their codes of conduct including:
 - Apply human rights due diligence, investigation and auditing before working directly or indirectly with any Syrian entity or entities working in Syria.
 - Adhere to the rules for using digital media, including by not using them to support human rights violations, including the positive promotion of groups accused of committing serious crimes and international crimes, including torture and murder.
 - Ensure transparency and respect for the press and the right to request information, including by not using the policy of strategic responses to evade clear answers.
- * Adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in working with any Syrian contractor or third party, or those working in Syria, and ensure that those entities are not complicit in human rights violations before working with them.
- * Ceasing any form of direct or indirect cooperation or support for the National Union of Syrian Students and other entities and groups that are affiliated with the Syrian government and are likely to have participated or involved in human rights violations. To the International community
- * Consolidate legal efforts to hold accountable the members of the National Union of Syrian Students and the Baath Party and security officials who are suspected of involvement in the massive, widespread and systematic violations of human rights, under the principle of universal jurisdiction, or in any of the mechanisms to hold the perpetrators accountable and justice for the victims.

To the Syrian government

- * Conduct prompt, thorough, impartial and independent investigations into the allegations of torture, arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial killing and other forms of unlawful killing against Syrian students by members of the National Union of Syrian Students, and prosecute those found guilty under fair trials.
- * Remove the provisions and penalties from the summary of the criminal record of students who have been tried for acts considered to be an exercise of basic rights guaranteed by international human rights law and the Syrian constitution, such as the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.
- * Erase disciplinary penalties issued for the same reason from student records, and

publish lists of this removal in universities, return those who have been dismissed to study if they wish, and cancel any effects or consequences of previous decisions.

- * End any form of military presence in universities and higher education institutions, and adopt a security body affiliated with the university and under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice, as an alternative to the university guards affiliated with the Ministry of Interior,
- * Ensure the requirements of security inside university facilities without infringing on university freedoms, and adopt electronic scanning techniques to inspect the entrances to universities and higher education institutions, in cases of necessity.
- * Take the necessary measures to ensure the freedom of student work, including the formation of associations and forums, the issuance of bulletins, and cultural and political events,
- * Prioritize freedom of expression, scientific research and assembly, and recognize independence and legitimacy of the university's existence as a scientific entity aligned with its social milieu, serving education and research as well as other functions including spreading knowledge, serving the community, and developing the surrounding environment.
- * Amend university admission policies and consider competence as the only determinant of admission, and end all exceptions, including the sons and daughter of the teaching staff, and members of the Arab Socialist Baath Party,
- * Prohibit militarization of education and its political adaptation, and abolish admission policies that grant additional degrees for those who perform military training including "Al-saiqa and al-Ryada" that violate the constitution and principles of justice.
- * Lift the hand of the Arab Socialist Baath Party from any role different from other political parties in the educational process and disengage it from its auxiliary organizations, the Youth of the Revolution and the Students Union,
- * Prohibit accepting secondary school students to the ranks of any political party, pursuant to the provisions of Article 13 of the Parties Law No. 100 of 2011, which requires for membership in any party, that the member must be 18 years old.
- * Commit to the text of Article 153 of the 2012 Constitution that states: "the legislation in force and issued before its approval is valid until it is amended in accordance with its provisions, provided that the amendment is made within a period not exceeding three years", and, amend or abolish laws, administrative decisions, and organizational decrees that violate the constitution and establish the authority of the Baath Party and stand in the way of pluralism, including the Arab Socialist Baath Party Security Law No. 53 of 1979.
- * Comply with the provisions of the Parties' Law issued by Legislative Decree No. 100 of 2011, especially Article 35, which obliges the Parties Affairs Committee to submit an application to the First Civil Court of Appeal in Damascus to consider dissolving the Arab Socialist Baath Party and liquidating its funds for not complying with the

principles stipulated in Article 5/ of the law confirmed in Article 5/ of the Regulations, Paragraph (f) in particular, which stipulates that the party's activity does not involve the establishment of any overt or secret military or paramilitary formations, or the use of violence in all its forms, or the threat or incitement of it.

- * Allow human rights monitors, including the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and the Special Rapporteur on Syria, to have unimpeded access to detention centers and on the situation

To Syrian civil society Human rights and civil organizations

- * Document violations of the National Union of Syrian Students, and work with the families of the missing and victims, including those residing in Europe, to sue former and current leaders and members of the National Union of Syrian Students and to issue arrest warrants against them within the framework of the principle of universal jurisdiction established in the European judiciary,
- * Include the names, photos and stories of university student victims in transitional justice programs, and in national memorial initiatives in national monuments, to formulate a collective agreement and a national memory of what happened in Syria, which in parallel with accountability and justice for the victims requires that everyone learns about the grave violations of human rights, recognize them and deal with them,
- * Consolidate the efforts of Syrian civil society organizations working in documenting human rights violations to establish a database at the national level, and cooperate with international entities such as the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism to support the investigation and prosecutions of the most serious crimes committed in Syria since March 2011, within an institutional framework that allows for greater collection that allow collecting information and evidence about the crimes and violations committed and paves the way for the perpetrators to be held accountable.
- * Establish a national fund to support student victims of violations, with permanent funding sources to provide mental health aid, legal and financial aid, and to provide grants and incentives to complete school years for students who were suspended or prevented from doing so due to conflict-related circumstances.
- * Consider establishing an independent group or organization specialized in monitoring the work of the United Nations in Syria.
- * Syrian and international media to focus on the work of the United Nations in Syria, and work on investigative reports about it.

