

Militia on Campus: Crimes of the National Union of Syrian Students at Damascus University



SYRIAN BRITISH
CONSORTIUM المجلس
السوري البريطاني

Militia on Campus:
Crimes of the National Union of Syrian
Students at Damascus University
ميليشيا في الحرم الجامعي: جرائم الاتحاد
(الوطني لطلبة سورية في جامعة دمشق)

Published in 2024 by
Syrian British Consortium
71-75 Shelton Street
Covent Garden
London WC2H 9JQ
United Kingdom
<https://www.SyrianBritish.org>

The Syrian British Consortium (SBC) serves as a voice for Syrians, British nationals and UK residents who are committed to the establishment of a free and democratic Syria. United in our shared values of democracy and universal human rights, we work with our partners to inform British government policy towards achieving this aim.

© Syrian British Consortium 2022



Lead author: Dr Yasmine Nahlawi
Investigators:
Dr Yasmine Nahlawi, Muhammad Shihadeh,
M Yafa, Dr Haytham Alhamwi, Sema Nassar
Report design: Superpower Partners

Contents

1	Executive Summary	4
2	Methodology	5
3	Introduction	7
4	Crimes Committed	10
5	Attacking Peaceful Protests	11
6	Imprisonment	14
7	Torture	17
8	Cooperation with State Security Services	19
9	Modes of Liability	21
10	Conclusion	22

1 Executive Summary

The National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS) is a national body that represents students in Syria within public and private universities as well as Syrian university students abroad. It held a general surveillance role even prior to the outbreak of conflict in Syria. After 2011 and in the context of the wider uprising overtaking the country, the NUSS assumed additional roles on university campuses to stifle anti-regime sentiment, including patrolling university grounds for anti-regime activity, clamping down against nonviolent student activity, arresting and torturing students, handing students over to security services, and generally intimidating and harassing students.



Figure 1: Logo of the National Union of Syrian Students.

This report offers the conclusions of a year-long investigation conducted by the Syrian British Consortium's (SBC) Investigations Team into international crimes committed by NUSS members and agents at the University of Damascus, focusing on the years 2011-2013 when anti-regime sentiment within the student body was at its highest. The significance of the University of Damascus stems from its location in the nation's capital which the government wanted to maintain within its grip, coupled with substantial anti-regime activism of the student body.

SBC conducted twenty in-depth interviews with seventeen male and three female witnesses, inclusive of former students, professors, and NUSS members, with their full and informed consent. Their testimonies revealed how NUSS members—themselves university students—assumed widespread powers on campus post-2011, attacking peaceful anti-regime protests; arbitrarily detaining students due to (suspicion of) anti-regime activity; and torturing students including by beating, tasing, and verbally and psychologically abusing them. Sex and gender-based violations (SGBV) as well as violations with sectarian undertones were also documented.

Witness testimony further confirmed extensive cooperation and coordination between the NUSS and Syrian State security services, indicating that NUSS crimes were not committed in isolation, but rather, in the context of the wider Syrian government crackdown against the national uprising against its rule which began in March 2011. As such, the violations documented within this report point to a role of the NUSS in the commission of war crimes and/or crimes against humanity of imprisonment, torture, and intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as per Articles 7 and 8 of the Statute of the International Criminal Court.

2 Methodology

This report summarises the findings of a year-long investigation (September 2022 to November 2023) conducted by SBC's Investigations Team into international crimes committed by NUSS members and agents within the University of Damascus [hereinafter referred to collectively as 'NUSS']. The investigation focused on violations committed between March 2011 and the end of 2013 when anti-regime activity on campus was highest.



Figure 2: Damascus University.

The report is based on the testimonies of twenty witnesses (seventeen male, three female) which were obtained and used within this report with their informed consent. The majority of these witnesses (fifteen males, two females) were former students within the University of Damascus who were directly detained by the NUSS or otherwise experienced or witnessed NUSS crimes being committed. Two of the witnesses were former university professors at the University of Damascus and offered insight into the role and influence held by the NUSS within the university. One witness (male) was a former NUSS member who detailed the internal structure and decision-making within the NUSS.

Interviews were conducted virtually, with the exception of two UK-based interviews which were conducted in person. Open-source research was used to corroborate witness testimony.

To protect witnesses, all names within this report have been altered and identifying information has been removed. This report refers to original testimonies through alphanumeric references beginning with "SBC".

Unless otherwise stated, the contents of this report are confined to first-hand testimony, namely, events and experiences that witnesses saw or underwent themselves. Hearsay evidence was not included in the findings unless it was corroborated by first-hand accounts. For this reason, the results of this report should be seen as an underrepresentation of the crimes committed by the NUSS at the University of

Damascus. The report arrives at its legal determinations using the standard “reasonable grounds to believe” employed by the Commission of Inquiry on Syria in its own reports.¹

Challenges in conducting this investigation included the passage of time (up to thirteen years) since the alleged crimes were committed. As such, it was difficult for some witnesses to recollect precise names or events. Other key witnesses have passed away, including in detention. Another challenge was the reluctance of some witnesses to offer their testimony, either due to frustration over the international system’s perceived inaction on Syria and hence a scepticism that any justice would be served, or due to security concerns pertaining to family members remaining in Syria. The final set of challenges pertained to obtaining testimonies from female witnesses. Males appeared to be particularly targeted for detention and torture as the NUSS wanted to avoid giving the impression that they were detaining female students, and thus, the pool of female witnesses was significantly smaller. In the limited instances in which SBC was able to connect with female witnesses who were direct victims of the NUSS, several of them declined to offer their testimonies. These challenges emphasise the need to provide greater protection and support to witnesses so that they feel safe in providing their testimonies, as well as to prioritise international accountability efforts against alleged perpetrators to increase Syrians’ faith in global justice systems.

A copy of this report, as well as redacted copies of the underlying interviews and materials, will be submitted to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism on Syria (IIIM) as well as relevant national war crimes offices, after which the report’s determinations can be used by national and international authorities to pursue judicially-determined findings of fact and law.

SBC’s Investigations Team would like to extend its deepest gratitude to the Center for Justice and Accountability for its continuous support throughout the investigation. Thank you also to the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) for sharing material from overlapping investigations. Our warmest gratitude and appreciation extend to the witnesses who entrusted us with their testimonies. We are humbled by the trust that you placed in us and we hope that we have given your stories justice.

1. See, for example, HRC, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (16 August 2012) UN Doc A/HRC/21/50 at para 11.

3 Introduction

The NUSS was established in 1966 through Legislative Decree No. 130 which declared it to be the sole representative for university students in Syria as well as for Syrian university students abroad.² It remained an auxiliary organisation of the Baath National Command in Damascus until January 2024, when Law No. 1 of 2024 established the NUSS's full financial and institutional independence from the Baath Party and government.³ However, rather than promote an independent student body or grant newfound academic freedoms, critics argue that the new law seeks only to polish the Syrian government's image abroad, evade responsibility for former NUSS crimes, and create means by which to circumvent international sanctions.⁴

Some of the major roles that the NUSS has assumed since its inception in 1966 include to mobilise the youth, cultivate young Baathist leaders, and conduct general surveillance within Syria's university campuses.⁵ Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, NUSS branches across Syrian universities assumed greater roles in monitoring and surveilling students, professors, and employees; clamping down against nonviolent protests on university campuses; and detaining and torturing students.⁶ In 2012, a paramilitary group with extensive connections to the NUSS, called Kata'eb al-Baath, was formed in the University of Aleppo and was subsequently exported to other universities.⁷ The history of the NUSS, its structure, and its role have been well-documented elsewhere.⁸

This report aims to complement and build upon existing works on the NUSS by providing a victim-centred account of violations that took place at the University of Damascus as well as the NUSS's role in them. Previous documentation and academic

-
2. 10/10/1966 مرسوم تشريعي رقم <<http://parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&cnid=8676&RID=-1&Last=9849&First=48&CurrentPage=98>> On branches and surveillance role of the NUSS abroad, see "The National Union of Syrian Students: A Biography of Violations" (*Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression*, 2023) <<https://scm.bz/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Student-Union-Report-EN-1.pdf>> at 5-6, 8 [hereinafter SCM Report].
 3. On the NUSS connections to the Baath Party prior to the 2024 law, see Ali Aljaseem, "In the Shadow of the State: The Rise of Kata'ib Al-Baath at Aleppo University after 2011" (*Journal of Perpetrator Research*, May 2021) Vol 3(2) at 93, 98. On the 2024 law, see "الرئيس الأسد يصدر القانون رقم (1) الخاص بتنظيم عمل الاتحاد الوطني لطلبة سورية" (*SANA News*, 6 January 2024) at <https://shorturl.at/nvAJ9>.
 4. Ammar Saati, former head of the NUSS, was placed on the US sanctions list in 2020. See "Treasury Sanctions Senior Syrian Government Officials" (*US Department of Treasury*, 20 August 2020) at <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1100>. See also Wagdi Sawahel, "Scepticism over law giving 'independence' to student union" (*University World News*, 18 January 2024) at <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240118102044323>; قراءة في قانون تنظيم عمل الاتحاد الوطني لطلبة سوريا (Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, 10 January 2024) at <https://www.omrandirasat.org/-أوراق-بحثية/قراءة-في-قانون-تنظيم-عمل-الاتحاد-الوطني-طلبة-سورية.html>.
 5. SCM Report (n2) at 5-6, 8; "Soft Tools of the Assad Regime: The National Union of Syrian Students as a Model" (*Omran Centre for Strategic Studies*, 2023) at <https://omranstudies.org/index.php/publications/papers/soft-tools-of-the-assad-regime-%E2%80%9Cthe-national-union-of-syrian-students-as-a-model%E2%80%9D.html> at 13-14 [hereinafter Omran Centre Report].
 6. Omran Centre Report (n5) at 16-17; SCM Report (n2) at 23; "Syrian Universities in the Uprising" (*Scholars at Risk Network*, 18 December 2013) at <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/syrian-universities-in-the-uprising/>; "الاتحاد الوطني لطلبة سوريا .. أسهم باعتقال الطلاب ويمثلهم في محافل دولية"، (2) <https://www.enabbaladi.net/607001/>.
 7. Kata'eb al-Baath comprised university and Baathist recruits '.. and led violent crackdowns against anti-regime activity both on and off university campuses to assist the overstretched Syrian army forces. Aljaseem (n3) at 97.
 8. SCM Report (n2); Omran Centre Report (n5); Aljaseem (n3).

efforts have focused on the University of Aleppo where NUSS violations had significant media resonance at the time.⁹ This report's focus on the less-documented crimes within the University of Damascus further evidences the existence of a national strategy to clamp down on student activity in the context of the 2011 uprising, and situates the NUSS's actions within the wider context of the Syrian government crackdown. The significance of the University of Damascus included its location within the nation's capital, which the Syrian government wanted to maintain under its tight grip, as well as the presence of considerable anti-regime leanings within the student body.

NUSS membership within the University of Damascus comprised staunch regime loyalists who were granted widespread and extensive authority to ensure that anti-regime sentiment on campus was suppressed.¹⁰ SBC witnesses were able to identify NUSS members directly because they were their classmates or coursemates or because they publicly ran in the NUSS elections.¹¹ In other instances, witnesses inferred NUSS affiliation from context, for example, if the individuals' age/build matched that of a university student, if they were involved in a wider organised NUSS crackdown (e.g. against a protest), if they handed students over to an NUSS office on campus (for detention), and/or if they were present as participants or bystanders throughout interrogation/torture sessions within an NUSS office.¹² SBC witnesses confirmed that most NUSS members at the University of Damascus were students who studied within various faculties, although they described others as appearing older than the average university age and/or as having maintained their NUSS positions on campus for many years, suggesting that they were no longer university students, but rather, entrenched government loyalists who were appointed to oversee the NUSS response to anti-regime activity on campus.¹³

Witnesses described the NUSS at the University of Damascus as representing the main policing and monitoring force on campus. State security services¹⁴ were largely absent from University grounds and entered only for specific instances, such as to assist with suppressing a protest or to detain a particular student (for example, when called upon by the NUSS or university staff).¹⁵ NUSS members thus assumed the role of patrolling and monitoring university grounds, lecture halls, student residences, and online activity for anti-regime sentiment, and, in some cases, checked student IDs and searched bags prior to allowing entry into the university or specific faculties.¹⁶ They reported students and even professors and university employees to the university administration and/or security services,¹⁷ or detained them directly, in which case students could be interrogated and tortured within NUSS offices or torture centres across campus and/or could be handed over directly by the NUSS to security services.¹⁸

-
9. See, for example, "Syrian students 'killed at Aleppo protest'" (*BBC News*, 3 May 2012) at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17937448>; "دعوات للتظاهر في جامعة حلب" وسط تواصل العمليات العسكرية (France 24, 18 May 2012) at <https://www.france24.com/ar/20120518--سوريا-الاحتجاجات-تواصل-العمليات> العسكرية-مناطق-متفرقة-دعوات-التظاهر-جامعة-حلب-المعارضة-بشار-الأسد.
 10. SBC-029; SBC-031; SBC-040; SBC-041.
 11. SBC-028; SBC-030; SBC-031; SBC-033; SBC-041; SBC-042; SBC-043; SBC-044.
 12. SBC-030; SBC-031; SBC-033; SBC-043; SBC-044.
 13. SBC-026; SBC-030; SBC-031; SBC-034; SBC-037; SBC-041; SBC-042; SBC-043.
 14. This report uses the terms "security services" and "State security services" interchangeably to refer to the intelligence branches that were known to be involved in detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and murder of Syrians.
 15. SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-031.
 16. SBC-027; SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-030; SBC-031; SBC-032; SBC-036; SBC-039; SBC-040; SBC-043; SBC-044.
 17. SBC-031; SBC-039; SBC-040.
 18. SBC-029; SBC-035; SBC-040.

The NUSS furthermore assumed a role in violently cracking down against nonviolent student protests on campus and acquired weaponry including wooden and stun batons and, in some cases, guns.¹⁹



Figure 3: Daren Suleiman assumed leadership of the NUSS in 2020 in a move to help polish the Syrian government's image abroad.

This report comes against the backdrop of the gradual re-entry of the NUSS into global fora. In 2020, NUSS leader Ammar Saati—who oversaw the NUSS's brutal crackdown against university students across the country post-2011 and was placed on the US sanctions list in 2020²⁰—was replaced by Daren Suleiman who, upon assuming her position, promised to represent “all Syrian students” and to hold to account those who had committed “individual mistakes”.²¹ Since her assumption of leadership, the NUSS has been invited to and has been represented in global events and conferences, serving as a tool to polish and propel the Syrian government's image abroad.²² This report serves as a reminder that this entity which is being welcomed back into the global fold is the same which oversaw the commission of horrific violations of international criminal law for which its victims have yet to receive any acknowledgment or accountability. Until perpetrators are held to account, international actors should ensure that violating actors are not legitimised, whether directly or indirectly, through such international representations.

-
19. SBC-028; SBC-030; SBC-033; SBC-036.
20. In addition to his role with the NUSS, Saati held a role in the Baath Party's Central Committee between 2005 and 2013 and was a member of the Syrian Parliament from 2003 to 2015. *See supra* note 4; “Ammar Saati: 17 years of leading ‘the National Union of Syrian Students’ and performing practices of ‘tashbih’” (*Enab Baladi*, 10 August 2020) at <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/08/ammam-saati-17-years-of-leading-the-national-union-of-syrian-students-and-performing-practices-of-tashbih/>.
21. Suleiman was formerly a member of the executive office of the NUSS as well as the former head of its Private Education and Informatics offices. She was also a Syrian government delegate to the Sochi negotiations as well as the subsequent Syrian Constitutional Committee. “President of the Syrian Students Union Daren Suleiman: A silk glove in regime's hands” (*Enab Baladi*, 23 September 2022) at <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/09/president-of-the-syrian-student-union-daren-suleiman-a-silk-glove-in-regimes-hands/>; Karam Shaar and Ayman Dasouki, “Syria's Constitutional Committee: The Devil in the Detail” (*Karam Shaar*, 16 November 2020) at <https://www.karamshaar.com/syrias-constitutional-committee-v1>.
22. In September 2020, a Syrian delegation headed by Suleiman was invited to attend the Transforming Education Summit in New York as part of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly. In 2021, the United Nations Development Programme in Syria announced collaboration with the NUSS to organise the international Hult Prize competition. “UNDP's cooperation with National Union of Syrian Students: partnership in crime” (*Enab Baladi*, 2 August 2021) at <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/08/undps-cooperation-with-national-union-of-syrian-students-partnership-in-crime/>.

4 Crimes Committed

SBC's investigation revealed that the NUSS at the University of Damascus directly committed as well as aided and abetted the commission of crimes against humanity of torture and imprisonment or other severe deprivation of liberty as per Article 7 of the Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC Statute), as well as war crimes of torture and intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as per Article 8 of the ICC Statute.²³ SBC further documented the commission of sex and gender based violations (SGBV) as well as the existence of sectarian undertones behind some of the crimes committed. There are furthermore well-referenced cases of murder at the hands of the NUSS which may amount to both war crimes and crimes against humanity of murder as per Articles 7 and 8 of the ICC Statute, although these cases were not directly documented by SBC.²⁴

Article 7 of the ICC Statute defines crimes against humanity as a number of specified acts that are committed as part of a “widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population”.²⁵ The NUSS's crimes discussed within this report, committed between 2011–2013, were situated chronologically within the Syrian government's country-wide attack against its civilian population which began in March 2011 to suppress a popular and nonviolent uprising and which is ongoing to this day. NUSS crimes were furthermore directly related to this attack as evidenced by the NUSS's coordination with State security services, its arrest of students due to anti-regime activity that they undertook off-campus, and its involvement in cracking down against protests outside the university campus, all of which are discussed in greater detail throughout this report. As such, relevant NUSS crimes documented within this report may amount to crimes against humanity.

Article 8 of the ICC Statute defines war crimes as grave or serious breaches of the laws or customs of war which are committed within the context of an international armed conflict (IAC) or non-international armed conflict (NIAC).²⁶ In its January 2024 judgement, the District Court of The Hague determined that the Syrian conflict had reached the threshold of a NIAC by July 2011,²⁷ and thus, relevant NUSS crimes detailed within this report that were committed after this time may amount to war crimes.

-
23. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (adopted 17 July 1998, entered into force 1 July 2002) 2187 UNTS 3 Art's 7-8 [hereinafter ICC Statute]. Note: the arbitrary deprivation of liberty is furthermore prohibited as a war crime in non-international armed conflicts as a matter of customary international law. “Rule 99. Deprivation of Liberty” (ICRC) at <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule99>.
24. See, for example, SCM Report (n2) at 31-32; Mansour Omari, “The UN's Student Partner in Syria Helped Torture Students” (*Amnesty International*, 27 July 2021) at <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/campaigns-blog/uns-student-partner-syria-helped-torture-students>; “اتحادات الطلبة تشرخ الجامعات السورية وتتحول إلى مراكز اعتقال وتعذيب” (الشرق الأوسط), 4 February 2013) at <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=715806&issueno=12487#.Y6Ha8XbMJPZ>.
25. ICC Statute (n23) Art 7. On the definitions of ‘widespread’, ‘systematic’ ‘attack’, and ‘civilian populations’ see *Prosecutor v. Momčilo Perišić* (Judgement) IT-04-81-T (6 September 2011) Para 82; *Prosecutor v. Akayesu* (Judgement) ICTR-96-4-T (2 September 1998) Para 579-82; *Prosecutor v. Tadić* (Opinion and Judgement) ICTY-94-1-T (7 May 1997) Para 638.
26. ICC Statute (n23) Art 8.
27. The Hague District Court, ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2024:575 (22 January 2024) (Judgement) <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2024:575> at Para 6.4.1.15. See also UN Doc A/HRC/21/50 (n1) Para 12. See also UN Doc A/HRC/21/50 (n1) Para 12.

5 Attacking Peaceful Protests

Witnesses described that the NUSS led organised and brutal responses to nonviolent student protests on campus, including protests at the Faculty of Sciences on 11 April 2011,²⁸ Faculty of Medicine on 19 April 2011,²⁹ Faculty of Economics on 30 June 2011,³⁰ Faculty of Economics in September 2011,³¹ Faculty of Medicine on 2 November 2011,³² Faculty of Sciences on 30 May 2012,³³ and others throughout 2011–2012.³⁴ The general pattern was that NUSS members encircled protesters, shouted profanities and cursed at them, and then attacked, including with sticks and batons.³⁵ They furthermore detained student protesters and proceeded to beat them within designated offices or torture rooms on campus and/or hand them over to security services.³⁶ Some of the crackdowns against the peaceful protests took place in conjunction with State security forces, as evidenced by armed individuals in uniform participating in the crackdowns, as well as the presence of government buses which brought these forces to the campus.³⁷



Figure 4: Protest in the Faculty of Sciences on 11 April 2011.

-
28. SBC-031; SBC-041; SBC-044. *See also* SBC-036; SBC-037; “مظاهرة طلاب جامعة دمشق في كلية العلوم 11 4 2011” (YouTube, 14 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZ1ConjR3Wg>; “مظاهرة لطلاب كلية العلوم في دمشق يطالبون بالحرية” (YouTube, 11 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YID7XoVGoGk>.
29. SBC-028; SBC-031; SBC-032; SBC-044. *See also* SBC-036; “19.04.2011 إعتداء رجال الأمن على إعتصام طلاب كلية الطب دمشق” (YouTube, 20 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ5-hPhw2bk>; “2011-19-4 اعتصام شباب كلية الطب في دمشق” (YouTube, 19 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p97KhR1f10>.
30. SBC-041.
31. SBC-037.
32. SBC-029; SBC-042. *See also* “2011 11 2 مظاهرة كلية الطب 2011 YouTube” (YouTube, 2 November 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmD-Valh1ck>.
33. SBC-043. *See also* SBC-026.
34. SBC-030; SBC-034; SBC-040.
35. SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-030; SBC-031; SBC-032; SBC-034; SBC-037; SBC-041; SBC-043; SBC-044.
36. SBC-028; SBC-031; SBC-034; SBC-037; SBC-041; SBC-044.
37. SBC-031; SBC-034; SBC-041.

A student protest on 11 April 2011 in front of the Faculty of Sciences was violently suppressed by the NUSS. Three witnesses described that approximately 25 NUSS members, supported by university security guards or shabiha,³⁸ surrounded 50-100 protesters from three sides and attacked them, beating them with their hands and wooden placards while shouting profanities.³⁹ SBC-041 detailed:

NUSS members began a counter-protest in which they had placards with the photo of Bashar Assad mounted on sticks, and they took off the picture of Assad and used the sticks to beat protesters. There were approximately 70-100 student protesters and approximately 25 NUSS members clamping down on the protest. University security personnel were standing in the protest perimeter bearing their arms and in military uniform... The NUSS members were attacking the protesters out of conviction and were the ones beating the students. They beat protesters, cursed at them, and chanted for Bashar Assad.⁴⁰

SBC-041 further described that he was grabbed by two NUSS members and one university security guard and was dragged with two other protesters to a security guard room near the Faculty of Chemistry where he was kicked in the face as he was questioned by an NUSS member.⁴¹ He was subsequently freed by fellow protesters.

On 19 April 2011, the NUSS attacked a silent sit-in attended by approximately 50 medical students adorning their white coats in front of the Faculty of Medicine as they raised flowers and signs calling for the release of detained students as shown in Figure 5.⁴² SBC-031 recalled:

A group of students, some of whom I recognised by face as NUSS members, encircled us, creating a sort of counter-protest. The Vice Dean arrived on the scene and asked us to disperse. We decided to stay quiet so as not to provoke the NUSS. We were especially scared because NUSS members began to pass around stones in preparation to hurl them at us.

Shabiha soon arrived carrying wooden sticks and rubber batons. They gathered with the NUSS members and slowly began to move toward us before together launching a severe attack. The shabiha were hitting us with batons and throwing rocks at us, while the NUSS students threw rocks and beat people with their hands. We were not at all expecting the attack, it was extremely violent and very organised.⁴³

38. The term "shabiha" is a loose term commonly used by Syrians to refer to pro-regime groups or individuals who could be part of a paramilitary group or could be unaffiliated with any group.

39. SBC-031 at 4-6; SBC-041 at 4-5; SBC-044 at 4. *See also* SBC-036 at 5; SBC-037 at 4; "2011 4 11 مظاهرة طلاب جامعة دمشق في كلية العلوم" (*You Tube*, 14 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZ1ConjR3Wg>; مظاهرة لطلاب كلية العلوم في دمشق يطالبون بالحرية (*You Tube*, 11 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YID7XoVGoGk>.

40. SBC-041.

41. SBC-041.

42. SBC-028; SBC-030; SBC-031; SBC-032; SBC-044. *See also* SBC-036; "19.04.2011 اعتداء رجال الأمن على إعتصام طلاب كلية الطب دمشق" (*You Tube*, 20 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ5-hPhw2bk>; "2011-19-4 اعتصام شباب كلية الطب في دمشق" (*You Tube*, 19 April 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p97KhR1f10>.

43. SBC-031.



Figure 5: Medical students raised flowers and called for the release of detained classmates during a silent sit-in at the Faculty of Medicine on 19 April 2011.

Another witness, SBC-032 was chased and arrested by the NUSS for filming the protest.⁴⁴ He was taken to the basement of the nearby Faculty of Dentistry, where he was pushed down the stairs and beaten by several NUSS members with batons.⁴⁵ He and two fellow students required hospital treatment due to injuries sustained at the protest and its aftermath.⁴⁶

The role of the University of Damascus NUSS in cracking down against protests was not confined to the campus. SBC-040 was enrolled at the International University of Science and Technology (IUST) and further attended classes at the University of Damascus. He recognised several University of Damascus NUSS members as among those suppressing a protest on the IUST campus on 15 November 2011.⁴⁷ These NUSS members beat students, including with sticks and batons.⁴⁸ One of their victims was unconscious when he was detained on campus. Other witnesses similarly identified or referenced incidents in which University of Damascus NUSS members were involved in protest suppression off campus, including outside mosques around the city.⁴⁹

44. SBC-032.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. SBC-040. *See also* SBC-032; “1-11-2011 الاعتداء على طلاب الجامعة الدولية الخاصة FLV” (*YouTube*, 18 November 2011) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPp56zBYp8Q>.

48. SBC-040.

49. SBC-030; SBC-032; SBC-034.

6 Imprisonment

The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented that, between 2011 and 2013, over 35,000 students had been arrested across Syria (31,000 male, 4,000 female).⁵⁰ While these arrests were not necessarily conducted by the NUSS, they nevertheless reveal the extent to which the university student body was targeted across the country for its activism against the government.

At the University of Damascus, witnesses described State security services as being largely absent from University grounds unless they were called to help suppress an on-campus protest or to detain a particular student.⁵¹ On-campus detentions were thus generally conducted by the NUSS.⁵² SBC documented the detention of thirteen direct witnesses (eleven male, two female) by the NUSS between 2011 and 2013 at the University. Dozens of other incidents of detention were further mentioned by witnesses as hearsay. It appeared that males were particularly targeted in order to avoid the impression that the NUSS detained female students.⁵³

The contexts of these arrests varied. Some students were detained while participating in or being present during on-campus protests.⁵⁴ Others were detained on university grounds but outside the context of protests, for example, at the university gates or courtyards.⁵⁵ Others were taken from their faculty library or canteen or from the student residences.⁵⁶ One was summoned to present himself at an NUSS office whereupon he was detained.⁵⁷ Witnesses described that, outside the context of protests, the NUSS generally avoided drawing attention when they detained students; they approached the students they wanted to detain and asked them to follow, warning them not to resist but not handcuffing or restraining them in any way.⁵⁸

Witnesses described that they were not presented with any formal charges when detained by the NUSS (noting, however, that the NUSS is not legally mandated to make arrests). Following lines of interrogation, witnesses understood that they were detained because of their participation in campus protests,⁵⁹ participation in off-campus anti-regime activity,⁶⁰ social media profiles,⁶¹ or other suspicions or contexts.⁶²

50. “Syrian Government violations against university student like kill, torture to death, arrest, threaten, and expelled of university” (*Syrian Network for Human Rights*, 2013) at https://snhr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/university%20student%20like%20kill.pdf.

51. See note 15 and accompanying text.

52. SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-030; SBC-041.

53. See SBC-027.

54. SBC-026; SBC-029; SBC-032; SBC-037; SBC-041.

55. SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-038; SBC-044.

56. SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036; SBC-042.

57. SBC-030.

58. SBC-026; SBC-029; SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036; SBC-038.

59. SBC-026; SBC-029; SBC-032; SBC-037; SBC-041.

60. SBC-028; SBC-038.

61. SBC-036; SBC-042; SBC-044.

62. SBC-030; SBC-033; SBC-035.

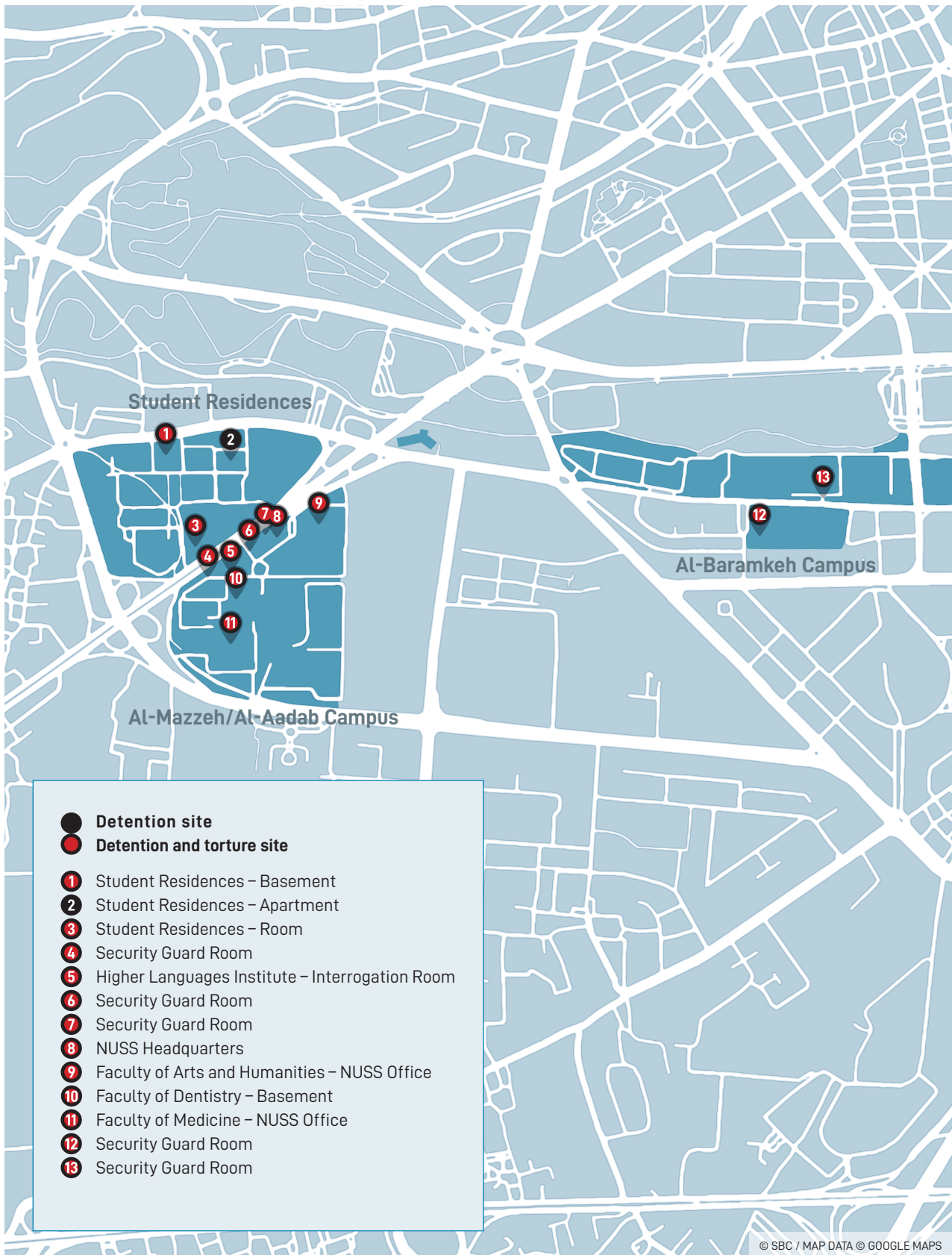


Figure 6: NUSS detention and torture sites across the University of Damascus campus.

Detained students were held by the NUSS within various sites across campus (See Figure 6). Some were held within security guard rooms which tended to be detached structures of approximately 2x2m in which university security guards operated.⁶³ Others were held within NUSS Administrative Committee offices (which were effectively NUSS offices within specific faculties), including within the Faculties of Medicine,⁶⁴ Economics,⁶⁵ and the Arts and Humanities.⁶⁶ Other witnesses were held in other locations across campus, including the basement of the Faculty of Dentistry,⁶⁷ an interrogation room near the Higher Languages Institute,⁶⁸ and a basement room in one of the student residences.⁶⁹ Students need not have been held exclusively in one of the aforementioned sites, but rather, were sometimes transferred across more than one site.

Some witnesses were interrogated and then released by the NUSS within the same day.⁷⁰ Others were handed over by the NUSS to State security services, in which case NUSS members personally escorted witnesses from their place of detention on campus to a government car that was dispatched to collect them.⁷¹ In some cases, NUSS members handed witnesses over to the car occupants and returned to campus.⁷² In other cases, NUSS members boarded the car with the witnesses and thus remained with them until they arrived at a State detention branch.⁷³ From NUSS custody, witnesses were directly transferred to the Political Security branch in Damascus (also known as the Jubba or Maysat branch),⁷⁴ General Intelligence Branch 251 (also known as Al-Khateeb Branch),⁷⁵ and Air Force Intelligence (AFI) Harasta branch.⁷⁶

63. SBC-026; SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-038; SBC-041; SBC-042.

64. SBC-036.

65. SBC-037.

66. SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-042.

67. SBC-032.

68. SBC-030.

69. SBC-033; SBC-035. *See also* SBC-026 (was held in a building next to the student residences).

70. SBC-030; SBC-032; SBC-037; SBC-042.

71. Witnesses identified these as government cars because they were tinted (tinted windows were prohibited in Syria, and thus, cars with tinted windows were assumed to be government cars), because of the military attire of the car occupants, and/or because the car directly transported witnesses to State detention branches.

72. SBC-026; SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-038.

73. SBC-036; SBC-042; SBC-044.

74. SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036; SBC-042; SBC-044.

75. SBC-026; SBC 028; SBC-038.

76. SBC-029.

7 Torture

Many witnesses recounted that after they were detained by the NUSS on campus, NUSS members directly interrogated and tortured them. One purpose of the interrogation and torture was the extraction of information, for example, regarding anti-regime activity that the student participated in on or off campus, or regarding their social media activity⁷⁷ (detained students were frequently required to provide access to their laptops, mobile phones, and social media accounts⁷⁸). Another purpose of the interrogation and torture was punishment, for example, for participating in protests.⁷⁹

NUSS torture methods were brutal, horrific, and wide-ranging. In a high-profile case, Ayham Ghazoul, then a Master's Dental Student at the University of Damascus, was severely tortured on campus by the NUSS in November 2012, including being beaten with an iron rod, having his nails pulled out, and having boiling water poured on him.⁸⁰ He was unconscious when he was transferred to the Raiding and Storming Branch 215 of the Military Intelligence and died soon thereafter in its custody.

SBC witnesses described pervasive beating at the hands of the NUSS, including slapping,⁸¹ punching,⁸² kicking,⁸³ as well as hitting with hands, sticks, batons, and thick plastic (PVC) pipes all over the body.⁸⁴ Several witnesses were also tased.⁸⁵ Verbal and psychological abuse was rampant, including forcing witnesses to see or hear others being tortured, threatening to burn their face with a hot tea kettle, threatening to send them to a detention branch after which they would never see their family again, threatening to detain their family members, and threatening to kill them.⁸⁶ Other methods described by witnesses include being forced to stand on their tiptoes,⁸⁷ clamping on their ears until they became unconscious,⁸⁸ and being thrown repeatedly against a desk.⁸⁹ SBC-030 recounted his interrogation at the hands of the NUSS:

The interrogation then began regarding my Facebook account. They went through each friend and asked me how I knew that person. With each response, I would get kicked, beaten, or hit. I would also get beaten anytime I mentioned certain phrases such as “revolution” or “protest” to which they would insist on the use of the phrases “terrorists” or “Arour’s people.”⁹⁰ I was zip tied and on the floor while getting beaten.⁹¹

77. SBC-026; SBC-030; SBC-033; SCB-035; SBC-042.

78. SBC-026; SBC-030; SBC-033; SBC-036; SBC-042; SBC-044.

79. SBC-029; SBC-032; SBC-033; SBC-036; SBC-038.

80. SCM Report (n2) at 31-32; Omari (n24);

“اتحادات الطلبة تشرح الجامعات السورية وتتحول إلى مراكز اعتقال وتعذيب” (n24).

81. SBC-026; SBC-028; SBC-030; SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036; SBC-038; SBC-042.

82. SBC-029; SBC-030; SBC-035; SBC-042.

83. SBC-030; SBC-032; SBC-033; SBC-041.

84. SBC-026; SBC-029; SBC-030; SBC-032; SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036; SBC-041; SBC-042.

85. SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036.

86. SBC-026; SBC-028; SBC-030; SBC-032; SBC-036; SBC-042.

87. SBC-030.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Adnan Arour is a Sunni Muslim imam from Hama residing in Saudi Arabia who regularly spoke out against the regime through his television show using sectarian language.

91. SBC-030.

Both male and female witnesses described gendered dimensions to their interrogations and torture at the hands of the NUSS. Two male witnesses stated that NUSS members cursed their mothers and/or sisters during interrogations,⁹² exploiting the association of women with concepts of honour and dignity within Syrian culture. One witness stated that NUSS members called his mother a prostitute and threatened to bring her and rape her in front of him if he did not cooperate.⁹³ Another witness described that NUSS members “went crazy” during his interrogation:

Then they sat me down, said to open my legs, and [one of the NUSS members] was going to kick me in the genitals with the heel of his shoe. My self-defence mechanism kicked in, and I kicked [the NUSS member] in the stomach, causing him to fall back. At this point, they began to beat me violently, hitting me all over my body, including on my head. I felt like I was moving in and out of consciousness.⁹⁴

Female witnesses described that some of their beatings took place at the hands of female agents of the NUSS, and that some male NUSS members refused to take part, calling the female witnesses “bitches” or “infiltrators” or stating that they did not beat women.⁹⁵ SBC-026 described an invasive search that she underwent by two female NUSS agents:

One of the female Shabiha then conducted an invasive search of my body while another female Shabiha looked on. She pulled my trousers down, opened my trench coat, looked in my bra, removed my headscarf and searched my hair, and asked me, “Where did you put the memory card, did you hide it in your behind?”⁹⁶

Several witnesses further stated that their detention, interrogation, and torture at the hands of the NUSS assumed sectarian and religious undertones, including specific references to their Sunni Muslim identities and/or the Alawite identities of their NUSS interrogators.⁹⁷ SBC-030 described that one NUSS member asked him during his interrogation, “Do you know Allah?” to which he responded, “Yes.” The NUSS member stated, “Let Allah come get you.”⁹⁸ This witness was also referred to as “Arouri” during his NUSS detention, in reference to a Sunni Muslim imam from Hama who was residing in Saudi Arabia and regularly spoke out against the regime through his television show.⁹⁹ Similarly, SBC-033 reported that as he was escorted by the NUSS to be handed over to the security services, one of the NUSS members escorting him stated, “Us Alawites, we are going to keep our boots on your heads, you Sunni people.”¹⁰⁰

92. Ibid; SBC-036.

93. SBC-030.

94. SBC-036.

95. SBC-026; SBC-029.

96. SBC-026.

97. SBC-030; SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036.

98. SBC-030.

99. Ibid.

100. SBC-033.

8 Cooperation with State Security Services

The patterns of NUSS violations described by witnesses—suppressing protests; detaining, interrogating, and torturing students; and handing students over to State security services—indicate that these violations were not isolated or circumstantial, but rather, planned and organised. Furthermore, these violations were not committed in a vacuum; they were directly premised upon and tied to the widespread and systematic attack waged by the Syrian government against its people for protesting its rule. The NUSS effectively served as the Syrian government’s arm on campus at the University of Damascus. In carrying out this role, it was in direct coordination with the wider State security apparatus.

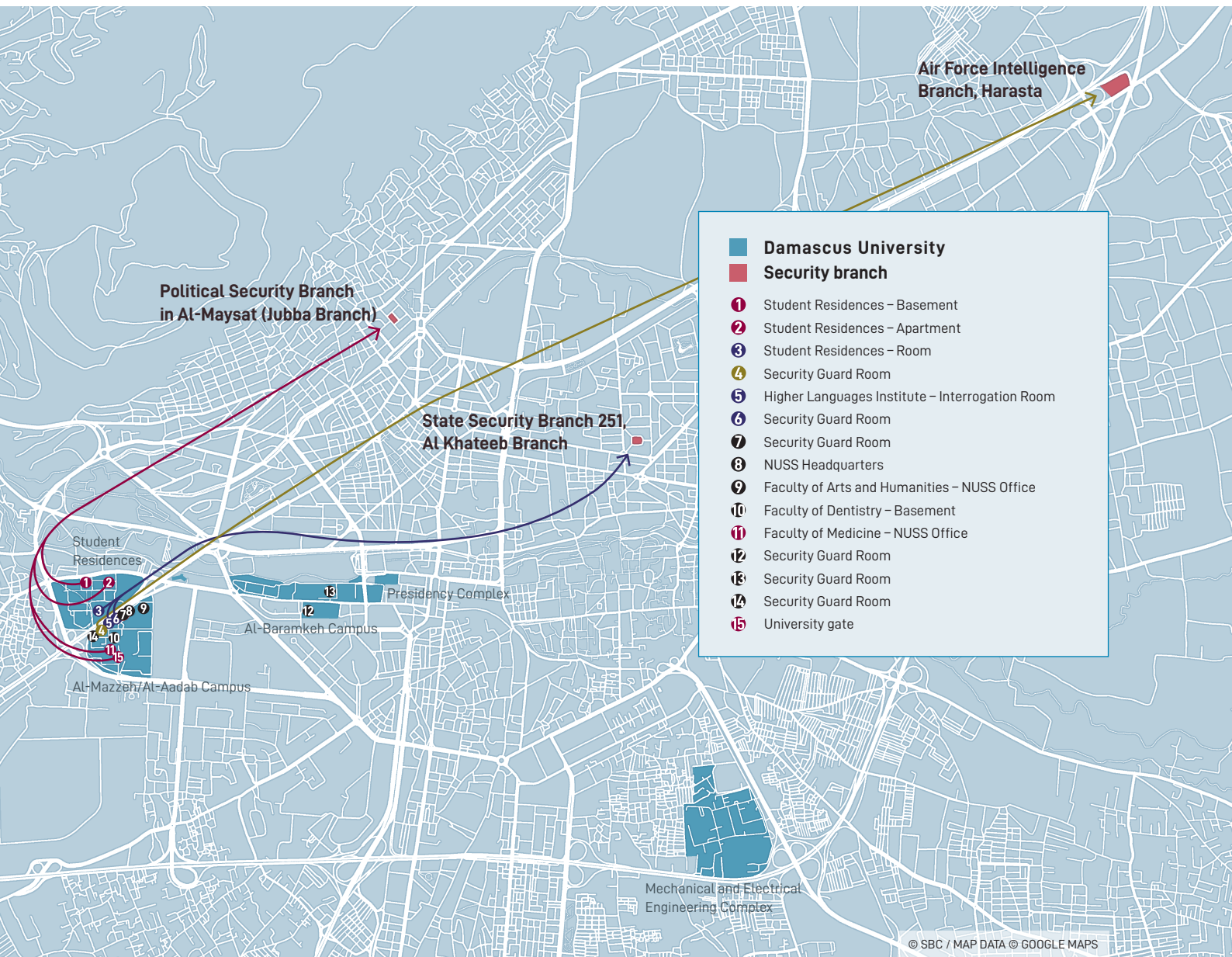


Figure 7: Direct transfer of students from NUSS custody to security services.

There are several major indicators as revealed through witness testimony which confirm that the NUSS was in direct coordination and cooperation with State security services throughout its crackdown against student activity. The first is witnesses' description of joint suppression of on-campus protests by the NUSS and State security forces. As discussed in Section 5, witnesses saw government buses transport men in military uniform to the University campus, who then participated in cracking down against the protests alongside the NUSS.¹⁰¹

Second, several witnesses described that, while in NUSS custody, they were interrogated by older individuals.¹⁰² The age of these interrogators, their civilian attire (often suits), and the subsequent handover of many of these students by the NUSS to State security branches together suggest that they were most likely from the security services. In some cases, they held seniority within NUSS detention sites as revealed through the manner in which NUSS members addressed them (e.g. the word "sidi", which translates roughly to "sir").¹⁰³ They often led interrogations or ordered beatings.¹⁰⁴

Third, students detained by the NUSS were handed over directly to State security services. As described in Section 6, the general pattern was that NUSS members escorted detained students to a government car parked near the University campus and handed detained students over to the security personnel, after which the students would be driven to a detention branch and be formally detained.¹⁰⁵ In some cases, NUSS members boarded the car themselves and thus personally delivered the detained students to the detention branches.¹⁰⁶

Finally, witnesses relayed a crossover between interrogations conducted by the NUSS and those conducted by State detention branches which suggests that the NUSS handed over its evidence, including results of its interrogations, to the security services. Notably, witnesses in detention branches were interrogated about information that was extracted through NUSS interrogations, including on their campus activity or on specific individuals or social media posts.¹⁰⁷ One witness relayed that he was interrogated directly by an NUSS member inside a State detention branch.¹⁰⁸

The above corroborates a high level of cooperation and coordination between the NUSS and State security branches. NUSS actions were clearly situated within the wider context of the country-wide government crackdown against anti-regime activity.

101. SBC-031; SBC-034; SBC-041.

102. SBC-026; SBC-028; SBC-030; SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-037.

103. SBC-030.

104. SBC-026; SBC-028; SBC-030; SBC-033; SBC-035.

105. SBC-026; SBC-028; SBC-029; SBC-033; SBC-035; SBC-036; SBC-038; SBC-042; SBC-044.

See supra note 71 on how witnesses identified these cars as government cars.

106. SBC-036; SBC-042; SBC-044.

107. SBC-033; SBC-034; SBC-035; SBC-036; SBC-042; SBC-044.

108. SBC-040.

9 Modes of Liability

As detailed throughout this report, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the NUSS committed crimes against humanity of torture and imprisonment or other severe deprivation of liberty as per Article 7 of the ICC Statute, as well as war crimes of torture and intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as per Article 8 of the ICC Statute.¹⁰⁹

In handing students over to State security services, NUSS responsibility further arises with respect to aiding and abetting international crimes that were committed within these detention facilities as per Article 25(3) of the ICC Statute.¹¹⁰ This is consistent with the judgement of the District Court of the Hague in January 2024 which found defendant *Mustafa A* criminally responsible for aiding and abetting crimes committed in detention facilities when he handed civilians over to these facilities. The rationale was that the defendant was aware, in handing over detainees, that they would be subjected to crimes such as torture which are commonly known to be committed within detention centres.¹¹¹ This approach is consistent with ICTY case law which holds that aiding and abetting entail the provision of “practical assistance, encouragement, or moral support which has a substantial effect on the perpetration of the crime.”¹¹²

In the same manner, the NUSS’s handover of students to State security branches gives rise to its responsibility in aiding and abetting crimes that are commonly known to be committed within these branches. While these crimes were not documented in detail by SBC, witness testimony as well as common knowledge regarding crimes committed within detention facilities point to NUSS responsibility in aiding and abetting the crimes against humanity of torture and imprisonment or other severe deprivation of liberty as per Article 7 of the ICC Statute, as well as the war crimes of torture and inhuman and degrading punishment as per Article 8 of the ICC Statute.

Other crimes not documented by SBC but further commonly known to be committed within Syrian detention facilities include the crimes against humanity of murder, rape, and sexual violence as per Article 7 of the ICC Statute, as well as war crimes of murder, extrajudicial executions, rape, and sexual violence as per Article 8 of the ICC Statute.¹¹³ Further investigation is required to show, to a criminal standard of proof, whether any students handed over by the NUSS to State security branches—including students not interviewed by SBC—were subjected to such crimes throughout their time in detention. Affirmative findings would give rise to further NUSS responsibility in aiding and abetting the commission of these crimes.

109. ICC Statute (n23) Art’s 7-8. *Recall* that the arbitrary deprivation of liberty is furthermore prohibited as a war crime in NIACs as a matter of customary international law. “Rule 99. Deprivation of Liberty” (n23).

110. ICC Statute (n23) Art 25(3).

111. The District Court of the Hague found defendant *Mustafa A* complicit in unlawful deprivation of liberty and torture for handing over a victim to the AFI because “knowledge of the brutal reputation of the Syrian intelligence and security services, the [AFI] in particular, was widespread.” *Prosecutor v Mustafa A* (Judgement) The Hague District Court, ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2024:575 (22 January 2024) <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2024:575> at Para 13.3 (Unofficial translation).

112. *Prosecutor v. Furundžija* (Judgement) IT-95-17/1-T (10 December 1998) Para 249. *See also Prosecutor v. Limaj et al.* (Judgement) IT-03-66-T (30 November 2005) Para 516; *Prosecutor v. Popović et al.* (Judgement) IT-05-88-A (30 January 2015) Para 1783.

113. See UN Human Rights Council, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic” (3 February 2016) UN Doc A/HRC/31/CRP.1; “Voices from the Dark: Torture and Sexual Violence Against Women in Assad’s Detention Centres” (*Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights*, July 2017) at <https://ldhrights.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Voices-from-the-Dark.pdf>.

10 Conclusion

The NUSS, a body theoretically created to serve and promote the interests of university students in Syria, was weaponised and turned against these students in order to stifle any civil activity on campus. In March 2011, these students were full of hope and passion for changing their society into one in which they could be recognised as equal citizens, afforded the protection of the law, and granted their rights to expression, representation, and pursuit of improving their destinies. For these dreams, and for their rejection of a system with the mantra “Assad or we burn the country,” their university campus transformed into a crime scene in which the atmosphere was one of fear and division, in which students turned against one another, and in which countless educational achievements were cut short. The body that was meant to serve and represent them became a de facto security branch on campus.

The collective experiences detailed throughout this report had harrowing effects on the lives of the witnesses. Their educational pursuits were disrupted, delayed, or brought to an end. Some of their families were forced to pay extortionate sums to have them released from detention. Many had to flee the country. Many also were left traumatised and required psychosocial support to rebuild their lives. These collective traumas represent a stain on the pursuit of academic freedoms and on the educational attainment of Syria’s youth.

In today’s political climate, as States seem poised to re-establish relations with the Syrian government, and as the NUSS is slowly being reintroduced to world stages, this report ends with the following recommendations:

Recommendations for States:

- Investigate and prosecute criminally responsible NUSS members under the principle of universal jurisdiction, including those identified or referred through Syrian civil society organisations;
- Support Syrian civil society organisations that work on investigations, evidence collection, and case file building;
- Maintain communication and transparency with Syrian civil society organisations regarding ongoing or pending investigations and allow them to become partners in these investigations;
- Support Canada and the Netherlands’ case against Syria at the International Court of Justice which invokes Syria’s responsibility for breach of the Convention Against Torture.

Recommendations for the United Nations:

- Ensure that all UN agencies conduct sufficient due diligence when identifying or working with Syrian or non-Syrian partners working on/in Syria;
- Ensure that all UN agencies employ human rights standards when identifying or working with Syrian or non-Syrian partners working on/in Syria.

Recommendations for State and non-State entities:

- Refuse direct or indirect cooperation with the NUSS;
- Publicly shame or condemn entities that cooperate with, platform, or otherwise directly or indirectly legitimise the NUSS;
- Carry out sufficient due diligence when working with or platforming Syrian or non-Syrian entities working on/in Syria;
- Boycott any events, initiatives, conferences, or other projects in which the NUSS or affiliated entity is represented.

