

Daughter of imprisoned Syrian Christian mayor advocates for her father's release in Washington DC

CSI organized meetings for Suleiman Khalil's daughter with Congressman Pete Aguilar, USCIRF, and other organizations

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EINPresswire.com/ -- This week, Christian Solidarity International (CSI) brought [Natalie Khalil](#), the daughter of [Suleiman Khalil](#), the former mayor of Sadad in Syria, to Washington DC to advocate for her father's release.

Natalie and the CSI team met with Congressman Pete Aguilar of California, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and other officials and organizations in the capital, to tell her father's story and build support for his release.



Natalie Khalil shared her father's story with Congressman Pete Aguilar (D-CA).

Suleiman Khalil, 51, was the mayor of the Syriac Orthodox-majority town of Sadad from 2012 to 2016. He is widely credited with saving the town's Christian population from massacre in 2015, when he organized the town's defense against ISIS.

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Joel Veldkamp, CSI

Syrian authorities have held him in prison since February 8. He has not been charged with any crime or given access to a lawyer.

Natalie told Congressman Aguilar and other interlocutors how Syrian authorities have blocked her and her mother from making regular visits to her father in prison. They have also not been able to call him or receive mail from him, or bring him food or medicine.

Suleiman's daughters and wife have been allowed to visit him just three times since February, for

ten minutes or less each time. Although they are Christians, on each occasion, they have been required to wear Islamic head coverings to enter the prison. They tried to bring Suleiman a cross necklace, but were not allowed. Suleiman himself has been forced to keep the Ramadan fast, and not allowed to have a Bible.

In their visits, Natalie said, she and her mother have seen how Suleiman's physical condition is deteriorating. He has lost a great deal of weight, and has been denied medicine for several chronic health conditions. There is reason to believe he has been tortured.

"Suleiman Khalil is a 21st century Christian hero," said Joel Veldkamp, CSI's director for public advocacy, who was part of the CSI delegation accompanying Natalie. "We have known him and his family since we met them in Sadad during the dark days of the Islamic State (ISIS)'s genocide. We know how highly he is regarded in his community. CSI is committed to securing his safe release."

Suleiman Khalil was a member of the opposition Syrian Social Nationalist Party and a vocal critic of the Assad dictatorship in Syria. He was elected as mayor in 2012 as the regime's grip on Syria was weakening. In 2016, after he became a local hero for his successful defense of Sadad against ISIS, the regime pushed him out of office.

During his tenure as mayor, Sadad was attacked by jihadist forces twice. In October 2013, the town was briefly overrun by a rebel coalition led by Jabhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. The jihadists killed 41 Christian civilians. In late 2015, ISIS attacked Sadad again. This time, Khalil was able to organize local civilians to defend the town during a month-long battle.

Veldkamp noted that the former leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra now control Syria's interim government - including the terrorist group's founder, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who today is president of Syria.

"It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Suleiman's true crime is having successfully defended a Christian town from a jihadist attack," Veldkamp commented. "Now that the U.S. has established warm ties with Ahmed al-Sharaa's government, we trust that U.S. officials will push their interlocutors in Damascus to release Suleiman Khalil and other political prisoners."

CSI invites its supporters to go to their website and send a [message](#) directly to Asaad al-Shaibani, Syria's foreign minister, asking him to tell his government to free Suleiman Khalil.

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