

Dossier on the Disappearance of Eva Maria Michelmann and Ahmet Polad



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Since January 18, German journalist Eva Maria Michelmann and Kurdish journalist Ahmet Polad have been reported missing. Both were last seen in Raqqa and, according to eyewitnesses, were taken away in a military vehicle belonging to the Syrian Interim Government's armed forces. This dossier provides an overview of the disappearance of the two journalists and the developments in the case.

Eva Maria Michelmann was born on December 2, 1989, in Siegburg. She lived in Cologne and studied social work. Michelmann worked as a social worker in Germany, particularly in the areas of women's, refugee, and homeless assistance. She also participated in humanitarian aid missions in Caracas, Venezuela.

As a freelance journalist, Eva Maria reported regularly from Rojava starting in 2022 with an international press pass and published articles in outlets such as the Turkish-language news agency "Etkin Haber Ajansı," or "ETHA" for short. She reported directly from the protests and developments on the ground. Previously, Eva had written regularly for the newspaper "Perspektive Online" in Germany, particularly on political topics related to women. Ahmet Polad is a journalist of Kurdish origin, an editor at Kurdistan Azad, and a producer at the television station Özgür TV.

Background on the Disappearance of Ahmet Polad and Eva Maria Michelmann

On the 28th, the Turkish-language news platform "Etkin Haber Ajansı," or ETHA for short, published an article (1) about the disappearance of the two journalists. Michelmann was in the city of Raqqa with Polad in mid-January to document developments on the ground and report on the attacks on the city by the Syrian transitional government. Video footage for the broadcaster Özgür TV, in which Ahmet Polad speaks, captures fighting and gunfire on the streets of Raqqa. As the fighting intensified, the two journalists sought shelter in a building belonging to a youth organization of the Democratic Self-Administration of Northeast Syria (DAANES) along with approximately 40 civilians. This building was eventually surrounded by forces of the transitional government. According to ETHA, numerous other buildings in the city were also attacked at the same time, leading to fierce clashes. As night fell, Syrian transitional forces reportedly tightened their encirclement of the building and eventually broke into the basement.

According to reports, several people were killed in the incident. A comprehensive account of the events has not yet emerged due to repeated power and internet outages. The report also states that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) contacted the Syrian Interim Government forces to negotiate the evacuation of civilians from the building. Ultimately, both forces reportedly agreed that the building would be evacuated in small groups and that the civilians would proceed to an area then under SDF control. In line with this, some of those evacuated from the building reached SDF forces guarding the El-Aqtan prison near Raqqa. When attempts were later made to establish telephone contact with the evacuated group, it turned out that Michelmann and Polad had not reached the aforementioned prison. An eyewitness who was evacuated reported that after leaving the building, both were placed in a vehicle by the transitional government. Consequently, there has been no sign of life from Michelmann and Polad for over 50 days.

Michelmann and Polad are two of thousands of missing persons

On January 6, the Syrian transitional government launched an offensive against the territories of the Democratic Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). During the fighting, several cities were captured by the Syrian transitional government, including Deir Hafir, Tabqa, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor. As a result, hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced. Furthermore, during the fighting, thousands of civilians and SDF fighters were arrested or have simply gone missing. The Syrian transitional government stated that it currently has 970 people in custody. According to Kongra Star, however, the actual number is significantly higher. Ilham Ehmed spoke of up to 4,000 people (2) who are reportedly being held as prisoners of war and hostages by the transitional government.

Activities since the disappearance

Since the news of Michelmann and Polad's disappearance was made public, efforts have been made through various channels to seek clarification. For example, Members of the German Bundestag Sanae Abdi and Cansu Özdemir spoke out publicly about the case, calling for both clarification of the situation and the protection of journalists in war zones in general. Özdemir addressed the federal government and the Federal Foreign Office.

In addition, German media outlets such as the Tagesspiegel, SPIEGEL, t-online, Deutschlandfunk, and Deutsche Welle (dw) reported on the story. International media outlets, for example from Switzerland, Spain, and the Netherlands, also published articles.

Several organizations dedicated to protecting journalists and press freedom were also mobilized. This included exchanges with the German Journalists' Union (DJU) and Reporters Without Borders. The ver.di union, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) (3), the Union of Free Journalists in Northeast Syria (YRA), and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) (4) issued statements on the case. Attorney Roland Meister also involved the International Red Cross. The Red Cross began establishing contacts in the region, including with Mazlum Abdi, Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), to locate the journalists.

Press Conference

On March 10, the solidarity group People's Bridge held a press conference together with attorney Roland Meister, Michelmann's brother, Dr. Antonius Michelmann, and her mother, Rotraut Hake-Michelmann. During the press conference, attorney Roland Meister stated that the German Foreign Office had been contacted. In a phone call, a staff member of the Foreign Office stated that all relevant authorities in the Middle East, not just in Syria, had been notified by the German government. Eva Maria Michelmann's details and a photo had been shared in the process to determine her whereabouts. The German government has not yet been informed by the Syrian transitional government. Roland Meister added: "We have heard from a journalist in Damascus who reported that the name Eva Maria Michelmann is unknown locally."

He further explained that there are four possible scenarios regarding Michelmann's condition. First, that she is in captivity, or that she is in informal captivity—meaning she has been abducted but not yet handed over to the official government. However, there is also the possibility that she may have been killed and buried in anonymous mass graves. The fourth possibility is that, since Turkey was directly involved in the military conflict in January and is cooperating with the Syrian transitional government, she may have been handed over to Turkey, as the Kurdish journalist Ahmet Polad, who was arrested alongside her, holds Turkish citizenship.

Michelmann's mother and brother also expressed great concern for their daughter and sister at the press conference. Dr. Antonius Michelmann emphasized that his sister had always been an open-minded, courageous, and honest person who saw Rojava as a point of attraction for solidarity and the lived unity of peoples.

On March 11, at the Federal Press Conference, the representative of the Federal Foreign Office was asked once again what steps had already been taken to clarify the status of German citizen Eva Maria Michelmann and to secure her release. The Federal Foreign Office replied that it was aware

of the case. When asked for more details on the steps taken in this regard, no further information was provided.

In the Michelmann case, press freedom and the protection of journalists in war zones are clearly being violated. The European Parliament and the Federal Government bear responsibility for promptly clarifying this case and securing the release of journalists Michelmann and Polad.

We ask you to advocate for:

- **Immediate clarification of the fate of the missing journalists Eva Maria Michelmann and Ahmet Polad and their release**
- **Transparent information on the health and life status of all missing persons (approximately 4,000 persons; see the statement by Kongra Star)**
- **Granting access for the International Committee of the Red Cross as well as human rights organizations to persons abducted and detained by the STG**

We are available for inquiries via the provided contact details.

People's Bridge

sources:

(1)<https://etha55.com/haberdetay/rakkada-kusatmada-kalan-iki-gazeteciden-haber-alinamiyor-219878>

(2)<https://deutsch.anf-news.com/frauen/kongra-star-startet-unterschriftenkampagne-fur-geiseln-und-vermisste-50697>

(3)<https://cpj.org/data/people/eva-maria-michelmann/>

(4)<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/syria-german-and-turkish-journalists-missing-in-raqqa-since-late-january>