

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT



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Syria: Peaceful activists must be released

On the second anniversary of the arrest and detention of peaceful activist Mazen Darwish and two of his colleagues, Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Syrian authorities to release the three men as well as all other activists held solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Mazen Darwish is the head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM). His colleagues, Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani, are staff members of the same organization. All three were arrested on 16 February 2012 during a raid on the SCM's offices by Syrian Air Force Intelligence, along with a number of others present there at the time. The three men spent months in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance, and Amnesty International understands that Mazen Darwish and Hussein Gharir were tortured or otherwise ill-treated in detention.

Mazen Darwish, Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani, along with two colleagues who were conditionally released on 6 February 2013, Mansour al-Omari and Abd al-Rahman Hamada, are standing trial before the Anti-Terrorism Court in Damascus because of their work to promote and protect human rights in Syria. They were indicted on 27 February 2013. Amnesty International calls on the Syrian authorities to drop all charges against the five men.

They are accused of "publicizing terrorist acts" under Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law. Other charges relate to their publication of studies on the human rights situation in Syria and the documentation of cases of people detained, subjected to enforced disappearance and killed in the context of the Syrian unrest. Their next court session is scheduled for 10 March 2014.

Amnesty International considers the ongoing detention and trial of these peaceful activists as evidence of the ongoing systematic repression against anyone speaking out against human rights violations in Syria. The organization has previously criticized the overbroad Anti-Terrorism Law, enacted by President Bashar al-Assad in 2012, under which Mazen Darwish and his colleagues, as well as other peaceful activists, are being tried.

More broadly, Amnesty International calls on the Syrian authorities to bring recognizable, criminal charges against any person in their custody or release them. Those charged should be promptly referred to trials that comply with international standards. Anyone deprived of their liberty must be given immediate access to their family, lawyers and medical attention.

While the majority of abuses committed in Syria since the outbreak of unrest in March 2011 have been at the hands of government forces, serious human rights abuses, including war crimes, have been committed by armed opposition groups, including some affiliated to al-Qa'ida and some affiliated to the Free Syrian Army. These include abductions, arbitrary detention, torture or other ill-treatment and unlawful killings. Amnesty International calls on all armed opposition groups to set free persons, including women and children, taken hostage for exercising their right to freedom of expression or for merely belonging to religions or sects perceived as supporting the Syrian government.

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