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Middle East/North Africa - Syria

Joint statement

Syria: Free Prominent Rights Defenders : Verdict scheduled in charges before Anti-Terrorism Court

5 September 2014

(Geneva, September 5, 2014) –The Syrian government should immediately and unconditionally release the arbitrarily detained human rights defender **Mazen Darwish** and his colleagues **Hani Al-Zitani** and **Hussein Ghareer**, 79 organizations said today. The Syrian Anti-Terrorism Court is expected to issue its verdict on September 24, 2014 in their trial for “publicizing terrorist acts.”

Darwish is the director of the *Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression* (SCM). Syrian Air Force Intelligence arrested the three men and other colleagues during a raid on the group’s office, in Damascus on February 16, 2012. The three men have been on trial before the Anti-Terrorism Court on charges of “publicizing terrorist acts” under article 8 of the country’s 2012 Anti-Terrorism Law. The charges are based on their peaceful activities that include monitoring and publishing information about human rights abuses in Syria.

“The trial against Mazen Darwish and his colleagues is nothing more than a sham, and a deep miscarriage of justice,” a spokesperson for the organizations said. “These human rights advocates should be immediately set free.”

The judge has postponed the trial several times because security forces have failed to provide the information requested by the court. Nevertheless, the groups understand from a source who is closely monitoring the court proceedings that the judge is expected to issue a verdict in the trial when it resumes in September.

Former detainees who had been held with the men said that security forces subjected Mazen Darwish and his colleagues to torture and other ill-treatment. Despite these credible reports, there has been no investigation into the abuses.

A May 15, 2013 UN General Assembly resolution included a demand for the immediate release of the three men. On January 2014, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) found that the three had been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty due to their human rights activities and called for their immediate release. The United Nations Security Council demanded the release of all arbitrarily detained people in Syria in its resolution 2139, adopted on February 22, 2014.

On June 9, the government announced an amnesty, including for the charges that Darwish and the others face. They have not been freed, however.

According to lawyer working with political detainees who has been monitoring the implementation of the amnesty, in the case of some detainees who should benefit from the amnesty, judges have sent the files back to the public prosecutor with a request to change the charges against them to charges that are not covered by the amnesty.

The Anti-Terrorism Court judge overseeing the trial of the three men should comply with the amnesty and refrain from sending their case back to the prosecutor for new charges, the organizations said. The three should be released immediately, as called for by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

“The families of SCM members hoped that their relatives would be released under the amnesty,” the spokesperson said. “But the Syrian authorities have once again proven that they are not capable of abiding by even their own publicly proclaimed amnesty. Every day behind bars for peaceful activists, who should never have been jailed in the first place, is another day of injustice for them and their families.”

The 79 undersigned organizations call for the immediate and unconditional release of Mazen Darwish and his colleagues, as well as all other activists arbitrarily held solely for peaceful political activism and human rights, humanitarian and media work.

Co-signing organizations in alphabetical order:

1. Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT)
 2. Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights
 3. Al-Sham Center for Democratic Studies and Human Rights – Syria
 4. AMAN NETWORK for Rehabilitation and defending Human Rights
 5. Amnesty International
 6. Arab-European Center Of Human Rights And International Law (AECHRIL)
 7. Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship
 8. Arabic Network For Human Rights Information
 9. Arab Working Group for Media Monitoring (AWG-MM)
 10. Article 19
 11. Assyrian Human Rights Network
 12. Bahrain Centre For Human Rights (BCHR)
 13. Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights
 14. Cairo Center for Development and Human Rights
 15. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
 16. Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
 17. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
 18. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
 19. Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies
 20. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
 21. El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence - Egypt
 22. Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)
 23. European-Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR)
 24. Forum of Cooperation for Human Development" in France
 25. Free Press Unlimited
 26. Front Line Defenders
 27. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
 28. Gulf Forum for civil society organizations
 29. Humanistic Institute for Development Cooperation (HIVOS)
 30. Human Rights First Society - Saudi Arabia
 31. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
 32. Independent Commission for Human Rights in Kurdistan - Iraq
 33. Initiative for Freedom of Expression - Turkey
 34. Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)
 35. International Centre for Justice and Human Rights (ICJHR) - Geneva
 36. International Center for Supporting Rights and Freedoms (ICSRF)
 37. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
 38. International Federation for Human Rights – in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH)
 39. International Media Support (IMS)
 40. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
 41. Iraqi Journalists Rights Defence Association (IJRDA)
 42. Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)
 43. Justice for Iran (JFI)
 44. Kurdish Organization for Human Rights in Syria (DAD)
 45. Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
 46. Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L)
 47. Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)
 48. Lualua Center for human Rights (LCHR)
 49. Madad Foundation for Human Rights
 50. Madani Organisation
 51. Maharat Foundation
 52. Menapolis (Menapolis.net)
 53. Palestinian League for Human Rights - Syria
 54. PAX
 55. PEN International
 56. Rafto Foundation for Human Rights
 57. Regional Free Council to Support Human Rights
 58. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
 59. Samir Kassir Foundation
 60. Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA)
 61. Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (Yemen)
 62. Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA)
 63. Syrian Center for Human Rights
 64. Syrian Centre for Legal Studies and Research
 65. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
 66. Syrian Civil Coalition
 67. Syrian Committee for Human Rights
 68. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
 69. Syrian Organization for Human Rights (SAWASIA)
 70. Syrian Women’s Network
 71. Together For Human Rights
 72. Tunisian Initiative for Freedom of Expression
 73. Vivarta - London
 74. Violations Documentation Center (VDC)
 75. Women’s Studies Centre - Palestine
 76. World Organisation Against Torture – in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
 77. Yemen organization for Defending Rights & democratic Freedoms
 78. Yemeni Organization for the Defense of Human Rights and Democratic Freedoms / Aden - Yemen
 79. Zarga Organization for Rural Development
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