

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Syrian human rights lawyer Radeef Mustafa faces life ban**

Amnesty International has called on the Syrian Bar Association to put a stop to disciplinary proceedings against lawyer Radeef Mustafa if, as it appears, they are aimed at obstructing his human rights work and penalizing him for expressing his opinion on sensitive political issues. The next hearing in the proceedings is due to be held on 30 January.

Radeef Mustafa has been accused by the Bar Association of violating provisions regulating the legal profession for being the head of an unauthorized organization and of fomenting “sectarian strife” by “spreading rumours, lies and unfounded information about the state” in written articles. He faces a ban for life from practising law if the Bar Association’s disciplinary board rules against him.

In a letter sent last week to Nizar Skaf, President of the Syrian Bar Association, Amnesty International raised concerns that the accusations appear to relate to his leading role in the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights in Syria (RASED) and to articles he has published on the internet, including one in which he criticized the continued imposition of a state of emergency in Syria and called for Syrian citizens to be allowed to stand for election to the presidency regardless of their religious identity.

RASED, like all human rights organizations in Syria, is forced to operate without official authorization. It focuses particularly on the rights of the Kurdish minority in Syria, who comprise up to 10 per cent of the population and live mostly in the north-east of Syria; Kurds experience identity-based discrimination, including restrictions on use of their language and culture. The country has remained under a national state of emergency since 1963, which the authorities use to repress, among other human rights defenders and political opponents, activists demanding greater official recognition of the rights of the Kurdish people.

Amnesty International’s concerns about the case of Radeef Mustafa are heightened by the outcome of previous disciplinary proceedings taken by the Bar Association against other lawyers known for their human rights work, in particular Muhannad al-Hassani who, in 2009 was banned for life from practising law on grounds that explicitly related to his legitimate and peaceful human rights work. In June 2010 Muhannad al-Hassani was sentenced to a three-year prison term after being convicted of “weakening nationalist sentiment” and disseminating “false news” by publishing information about unfair trials on the internet.

Amnesty International urges the Syrian Bar Association not to discipline any lawyer for their legitimate and peaceful human rights work. While the Bar Association has a mandate to take disciplinary proceedings against members whose professional conduct falls below the appropriate standard, this must not be interpreted in such a way as to penalize lawyers for pursuing the defence of human rights or for legitimately exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association.

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