



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL



AI Index: MDE 24/ 032/2009 (Public)
12 November 2009

Syria: Lifetime law practice ban against Muhannad al-Hassani sends chilling message

This week's decision by the Syrian Bar Association to issue a lifetime ban against Muhannad al-Hassani, president of the Syrian Organization for Human Rights (Sawasiyah), from practising law sends a disturbing and powerful signal to other lawyers, seemingly aimed at deterring them from carrying out legitimate human rights work, Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists said today.

On 10 November, the disciplinary board of the Damascus section of the Bar Association decided to permanently bar Muhannad al-Hassani, a member of the Bar Association for 15 years, from practising as a lawyer on the following five grounds:

- "being the president of the Syrian Organization for Human Rights, which has been established without an official licence and without obtaining the Bar Association's approval";
- "having the organization carry out its activities in a way that is harmful to Syria";
- "publishing false and exaggerated information that weakens the state and its reputation abroad";
- "attending and documenting the proceedings of the Supreme State Security Court without being the lawyer of those involved in these proceedings"; and, consequently,
- "violating the law governing this profession as well as the [Bar Association's] internal rules, and harming the dignity, honour and traditions of this profession".

The grounds relate explicitly to Muhannad al-Hassani's work as a human rights defender to observe and report on the trials of individuals brought before the Supreme State Security Court, whose proceedings fall far short of international standards for fair trial.

The disciplinary procedure against Muhannad al-Hassani began on 2 August, shortly after an investigating judge issued him on 30 July with criminal charges of "weakening national sentiment" and "spreading false information that could debilitate the morale of the nation and harm the reputation of the state abroad". The charges, which Amnesty International believes to be intended to punish him for his human rights work, are closely echoed by two of the grounds used by the Bar Association.

Muhannad al-Hassani is currently awaiting trial in 'Adra Prison near Damascus. Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists consider him to be a prisoner of conscience. If convicted, he could face between three and 15 years' imprisonment.

Muhannad al-Hassani's lawyers now plan to appeal the decision by the Damascus section of the Bar Association before a review mechanism of the national Bar Association.

Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists call on the Bar Association to uphold, rather than undermine, the rights of its member lawyers and consequently to overturn without delay the decision to bar Muhannad al-Hassani from practising law.

As the UN expert on the issue, the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, has said: "The freedom of association and expression of lawyers and solicitors is essential for the exercise of the profession and must be established and guaranteed by law."

For more information, please see:

- *Open Letter to Syrian Bar Association: Concerns at the disciplinary trial of Mr. Muhannad al-Hassani before the Syrian Bar Association* (Index: MDE 24/031/2009), issued on 6 November 2009.