

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Syria: Release human rights lawyer Muhannad al-Hassani**

Amnesty International has written to the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad calling upon him to intervene in the case of Muhannad al-Hassani, a prominent lawyer, human rights defender and international award winner, whose trial is to be concluded this Wednesday, 23 June. He faces a sentence of between three and 15 years of imprisonment if convicted.

Amnesty International considers Muhannad al-Hassani to be a prisoner of conscience detained solely for his legitimate and peaceful human rights work. It is urging President al-Assad to ensure that he is released immediately and unconditionally and is allowed to continue practising as a human rights lawyer and defender.

Muhannad al-Hassani's trial before the Damascus Criminal Court began in February this year and the court is due to return its verdict next Wednesday. He is being prosecuted under vague and broadly drawn "catch-all" charges - "weakening national sentiment" and "conveying within Syria false news that could debilitate the morale of the nation" - that have been used frequently by the Syrian authorities to imprison peaceful critics, including those who advocate greater respect for human rights.

Muhannad al-Hassani's work as a human rights defender has been internationally recognized and there is wide international concern over his plight. Last month he was awarded the prestigious Martin Ennals Award, the main award of the international human rights movement. In conferring this signal honour on Muhannad al-Hassani, the Chairperson of the award jury described him as a man of "exceptional courage" who is being "arbitrarily detained in unacceptable conditions for defending the rule of law and the right to organize a human rights organization".

Muhannad al-Hassani was arrested on 28 July 2009 and accused by State Security officials of publishing "in a harmful manner" information about trials of government critics and others before the Supreme State Security Court which failed to satisfy international fair trial standards, reports on adverse conditions in Syrian prisons and a death in custody possibly as a result of torture or other ill-treatment. He is also accused of directing the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights (Sawasiyah) without it having been permitted legal authorization.

Since his arrest, although he has yet to be convicted, the Syrian Bar Association has taken disciplinary procedures against Muhannad al-Hassani and effectively struck him off the role of lawyers. This is an extraordinary and unjust measure which Amnesty International believes should be immediately reversed.

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998, recognizes the important role of human rights defenders such as Muhannad al-Hassani and calls on state authorities to defend and uphold it. In addition, the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers adopted in 1990 provide that lawyers must be "able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference" and that they "shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or

administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties”.

In Syria, however, lawyers and other human rights defenders constantly run the risk of being arrested as well as other forms of harassment. Human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, who was the head of a EU-funded human rights centre that was shut down by the authorities soon after opening in March 2006, was arrested on 17 May 2006 and sentenced after an unfair trial to five years in jail on the charge of “spreading false information harmful to the state”.

Lawyer Haytham al-Maleh, the 78 year-old former head of the Human Rights Association of Syria, which like all independent human rights organizations in Syria has not been authorized by the authorities, was arrested on 14 October 2009 and is being tried before a military court; he faces several charges including the same two held against Muhannad al-Hassani, “weakening national sentiments” and “conveying within Syria false news that could debilitate the morale of the nation”.

Amnesty International similarly considers both men to be prisoners of conscience and repeats its calls to the Syrian President to have both men released immediately and unconditionally.