

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Syria: Amnesty International calls for the release of human rights defender and prisoner of conscience, Muhannad al-Hassani

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate release of well-known Syrian human rights lawyer, Muhannad al-Hassani who was arrested on 28 July 2009 for his legitimate work in defending political prisoners in Syria. He has apparently been charged with “weakening national sentiments” and “spreading false news” and is being held in ‘Adra prison, Damascus.

Prior to his arrest he had been summoned for questioning several times by the State Security, one of many security forces operating in Syria which have excessive powers to restrict individuals from exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. The questioning centred around his human rights work, including his defence of political detainees and the work of his organisation – The Syrian Human Rights Organisation (SAWASIYAH) for which he is the Chair of the Board of Directors. SAWASIYAH monitor and publicize human rights violations carried out by the Syrian authorities. Muhannad al-Hassani had regularly carried out observations of trials before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) whose proceedings fall far short of international standards for fair trial.

According to sources in Syria, Muhannad al-Hassani was referred to the Justice Palace in Damascus on 30 July. He was interrogated by the Damascus First Investigation Judge and later formally charged. The session was not open to the public and even the defendant’s lawyer was not allowed access to the court.

In 2007 Muhannad al-Hassani, and other human rights lawyers, Khalil Ma’atouq, Mustafa Osso, Radif Mustafa and Hasan Masho were prevented by the authorities from travelling to Egypt to attend a workshop organized by the International Federation for Human Rights and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. More recently, Muhannad al-Hassani had again sought permission to travel to Egypt to attend a training in human rights work by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights, but was banned from travelling. This is a well-established pattern used by the Syrian authorities to punish human rights defenders and ensure the suppression of any hint of political dissent.

Amnesty International is concerned that Muhannad al-Hassani faces imprisonment purely for his legitimate human rights work. Other people have been imprisoned solely for their human rights work. Anwar al-Bunni, a prominent human rights defender and lawyer in Syria, is serving five years in prison for “spreading false information harmful to the state” for a statement he made in April 2006 to a Qatar-based newspaper in which he said that the death in custody of Muhammad Shafer Haysa, had been “as a result of ill-treatment possibly amounting to torture”.

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