

SYRIA: RENEWED CALLS FOR BASSEL KHARTABIL'S RELEASE ON 4TH ANNIVERSARY OF DETENTION

MDE 24/3656/2016

17 March 2016

Syria's authorities should reveal the whereabouts of Bassel Khartabil, a software developer and free speech activist, and release him immediately, 31 organizations said on the fourth anniversary of his detention

On 15 March 2012, Military Intelligence arrested Bassel Khartabil and held him in incommunicado detention for eight months before moving him to 'Adra prison in Damascus in December 2012. During this time he was subjected to torture and ill-treatment. He remained in 'Adra until 3 October 2015, when he managed to inform his family that he was being transferred to an undisclosed location. Since then his whereabouts remain unknown and there are serious concerns for his life.

Based on unconfirmed information that the family received from some local sources, there are fears that he may have been tried and sentenced to death by a Military Field Court in the Military Police headquarters in Al-Qaboun, Damascus. These courts are notorious for conducting closed-door proceedings that do not meet minimum international standards for a fair trial.

Since his detention, many human rights groups have campaigned for his release. On 21 April 2015, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared his detention a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and called for his release, yet the Syrian authorities refuse to free him.

A Syrian of Palestinian parents, Bassel Khartabil is a 34-year-old computer engineer who worked to build a career in software and web development. Before his arrest, Bassel Khartabil used his technical expertise to help advance freedom of speech and access to information via the internet. He has won many awards, including the 2013 Index on Censorship Digital Freedom Award for using technology to promote an open and free internet, and was named one of Foreign Policy magazine's Top 100 Global Thinkers of 2012 "for insisting, against all odds, on a peaceful Syrian revolution."

The signatory organizations express concern at his on-going arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance and believe that it is a direct result of his peaceful and legitimate work for the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression.

The groups call on the authorities in Syria to:

1. Immediately disclose the whereabouts of Bassel Khartabil and grant him access to a lawyer of his choice and to his family;
2. Ensure that he is protected from torture and other ill-treatment;
3. Immediately and unconditionally release him;

4. Release all detainees in Syria held for exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression and association.

Co-signed:

1. Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
2. Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
3. Amnesty International
4. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
5. Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)
6. English PEN
7. Euromed Rights (EMRHN)
8. Front Line Defenders (FLD)
9. Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)
10. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
11. Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (HIVOS)
12. Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)
13. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
14. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
15. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
16. Iraqi Association for the Defence of Journalists' Rights (IJRDA)
17. International Media Support (IMS)
18. Index on Censorship
19. Jordan Open Source Association (JOSA)
20. Lawyers Rights Watch Canada

21. Metro Centre to Defend Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan
22. No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ)
23. PAX for Peace
24. PEN International
25. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
26. Samir Kassir Foundation
27. Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF)
28. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
29. The Day After
30. Tunisian Initiative for Freedom of Expression
31. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders