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## **Threats force Syrian activists underground amid nationwide protests**

Human rights activists seen to be involved in pro-reform protests in Syria have been forced into hiding after receiving threats from Syrian authorities, Amnesty International said today as a “Day of Defiance” took place around the country.

Syrian authorities heightened security measures ahead of today’s protests, leading to several protester deaths and the detention of a key opposition activist.

“Given recent events, Syrian human rights and political activists have cause to fear for their lives and liberty, and a number have gone into hiding after receiving threats,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“Syrian security forces have killed hundreds and arrested many more during and after protests. This campaign of violence and intimidation must cease and human rights defenders must be allowed to carry on their work without fear for their personal safety.”

Amnesty International has learned of several prominent human rights and political activists who have recently been forced into hiding.

These include: human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh and her husband Wa’el Hammada; Haytham al-Maleh; Hind and ‘Omar al-Labwani; Jwan Yousef Khorshid; Walid al-Bunni; and Suheir al-Atassi.

Authorities approached Wa’el Hammada’s brother ‘Abd al-Rahman, a 20-year-old student and accountant, at his home in Damascus on Saturday, 30 April, after he earlier evaded them at his place of work. They arrested ‘Abd al-Rahman after he was forced to call his brother to persuade him to come out of hiding but was unable to get through to him.

Human rights activists Hind al-Labwani, aged 23, and ‘Omar al-Labwani, aged 19, both went into hiding sometime following the protests on 30 April after security forces threatened to arrest them. Their father Kamal al-Labwani is a prisoner of conscience who is currently serving a 12-year prison term. They have participated in protests since they began in their home town al-Zabadani near Damascus.

Jwan Yousef Khorshid is a Kurdish human rights activist and member of the board of directors of the unauthorized Kurdish Committee for Human Rights in Syria (RASED). He was involved in the protests in his home city of Qamishly, north-eastern Syria. He reportedly went into hiding on 25 April. The Military Security visited his home on more than one occasion in early May and on 5 May they threatened his wife with arrest if Jwan Yousef Khorshid did not hand himself over within 24 hours.

Haytham al-Maleh, a veteran human rights lawyer and former prisoner of conscience, went into hiding last week after his son, Iyas al-Maleh, who lives abroad, received a tip-off and phoned him at home in a

Damascus suburb. Iyas al-Maleh told Amnesty International that threats his father receives by email and on his Facebook account, such as “you deserve to be hanged”, have failed to silence him – last night he spoke on Al Jazeera television.

Walid al-Bunni, twice detained as a prisoner of conscience and a member of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, an unauthorized opposition coalition, fled his home on the outskirts of Damascus on 5 May after the security forces broke down the front door of his house. He has gone into hiding.

Suheir al-Atassi, president of the unauthorized Jamal al-Atassi Forum discussion group, has also gone into hiding. A prominent participator in the pro-reform demonstrations, she had been arrested on 16 March when plain-clothes members of the security forces violently dispersed a peaceful protest calling for the release of political activists. She was dragged away by her hair, then held in several detention centres including the Muntaqa Branch of Military Security. Upon her release on 3 April, she continued to demand reform.

“Syrian authorities must stop this campaign of intimidation against individuals who have merely expressed their views in public protests,” said Philip Luther.

“The ever-worsening violence, mass arrests and ill-treatment of detainees has only served to embolden protesters around the country, and they must be allowed to make their opinions known in safety.”

Opposition leader Riad Seif was arrested today while leaving the al-Hasan mosque in Damascus, a launch point for street protests in the capital. A former independent member of the Syrian parliament, he was twice before held as a prisoner of conscience and suffers from advanced prostate cancer, sparking fears for his well-being in detention.

Hundreds more have been arrested and held in incommunicado detention since pro-reform protests began in mid-March.

Amnesty International is concerned about many others detained in recent days for their participation in or support for the popular protests around the country. These include political and human rights activists, mosque imams and journalists.

Since 30 April, the Syrian security forces and army have been conducting house-to-house arrests in towns and cities around Syria, including al-Zabadani and Madaya (west of Damascus), Dera’a in the south, Duma (near Damascus), and the coastal city of Latakia. In most of these places telephone lines and mobile phones were cut off.

Amnesty International has compiled a list of more than 540 names of individuals killed by Syrian security forces in the last seven weeks. Several additional protesters were reportedly killed in today’s “Day of Defiance” protests around the country.