

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER BELIEVED HELD IN SYRIA

Human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his friend Mohammed Thatha, who went missing on 2 October, are believed to be held at an Air Force Intelligence branch in Damascus, the Syrian capital, in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance.

On 2 October, **Khalil Ma'touq** – who has been working as a human rights lawyer for a number of years, has defended hundreds of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Syria, and is also the executive director of the Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research– and his friend **Mohammed Thatha** set off for Khalil Ma'touq's office but never arrived at their destination. Their mobile phones are still switched off and the two men have not been heard from. Their families believe that they were arrested at one of the various government-operated checkpoints on the way, possibly due to Khalil Ma'touq's human rights-related activities and recent international travel for medical treatment.

Despite repeated inquiries with the local authorities, the families or lawyers have not yet received a response from the Syrian government. So far, the authorities have neither notified the families of the arrest of the two men, nor allowed the men to contact their families.

Nevertheless, according to Khalil Ma'touq's lawyer, his family has managed to obtain unofficial information about him and Mohammed Thatha, which leads them to believe that the men are being detained at a branch of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence in Damascus and that Khalil Ma'touq has access to his medication there. Khalil Ma'touq suffers from advanced lung disease and has severe breathing difficulties, due to reduced lung function. Neither the families in Syria nor Amnesty International have been able to verify this information. It is unclear whether Khalil Ma'touq receives the constant medical supervision that his condition requires, even if he does have access to medication.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English, French or your own language:

- Calling on the Syrian authorities to urgently inform Khalil Ma'touq and Mohammed Thatha's families of the two men's fate and whereabouts. If they are held solely on account of Khalil Ma'touq's human rights work or for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, they should be released immediately and unconditionally;
- If they are detained, urging them to ensure that both men are protected from torture and other ill-treatment, and allowed immediate contact with their families and lawyers of their choice;
- If they are detained, urging the authorities to grant Khalil Ma'touq access to all necessary medical care, in civilian hospitals with specialized facilities if required.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 21 NOVEMBER 2012 TO:

President

Bashar al-Assad

Fax: +963 11 332 3410 (keep trying)

(fax/phone line – say "Fax") (Fax is the only reliable communication method; please do not send letters)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Interior

Major General Mohamad Ibrahim al-Shaar

Fax: +963 11 311 0554

(fax/phone line – say "Fax") (Fax is the only reliable communication method; please do not send letters)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Walid al-Mu'allim

Fax: +963 11 214 6253 (keep trying)

(fax/phone line – say "Fax") (Fax is the only reliable communication method; please do not send letters)

Salutation: Your Excellence

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA 298/12. Further information:

<http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/080/2012/en>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Thousands of suspected opponents of the government have been arrested in Syria since protests broke out in February 2011 and many, if not most, are believed to have been tortured and otherwise ill-treated. Amnesty International has received the names of more than 580 people reported to have died in custody during this period and has documented many cases of torture or other ill-treatment. See *'I wanted to die': Syria's torture survivors speak out* (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/016/2012/en>).

Amnesty International has also received many reports of people like Khalil Ma'touq and Mohammed Thatha who have apparently been subjected to enforced disappearance, where state officials have provided their families with no information on their fate: most are believed to have been arrested by the security forces. Some have been released after months of secret, incommunicado detention; others remain missing (see *Kept in the Dark – the murky world of enforced disappearances*, 29 August 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/kept-dark-murky-world-enforced-disappearances-2012-08-28>)

Since protests broke out, the situation has evolved into an internal armed conflict throughout much of the country. Systematic and widespread human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity and possible war crimes have become rife in Syria, where civilians are the main victims. Amnesty International has documented numerous examples; most recently in documents such as *Civilians bearing the brunt in the battle for Aleppo* (Index: MDE 24/73/2012, 23 August 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/073/2012/en>) and *Indiscriminate attacks terrorize and displace civilians* (Index: MDE 24/078/2012, 19 September 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/078/2012/en>).

Although the vast majority of the human rights abuses documented by Amnesty International have been committed by the state's armed forces and pro-government *shabiha* militias, abuses have also been committed by armed opposition groups. This includes the torture and killing of captured soldiers and *shabiha* militia members as well as the abduction and killing of people known or suspected to support or work with the government and its forces, or the taking of civilians as hostages to try to negotiate prisoner swaps. Amnesty International condemns without reservation such abuses and has called on the leadership of all armed opposition groups in Syria to state publicly that such acts are prohibited and to do all in their power to ensure that opposition forces put an immediate stop to them. Other bodies such as the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic have made similar findings, including in their most recent report published on 15 August 2012.

Amnesty International is continuing to call for the situation in Syria to be referred to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. The organization is also calling for an international arms embargo aimed at halting the flow of weapons to the Syrian government, and an assets freeze on President Bashar al-Assad and his close associates. Additionally, states considering supplying weapons to the armed opposition should have in place the necessary mechanisms to ensure the material supplied is not used to commit human rights abuses and/or war crimes. The Syrian government should also allow the international independent commission of inquiry as well as international human rights and humanitarian organizations unfettered access to all parts of the country.

Go to the interactive Eyes on Syria map (www.eyesonsyria.org) to see where human rights violations are being committed in Syria, and Amnesty International's global activism to seek justice.

Name: Khalil Ma'touq, Mohammed Thatha
Gender m/f: m

Further information on UA: 298/12 Index: MDE 24/081/2012 Issue Date: 10 October 2012