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Syria: Campaign to Free Detainees

Human Rights Coalition Opens ‘Hearts in Our Hands’ Effort

The Free Syrian Voices (www.free-syrian-voices.org) coalition today announced its “Hearts in Our Hands” Campaign to call for the release of peaceful Syrian activists held both by the Syrian government and armed groups. The coalition was formed to coordinate the efforts of six international human rights organizations for detained Syrian human rights defenders and activists.

The campaign’s timing, over the Valentine’s Day weekend and through 17 February 2015, marks the 3rd anniversary, on 16 February, of the arrest and detention of Mazen Darwish, director of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), and two staff members, Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani. They remain in Syrian government jails solely for their human rights work, along with hundreds of other human rights, media, legal and humanitarian workers detained since the peaceful protest movement in Syria started in 2011.

During the campaign, using social media, supporters are asked to post and share pictures of themselves holding signs featuring hearts and messages or making shapes of hearts with their hands in solidarity with the imprisoned Syrians. The intention is to pressure key actors on Syria, particularly Russia and Iran, to use their influence for the release of the peaceful activists.

UN Security Council Resolution 2139 of February 22, 2014 strongly condemns the arbitrary detention and torture of civilians in Syria, as well as the kidnappings, abductions, and forced disappearances. The resolution demands the immediate end of these practices and the release of all arbitrarily detained people, starting with women and children, as well as sick, wounded, and elderly people, and including UN personnel and journalists. Syria has not complied, and there has been no follow-up from the Security Council.

For the third anniversary of the raid on the SCM offices, Yara Bader, Mazen Darwish’s wife and the current director of the organization, released this statement: *“It is now three years since my husband, Mazen, and our dear friends and colleagues Hani and Hussein were taken from us and locked away in the Syrian regime’s prisons. More than the personal, it is for our homeland, Syria, that this is the biggest loss – what Mazen and others who suffer the same fate were trying to do was to make real change in Syria through nonviolent means, recognizing the dignity of all. By locking away these people, the regime has ensured that the only space available in Syria is for brutality, violence and inhumanity on a large scale. Not only do I need Mazen free, Syria and the Syrian people need all our heroes in prison freed immediately, for the sake of our future.”*

On 16 February 2012, 14 human rights defenders were arrested at the organization’s offices in Damascus. The security officers closed the office and blindfolded the human rights defenders, then took them to an undisclosed location. While others were subsequently released, Mazen Darwish, Hussein Gharir and Hani al-Zitani remain behind bars, charged with “promoting terrorist activity.” The Anti-Terrorism Court, which is handling the case, has repeatedly postponed the

trial. **The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention** concluded in November 2013 that the three men's deprivation of liberty was arbitrary.

The Free Syrian Voices coalition was formed in March 2014 to coordinate the work and advocacy of international human rights organizations in supporting Syrian human rights defenders and activists.

The website features an exclusive video with Yara Bader, who was also detained with her husband and other colleagues but later released. It also features 54 profiles of human rights defenders, journalists, activists, and humanitarians being arbitrarily held.

The campaign is an effort to encourage the public to support the efforts for the release of all detainees held in Syria for their peaceful advocacy. Suggested texts to include with photos for Tweets:

.@KKdolgov 3 years after arrest hearts of SCM detainees r in your hands #Syria #freeSYvoices
<http://free-syrian-voices.org/take-action/>

.@JZarif 3 years after arrest hearts of SCM detainees r in our hands #Syria #freeSYvoices
<http://free-syrian-voices.org/take-action/>

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