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Syria: Free Human Rights Defenders Held 3 Years

Detained Arbitrarily, and Tortured

The Syrian government should immediately free the prominent Syrian human rights defenders Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir, 71 human rights groups said today, on the third anniversary of their arrest. The three men have been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty on the basis of their human rights activities.

Syrian Air Force Intelligence arrested all those who were present including the three human rights defenders during a raid on the offices of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) in Damascus on 16 February 2012. All the detained SCM members were released, some on bail, except the three men. Mazen Darwish is the director of the SCM while Hani Al-Zitani and Gharir are both staff members.

The three men were detained for approximately one year in security branches in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance, where they were subjected to ill treatment and torture. They were then transferred to 'Adra Central Prison in Damascus.

In February 2013, the three were taken before the Anti-Terrorism Court on charges of “publicizing terrorist acts” under Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law of 2012. Since then, the court has repeatedly postponed their trial, most recently in January 2015. A new trial date has not yet been set.

Although the government announced a general amnesty on 9 June 2014, that covered the charges against the men, they have not been freed.

The SCM is an important non-governmental organization working to disseminate information regarding the human rights situation in Syria including media freedom and freedom of expression. It has published studies on media freedom, violations against journalists, and the human rights situation in the country, and has documented reports of detained and disappeared civilians.

The undersigned organizations believe that Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir are being persecuted as a result of their legitimate human rights work and exercise of their right to freedom of expression in response to

the ongoing crisis in Syria. The Syrian authorities should immediately and unconditionally release the three men and drop all charges against them.

The UN General Assembly, in resolution 67/262 of 15 May 2013 called for the release of the three men. In January 2014, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) also found that the three men had been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty due to their human rights activities and called for their immediate release. UN Security Council Resolution 2139, adopted on 22 February 2014, also demanded the release of all arbitrarily detained people in Syria.

Despite these calls, the three men remain in detention. While Hussein Gharir continues to be held in 'Adra central prison, on 31 January, Mazen Darwish was transferred to the central prison in Hama, and on 4 February Hani Al-Zitani was transferred to Sweida central prison with no explanation.

The Syrian government should heed the UN's call and immediately release everyone the government is arbitrarily detaining, the organizations said. Staffan De Mistura, the UN special envoy to Syria, should make the release of peaceful activists, including these three detainees, a key priority.

The organizations are:

- 1) Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture
- 2) Arab Forum for Alternatives
- 3) Alkarama Foundation
- 4) Amnesty International
- 5) Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
- 6) Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship (London)
- 7) ARJ EU Working group on arts-rights-justice, Chair
- 8) Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)
- 9) Cairo Center for Development CCD
- 10) Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
- 11) Canadian Journalists for Free Expression
- 12) Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights in Syria
- 13) CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation
- 14) Coalition for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR)
- 15) Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- 16) Dawlaty
- 17) Developmental Interaction Network (DIN)
- 18) Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)
- 19) El-Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence
- 20) Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)
- 21) Etana for Documentation and Studies
- 22) European-Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR)
- 23) Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria
- 24) Fraternity Center for Democracy and Civil Society
- 25) Freedom House

- 26) Front Line Defenders
- 27) Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)
- 28) Humanistic Institute for Development Cooperation (HIVOS)
- 29) Human Rights Watch (HRW)
- 30) Initiative for Freedom of Expression – TURKEY
- 31) International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
- 32) International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
- 33) International Media Support (IMS)
- 34) International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
- 35) Iraqi Al-Amal Association
- 36) Iraqi Institute for the Civil Development
- 37) Iraqi Journalists Rights Defense Association (IJRDA)
- 38) Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)
- 39) Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada (LRWC)
- 40) Lawyers for Lawyers
- 41) Lebanese Center for Human rights
- 42) Lualua Centre for Human Rights
- 43) Mada Centre for Appeal (Mada for Neda'a)
- 44) Madad NGOs
- 45) Maharat Foundation
- 46) Metro Centre to Defend Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan
- 47) Moroccan Association for Human Rights, the Belgian Section (AMDH)
- 48) No Peace Without Justice
- 49) Omani Observatory for Human Rights
- 50) PAX (The Netherlands)
- 51) PEN International
- 52) Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- 53) Samir Kassir Foundation, SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom
- 54) Society Action Network (ICAN)
- 55) Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research
- 56) Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
- 57) Syrian Female Journalists Network
- 58) Syrian human Rights Organization (Swasiah)
- 59) Syrian Journalists Association
- 60) Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
- 61) Syrian Women for state of citizenship
- 62) Syrian Women Forum for Peace
- 63) Syrian Women League (SWL)
- 64) The Day After
- 65) Tunisian Initiative for Freedom of Expression
- 66) Tunisian Organization Against Torture
- 67) Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC)
- 68) Vivarta
- 69) Women Now
- 70) World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

71) Yemeni Organization for the Defense of Human Rights and Democratic Freedoms