

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT LETTER



31 August 2015

AI Index: MDE 24/2356/2015

DETAINEES IN SYRIA

A letter that has been sent to members of the UN Security Council

We, a group of 15 international and Syrian NGOs, are seeking your government's assistance, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, to take steps to ensure the release of all those in Syria who have been arrested as the result of the peaceful exercise of their human rights and to ensure that the charges against activist **Mazen Darwish** and two of his colleagues at the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), who have recently been conditionally released, are dropped.

Despite Security Council resolution 2139, thousands of individuals remain either arbitrarily detained or subjected to enforced disappearance by the Syrian authorities, or held by non-state armed groups following abduction. Some are held in this way because they are human rights defenders, because of their peaceful political activism, because they are journalists or have otherwise worked with the media, or because they have provided civilians with humanitarian or medical support.

Those still subjected to enforced disappearance include **Faten Rajab**, a physicist from Damascus who was campaigning for freedom and dignity for all people in Syria. She was arrested in December 2011 and her whereabouts remain unknown. They also include **Khalil Ma'touq**, a lawyer and director of the Syrian Centre for Legal Studies and Research, who is believed to have been arrested in October 2012 and was subsequently seen in various detention facilities operated by the Syrian security forces. He had defended political prisoners since the early 1990s.

Abd Al-Aziz Al-Khayyir, **Iyas Ayash** and **Maher Tahan**, too, remain forcibly disappeared after their arrest following their return from a visit to China in September 2012. The men worked with the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, a coalition of political opposition groups, which appears to have been the reason for their arrest. Citizen journalist **Ali Othman** has also been subjected to enforced disappearance since 2012, when he was arrested in Homs where he had been providing news on the situation there and working with international journalists.

Civil society figures who have been targeted by armed groups include staff members of the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, an organization which is a signatory to this letter. They remain missing following their abduction in December 2013 from Duma, a city in the besieged Eastern Ghouta area under the control of various armed groups, of whom Jaysh Al-Islam is one of the most dominant ones. **Nazem Hamadi**, **Razan Zeitouneh**, **Samira Al-Khalil** and **Wa'el Hamada** were active in human rights monitoring.

Mazen Darwish and his colleagues **Hani Al-Zitani** and **Hussein Gharir**, all staff members of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, a co-signatory to this letter, were released from detention by the state in July and August 2015. After being arrested in February 2012, they had been subjected to enforced disappearance and torture and other ill-treatment in custody. While we welcome their releases,

we remain concerned as they continue to face the charge of “publicizing terrorist acts” in an unfair trial before the Anti-Terrorism Court. We attach a statement that we issued following these releases for your information.

We note that the Security Council Presidential Statement of 17 August 2015 emphasizes the importance of the implementation of resolution 2139 in order to ensure the creation of “an environment conducive to the commencement of substantive political negotiations and in building confidence among the parties”. Consequently, we urge your government to use its position on the Security Council to:

- Call on all parties to the conflict in Syria to immediately reveal the whereabouts of all detainees, to ensure they have unrestricted access to their family and lawyers, and are protected from torture and other ill-treatment;
- Call on all parties to provide immediate and unhindered access for independent international monitors, such as the UN-mandated Commission of Inquiry, to all persons deprived of their liberty;
- Call on all parties to immediately and unconditionally release all those who are currently arbitrarily detained because they are human rights defenders, because of their peaceful political activism, because they are journalists or have otherwise worked with the media, or because they have provided civilians with humanitarian or medical support;
- Call on the Syrian government not to use the expansive powers of the country’s Anti-Terrorism Law to detain and prosecute individuals as a result of their peaceful activism, promotion and protection of human rights or humanitarian or media work; and to ensure that any prosecutions are only for internationally recognizable criminal acts in proceedings which comply with international fair trial standards;
- Call on the Syrian authorities to drop the charges against human rights defenders Mazen Darwish, Hani al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir immediately and unconditionally; and
- Call on all parties to provide immediate and unhindered access to international detention monitors to all detention facilities, official and unofficial.

Yours sincerely,

Amnesty International

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

English PEN

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

Front Line Defenders

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries (HIVOS)

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

International Media Support (IMS)

International Press Institute (IPI)

PEN American Center

Reporters without Borders (RSF)

Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)

The Day After

Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC)