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Syria: Fears for life of free expression advocate

Bassel Khartabil, in undisclosed location, may face death sentence

Bassel Khartabil, a defender of freedom of expression being held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance may be facing a death sentence, 30 local and international organizations said today. His wife has received unconfirmed reports that a Military Field Court has sentenced him to death. His whereabouts should be disclosed immediately, and he should be released unconditionally, the groups said.

Military Intelligence detained Bassel Khartabil on 15 March 2012. He was held in incommunicado detention for eight months and was subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. He is facing Military Field Court proceedings for his peaceful activities in support of freedom of expression. A military judge interrogated Bassel Khartabil for a few minutes on 9 December 2012, but he had heard nothing further about his legal case, he told his family. In December 2012 he was moved to 'Adra prison in Damascus, where he remained until 3 October 2015, when he was transferred to an undisclosed location and has not been heard of since.

Reports that his wife received from alleged sources inside Military Intelligence suggest that since his disappearance he has been tried by a Military Field Court in the Military Police headquarters in al-Qaboun, which sentenced him to death. Military Field Courts in Syria are exceptional courts with secret closed-door proceedings that do not meet international fair trial standards. Defendants have no legal representation, and the courts' decisions are binding and not subject to appeal. People brought before such courts who were later released have said that proceedings are perfunctory, often lasting only minutes.

Bassel Khartabil is a software developer who has used his technical expertise to help advance freedom of speech and access to information via the internet. He has won many awards, including the 2013 Index on Censorship Digital Freedom Award for using technology to promote an open and free internet. His arrest and on-going detention are apparently a direct result of his peaceful and legitimate work, the groups said.

Demands for his release have been published by this group since his arrest and have been echoed by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in April 2015.

The authorities in Syria should:

1. Immediately disclose the whereabouts of Bassel Khartabil and grant him access to a lawyer and to his family;
2. Ensure that he is protected from torture and other ill-treatment;
3. Immediately and unconditionally release him;
4. Release all detainees in Syria held for exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression and association.

List of signatories:

1. Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT)
2. Amnesty International (AI)
3. Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship (AFDC)
4. Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
5. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
6. Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights in Syria
7. Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)
8. EuroMed Rights (EMHRN)
9. Fraternity Foundation for Human Rights
10. Front Line Defenders (FLD)
11. Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
12. HIVOS Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
13. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
14. Index on Censorship
15. Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR)
16. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
17. Iraqi Association for the Defence of Journalists' Rights (IJRDA)
18. Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada (LRWC)
19. Maharat Foundation
20. Metro Centre to Defend Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan
21. PAX
22. PEN International
23. Rafto
24. Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
25. Rethink Rebuild Society
26. Sisters Arab Forum for Human Rights (SAF)
27. SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom
28. Syrian American Council (SAC)
29. Syrian Association for Citizenship
30. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
31. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
32. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
33. Syrian Women Association
34. The Day After Association (TDA)
35. Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC)
36. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) under the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders