

STATEMENT

Attack on the free exercise of the lawyer's profession and threat to the effective protection of human rights in Syria

Brussels, 21 October, 2009. *Avocats Sans Frontières* is deeply concerned by the current wave of repression against Syrian lawyers working for the defence of human rights. The prosecution of lawyers involved in human rights defence seriously endangers the free and independent practice of the lawyer's profession.

Avocats Sans Frontières already stated its deep concern about the situation of Mr. Muhannad Al Hassani who has been arrested by the Syrian authorities on 28 July, 2009 and is still detained, awaiting his trial of which the date remains to be set. A well-known human rights lawyer; Mr. Muhannad Al Hassani is the Chairman of the Syrian Human Rights organization "Swasiya", he was a several-time observer before the Supreme State Security Court. He is recognized for his legitimate action for the defence of the rights of political prisoners in Syria.

In spite of the mobilisation of various organisations in support of Mr. Al Hassani and the adoption of a Resolution by the European Parliament on 17 September 2009, Mr. Muhannad Al Hassani was formally charged on the grounds that he had "*offended national feelings*" and "*propagated false information*" on 20 October 2009.

The case of Mr. Muhannad al Hassani is far from being isolated. Mr. Haitan Al-Maleh, an eminent Syrian lawyer, founding member and former Chairman of the Human Rights Association in Syria, decorated in 2006 by the Government of Netherlands for his courageous dedication in combating human rights violations, was officially placed in custody on 20 October 2009, after having been detained in an undisclosed location and deprived of any contact with the outside world for six days. The reasons for his detention and the charges against Mr. Haitan Al-Maleh have not been made public yet.

Mr. Haitan Al-Maleh was one of the lawyers assigned to the defence of Muhannad Al Hassani. Without assuming that his arrest is linked to the fact that he was involved in the defence of his colleague, it is still revealing of a hardening of the Syrian authorities' attitude towards human rights defenders.

The arrest of Mr. Haitan al-Maleh occurred on 14 October, two days after he had given a phone interview to the TV channel Barada in which he criticised Syrian authorities.

Therefore, *Avocats Sans Frontières* wishes to strongly underline that lawyers, as any other citizen, are entitled to benefit from the right of freedom of speech, as stated in articles 19 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

More generally, *Avocats Sans Frontières* calls on the Syrian authorities to end the prosecutions against lawyers working for the defence of human rights and to use all necessary measures to allow lawyers to practice their profession without hindrance, intimidation, harassment or undue interference, as prescribed in article 16 of the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, adopted by the United Nations on 7 September 1990.

Avocats Sans Frontières also calls on the Syrian authorities to stop all intimidation against human rights defenders and to use all necessary means to promote the protection and the implementation of human rights and fundamental liberties, at the national and international level, in accordance with the dispositions of the United Nations General Assembly Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by consensus on December 9th 1998.

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