



**Statement**

**Syria: Free Human Rights Defenders Held 3 Years Detained Arbitrarily, and Tortured**



(Geneva, February 16, 2015) – The Syrian government should immediately free the prominent Syrian human rights defenders Mazen Darwish, Hani Al-Zitani and Hussein Gharir, 70 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 February 16, 2012. All the detained SCM members were released, some on bail, except the three men. Darwish is a journalist and the director of the SCM while 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 June 9, 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 Darwish, Al-Zitani and 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 May 15, 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 February 22, 2014, also demanded the release of all arbitrarily detained people in Syria.

Despite these calls, the three men remain in detention. While Gharir continues to be held in Adra central prison, on January 31, Darwish was transferred to the central prison in Hama, and on February 4 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.

### **Signatories:**

Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture  
Arab Forum for Alternatives  
Alkarama Foundation  
Amnesty International  
Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)  
Arab Foundation for Development and Citizenship (London)  
ARJ EU Working group on arts-rights-justice, Chair  
Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)  
Cairo Center for Development CCD  
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)  
Canadian Journalists for Free Expression





Centre for Democracy and Civil Rights in Syria  
CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation  
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)  
Dawlaty  
Developmental Interaction Network (DIN)  
Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)  
El-Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence  
Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN)  
Etana for Documentation and Studies  
European-Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (EBOHR)  
Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria  
Fraternity Center for Democracy and Civil Society  
Freedom House  
Front Line Defenders  
Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)  
Humanistic Institute for Development Cooperation (HIVOS)  
Human Rights Watch (HRW)  
Initiative for Freedom of Expression – TURKEY  
International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)  
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders  
International Media Support (IMS)  
International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)  
Iraqi Al-Amal Association  
Iraqi Institute for the Civil Development  
Iraqi Journalists Rights Defense Association (IJRDA)  
Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM)  
Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada (LRWC)  
Lawyers for Lawyers  
Lebanese Center for Human rights  
Lualaba Centre for Human Rights  
Mada Centre for Appeal (Mada for Neda'a)  
Madad NGOs  
Maharat Foundation  
Metro Centre to Defend Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan  
Moroccan Association for Human Rights, the Belgian Section (AMDH)  
No Peace Without Justice  
Omani Observatory for Human Rights  
PAX (The Netherlands)





PEN International  
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)  
Samir Kassir Foundation, SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom  
Society Action Network (ICAN)  
Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research  
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)  
Syrian Female Journalists Network  
Syrian human Rights Organization (Swasiah)  
Syrian Journalists Association  
Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)  
Syrian Women for state of citizenship  
Syrian Women Forum for Peace  
Syrian Women League (SWL)  
The Day After  
Tunisian Initiative for Freedom of Expression  
Tunisian Organization Against Torture  
Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC)  
Vivarta  
Women Now  
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory  
for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders  
Yemeni Organization for the Defense of Human Rights and Democratic Freedoms

