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**THE PERSONAL STORY OF A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER IN EXILE
HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WORKING GROUP
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Guest Speaker:

Muhannad al- Hassani, President and Co-Founder, Syrian Organization for Human Rights (Sawasiya)

Background

Muhannad al- Hassani is a lawyer and human rights defender. He is the President and Co-Founder of the Syrian Organization for Human Rights (Sawasiya). Sawasiya is an unauthorized organization that monitors and publicizes human rights violations carried out by the Syrian authorities. As President of Sawasiya, al-Hassani regularly monitors and documents trial sessions held before the Supreme State Security Court, as well as military and criminal courts. He has also defended a number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, and cooperated closely with the International Commission of Jurists, an international human rights organization that provides legal expertise at both the international and national level. Al-Hassani served a two-year prison term in Damascus Central Prison of Adra, following a politically-motivated trial due to his human rights work (including his work calling for a separation of powers in Syria, and independence of the judiciary as well as free labor unions). He is also permanently banned from practicing law by the Syrian Bar Association.

Muhannad's Journey into Exile

Five months after the revolution began in Syria, Muhannad was moved from prison into solitary confinement for more than a week. He was eventually released by the Syrian Director of Intelligence and his passport, which was confiscated in 2005, was returned to him. Twenty days after his release from jail, WikiLeaks documents were released which contained information regarding Muhannad's activities, which put him in danger before the Syrian authorities. Fearful for his life, Muhannad left Syria immediately for Cairo. He did not have a chance to say good bye to his family or to take any personal belongings. From Cairo, Muhannad was able to contact a friend in Switzerland who put him touch with a human rights activist in Cairo. This activist took Muhannad to the office of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) where he stayed for a couple of months.

Muhannad soon became aware of the fact that the Syrian government was attempting to have him extradited from Egypt. Because of this, he fled to Paris, where he was able to meet with representatives of the European Commission for Human Rights and other political figures. Muhannad came to the United States in the beginning of 2012 to join his younger brother who was already living here. His brother had also fled Syria because of detention and abuse by the Syrian authorities for allowing his home to serve as the headquarters of Sawasiya.

After arriving in the United States, Muhannad stayed with a former classmate. With the assistance of an attorney at Human Rights First, he applied for political asylum right away, as his passport would soon expire. At the advice of his attorney, he also attempted to obtain food stamps and other social services. His experience with social services was difficult. The representative he was interviewed by had a hard time believing his story and that he did not pay his friend in exchange for housing. In order to approve the food stamps, Muhannad had to obtain a letter from his friend, breaking down his expenses. He felt embarrassed and humiliated. He was able to get food stamps for less than \$200/month. In Syria, Muhannad, not only left behind his personal belongings, but also property valued at \$5 million dollars.

Documentation of Crimes in Syria

Sawasiya still has a presence in Syria and has an extensive database of crimes by the Syrian regime, informed by activists on the ground, who are risking their lives to provide this information. Some of the information requires authentication, but there is ample physical evidence in support of allegations.

After his release from jail, Muhannad learned that there are many young lawyers in Syria who have become political activists and are calling for constitutional reform and an independent judiciary.

In prison, Muhannad learned of the horrendous abuse suffered by political activists in jail. He tried to form an organization of young attorneys to work on freedom of speech and try to prevent the abuse of political activists. His organization along with a network of attorneys are working together to preserve the rights of demonstrators in Syria. A number of attorneys have been arrested or killed.

Attorneys and activists have formed a coalition of human rights defenders outside Syria. Their goal is to document human rights violations and crimes against humanity. They are trying to coordinate with attorneys inside Syria to document and authenticate the information, and to continue working towards a legal frame (transitional justice) for the transitional period after the fall of the Syrian regime.

The Situation of Human Rights Defenders within Syria and in Exile

Since the beginning of the uprising, 6,000 people have disappeared and 150,000 detainees have been tortured. Syria is in a state of humanitarian crisis and they need resources to document this horrendous legacy. They need an office in Geneva to present their report to UN officials, as well as offices in cities and provinces in Syria. 1.8 million families have lost their homes and have no shelter. Thousands of residents in the UAE were returned to Syria for objecting to crimes against their families. In Lebanon, the wounded Syrian refugees are attacked and also returned to Syria (similar in Jordan).

Human rights defenders need a professional framework for their activities and highly qualified professionals.

The UN is subject to a lot of suspicion within the region because of its perceived double standards and selective enforcement. For example, Libyan revolutionaries were armed just 17 days after the revolution started. Whereas it has been 16 months since the uprisings began in Syria, and the international community has not gotten involved. Additionally, Libya was

removed from the UN Human Rights Council soon after the revolution began while Syria's representative is still permitted to make statements at the Council's sessions.

Suggestions for Funders

- Funders can join IHRFG's Human Rights Defenders Working Group to have conversations about these issues and strategic grantmaking, informed by human rights defenders on the ground.
- Funders can refer to the resource guide of emergency funding compiled by IHRFG's HRDs Working Group. This guide (currently in draft form) can be shared with organizations and individuals. Funders are encouraged to contribute more information to the guide.

Questions and Answers with Muhannad al-Hassani:

- 1) What has the interaction with the UN system been in terms of sharing documentation of abuse?
 - a. Answer: Muhannad met with the UN Commission of Inquiry and provided them with evidence of the atrocities. They issued two reports and there is documentation of crimes against humanity, genocide, and war crimes. However, there seems to be no political will to help Syrians. The political will lies in Washington DC.
- 2) Can human rights groups and activists in Syria receive grants from outside of Syria?
 - a. Answer: Yes, they can receive relief assistance. Syria is now divided into separate sections and it is easy to get assistance to borders where the refugees are. In Syrian/Turkish borders there are thousands of homeless people. The truth is the country that has given the most help to Syrian refugees is Turkey.
 - b. Comment from the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Right (EMHRF): Syria is one of the EMHRF's priority countries. EMHRF provides support for human rights defenders to hide, basic materials to continue their work and deal with new initiatives such as dialogue with youth etc. Funding can go into Syria but funders must be flexible and innovative.
- 3) How do you get information from people in the country? Is the Internet reliable? What do people in Syria expect other countries to do?
 - a. Answer (a): With regard to the Internet, they communicate via Skype. They were able to get technological tools to revolutionaries that are typically used by news correspondents.
 - b. Answer (b): Muhannad believes that the bloodshed in Syria will continue unless the international community takes concrete steps. The people of Syria expect the people of Turkey to continue providing what they can within their means and in light of any restrictions.
- 4) Is Muhannad advocating for military intervention by the international community?
 - a. Answer: Yes, he advocates for international military intervention. This is the duty of the international community under the UN Charter which requires intervention when a regime commits crimes against humanity and threatens international peace. Permanent members of the Security Council were given

this status because they were assumed to undertake their international moral obligations in accordance with all international treaties and moral standards, which provide for people's right to life and dignity.

- 5) Is Sawasiya documenting only violations by the Syrian government or all of the parties involved? With regard to Lebanon -- is there documented information about people being kidnapped from hospitals?
 - a. Answer: They are not yet at the documentation stage, but still monitoring the situation. Documentation requires more resources. Additionally, the violations committed by the opposition are a negligible quantity compared to the crimes by government. The government is committing genocide and ethnic cleansing. With regard to Lebanon, Muhannad has a highly classified file containing information regarding the kidnappings.
- 6) Has Muhannad spoken to the American media?
 - a. Answer: There was 1 Hispanic newspaper that interviewed him and printed the article in Spanish. The amount of media coverage of the Syrian revolution has been scarce. The American public is largely unaware of the situation in Syria.