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20 October 2010

## Syria urged to release or charge Lebanese Shi'a cleric

Amnesty International has urged the Syrian authorities to release or charge a Lebanese Shi'a cleric held incommunicado for more than three months after he was arrested while on his way to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Former Hizbullah member Sheikh Hassan Mchaymech was travelling by car to Saudi Arabia with his wife and mother, when he was arrested by Syrian Political Security on the Syrian side of the Jdeidet Yabous border crossing with Lebanon on 7 July.

The Syrian authorities have not publicly given a reason for his arrest or revealed where he is being held or whether any charges have been brought against him. The Syrian security services are well known for carrying out acts of torture and other ill-treatment.

"The Syrian authorities must immediately reveal the whereabouts of Hassan Mchaymech and either release him or charge him with a recognizable criminal offence," said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"While he remains in detention, the authorities must take steps to ensure that he is not tortured or otherwise ill-treated, that he is allowed visits from his family and that he is granted access to a lawyer of his choosing."

According to Hassan Mchaymech's family, since his arrest the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has written to the Syrian authorities several times to request clarifications of the reason for his arrest. They are yet to receive any response to the requests.

Hassan Mchaymech's family has also published three appeals in Lebanese newspapers calling on Lebanese President Michele Suleiman, Prime Minister Sa'ad al-Hariri and Speaker of the National Assembly Nabih Berri to pressure the authorities to reveal his fate.

The family met with representatives of the three officials addressed in the appeals, who told them that the Syrian authorities had not responded to their demands for information.

Hassan Mchaymech was a member of Hizbullah, an influential Shi'a political and military organization in Lebanon that is supported by Syria and Iran, but left in 1998 following internal disagreements.

He then created and edited the monthly online magazine <http://difaf.org>, in which he wrote articles calling for tolerance of differences between religious sects in Lebanon and for the separation of religion and politics.

In August 2009, he co-founded, along with a group of other Lebanese Shi'a religious figures, the Independent Scientists' Forum, an NGO calling for the respect of intellectual and religious diversity.



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Political Security is one of several branches of the Syrian security forces, all of which regularly detain people on the slightest suspicion of opposition to the government.

In 2009, at least seven people were reported to have died as a result of abuses in custody in Syria. The authorities have taken no action to investigate these allegations.

"Confessions" extracted under duress are systematically used as evidence in Syrian courts, and the defendants' claims that they have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated are almost never investigated.

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