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Laudatio for Mazen Darwish

Bruno Kreisky Human Rights Award, 10 June 2013

Mazen Darwish is the most prominent human rights lawyer and defender in Syria, a country where some of the most serious human rights violations of our time are currently taking place. Mazen Darwish was born in 1974 and graduated with a law degree from Damascus University in 1998. He soon began to advocate for human rights, and freedom of speech in particular. In 2004, he founded the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), the first non-profit organization advocating human rights and defending freedom of expression in Syria. His aim was to raise awareness and spread freedom of expression, belief and tolerance in a country governed for many decades by a ruthless dictatorship and a constant state of emergency. In a March 2011 interview in Damascus, Mazen Darwish rightly said that "in Syria, being a journalist is like walking through a minefield". Providing legal and technical support to journalists and activists, as well as researching and publishing reports and around 10 studies on human rights abuses, brought the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression to the Syrian Government's attention. Since its inception, its members have been subject to harassment, and Darwish himself has been arrested and beaten several times. In 2006, the Centre launched an independent news website which was soon banned by the Syrian Government. In 2007, Mazen Darwish was banned from travelling abroad and his passport was confiscated by the authorities. This also prevented him from visiting his two children living in France. In April 2008, Darwish and a colleague were arrested after their reporting on riots in Adra, a town near Damascus. He was later imprisoned for ten days for "defaming and insulting the administrative bodies of the State". In 2009, the authorities finally shut down the Centre's offices in Damascus. Mazen Darwish and other member of the Centre took their work underground and have been among the most important fighters for human rights in Syria, despite living in constant fear and facing enormous obstacles.

In March 2011, the "Arab Spring" had also reached Syria. On 15 March, after a facebook call for a "Day of Dignity", dozens marched in Damascus. The day after, security forces broke up a silent gathering in Marjeh square in Damascus of about 150 protesters holding up pictures of imprisoned relatives and friends. According to witnesses, at least 30 people were arrested, among them Mazen Darwish. On 18 March, the first three peaceful protesters were killed by security forces in the southern city of Daraa. On 23 March, Mazen Darwish was again arrested after being summoned for investigation for media releases about the arrests in Syria and the events in Daraa. On 29 April 2011, the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva for the first time condemned the human rights violations against peaceful protesters and launched its first investigation into human rights violations in Syria. Several independent investigations followed which revealed some of the most shocking human rights violations amounting to crimes against humanity and which led to strong condemnations by the Human Rights Council, but as we all know, the Security Council was prevented up to the present day by the veto of Russia and China to take stronger action aimed at protecting the people of Syria against these atrocities. This failure of the international community contributed to the fact that peaceful protests by unarmed civilians finally turned into a bloody civil war with countless human rights abuses committed by all sides. By providing information on these atrocities to international

media, Mazen Darwish continued to hope that the international community would finally help the Syrian people and human rights defenders against the repression by the regime of Bashar al-Assad. But these hopes and expectations were betrayed by the international community, similar to earlier cases from Rwanda to Srebrenica, despite the new doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect promulgated by the UN Summit in 2005.

On 16 February 2012, members of the Air Force Intelligence stormed the offices of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression in Damascus, arresting Mazen Darwish and 15 other journalists and activists, including blogger Razan Ghazzawi and Darwish's wife, journalist Yara Bader. While his wife was released in May 2012 and can fortunately be with us today, Mazen Darwish was held incommunicado for almost ten months in the notorious El Mezza detention centre before being sent to Damascus Central Prison. According to reports of former detainees held together with the human rights defenders, they have been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. On 27 February 2013, Mazen Darwish as the head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression and four of his colleagues were charged with crimes under the Anti-Terrorism Law, enacted by President Bashar al-Assad in 2012. They are accused of having monitored online news by the Syrian opposition, published studies on the human rights and the media situation in Syria, as well as having documented names of detained, disappeared, wanted and killed persons within the context of the Syrian conflict. The indictment further states that an investigative judge in Damascus considered these actions part of an attempt to "stir the internal situation in Syria and so provoke international organizations to condemn Syria in international fora". If convicted, they may be sentenced to between three and fifteen years of imprisonment and hard labour. They were scheduled to stand trial before the special Counter Terrorism Criminal Court in Damascus, but the trial was postponed until 26 June. Since the Syrian Minister of Justice on 9 May had made a commitment to an international peace delegation to release 72 non-violent activists, including Mazen Darwish and his colleagues, the Bruno Kreisky Foundation, by today awarding the Bruno Kreisky Human Rights Prize to Mazen Darwish, strongly appeals to the Syrian Government to follow up on this commitment, to drop the terrorism charges and to immediately release all human rights defenders of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression. Since he cannot be with us today, his wife Yara Bader will receive the Bruno Kreisky Human Rights Award on his behalf.