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FREEDOM NOW

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**SYRIAN GOVERNMENT RELEASES AWARD-WINNING
HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER AND ACTIVIST MUHANNAD AL-HASSANI**

Washington, D.C.: It was confirmed today that the Government of Syria released prisoner of conscience Muhannad Al-Hassani from his wrongful imprisonment. Mr. Al-Hassani's release was part of a general amnesty release on June 2, 2011. The government had held Mr. Al-Hassani since July 28, 2009, when the Syrian General Intelligence Service arrested him for "weakening national sentiment."

In response to the news, Freedom Now attorney Sachi Jensen said, "I am overjoyed Muhannad Al-Hassani is released. Only four months ago, while detaining Mr. Al-Hassani in unthinkable conditions, President Al-Assad proclaimed that Syria was immune to protests sweeping Arab nations because he was linked to the interests of his people. I applaud this release and now call on the Syrian government to *truly* serve these interests by ceasing harassment and violence against protesters and courageous human rights defenders like Mr. Al-Hassani."

Prior to his arrest, Mr. Al-Hassani served as President of the Syrian Human Rights Organization. A bold advocate of human rights, he worked to defend Syrian political prisoners and expose abuses in the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), a special tribunal handling politically sensitive cases and not bound by a code of procedure. In recognition of these efforts, Mr. Al-Hassani received the 2010 Martin Ennals Award, a prestigious international award for human rights defenders. This work made him a target of government persecution, which led to both his disbarment and imprisonment.

A few days before Mr. Al-Hassani's arrest, while monitoring the SSSC, a court employee attacked him under the chief prosecutor's orders and tore up his notes. The following day, Mr. Al-Hassani was summoned to an intelligence facility in Damascus' al-Hateeb district. Interrogation sessions followed on July 26 and 27, 2009.

On June 23, 2010, the SSSC convicted and sentenced Mr. Al-Hassani to three years in prison relying solely on "secret reports" from the General Intelligence Service. The trial, after Mr. Al-Hassani spent a year in a crowded 70-person prison cell without bail, violated international standards of due process of law. In October, Mr. Al-Hassani was nearly blinded when a fellow prisoner violently beat him while chanting national slogans. The attacker used a sharp iron tool not allowed in the prison, raising suspicions that prison authorities were involved.

Mr. Al-Hassani's release comes after 10 weeks of protests against Bashar Al-Assad's 11-year "state of emergency" rule, which suspended many Syrian constitutional protections for citizens.

Freedom Now, a prisoner of conscience advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., represented Muhannad Al-Hassani as his international *pro bono* legal counsel, submitting a petition to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on his behalf.

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Our mission is to free prisoners of conscience through focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts.