

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

OF ACADEMIES AND SCHOLARLY SOCIETIES

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Prominent International Scientists Condemn Deliberate Attacks on Syrian Health Professionals; Urge National Science Academies to do the same

On the occasion of the 11th biennial meeting of the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies (Network), hosted last week by the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in Halle, grave human rights abuses perpetrated against scientific colleagues in several countries were presented. In particular, distinguished representatives from 29 national academies discussed and condemned the blatant abuse of health professionals and violation of the principle of medical neutrality in Syria—the primary focus of this statement by the Network’s Executive Committee.

Physicians for Human Rights confirms in a recent press release that there have been “150 attacks on 124 [Syrian health care] facilities between March 2011 and March 2014,” and that during the same period, 460 civilian health professionals have been killed in shelling and bombings, in shootings, and from torture.

Syrian university professor and relief activist, Dr. Zedoun Alzoubi, who has been twice imprisoned and now lives in exile in Germany, gave detailed accounts of health professionals in Syria who have been oppressed, disappeared, imprisoned, tortured, or killed. He also noted that Resolution 2139 (2014) (8.) of the United Nations Security Council demands that all parties involved in the Syrian conflict:

respect the principle of medical neutrality and facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment, transport and supplies, including surgical items, and recalls that under international humanitarian law, the wounded and sick must receive, to the fullest extent practicable, and with the least possible delay, medical care and attention required by their condition and that medical and humanitarian personnel, facilities and transport must be respected and protected . . .

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Academies in the Network support and promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, assist unjustly incarcerated nonviolent professional colleagues, address grave science-related human rights issues, and advocate for member institutions whose independence is threatened.

(The U.S. National Academies, non-profit, non-governmental honorary societies, host the Network secretariat.)

FOUNDING MEMBERS
François Jacob* – France
Max Perutz* – United Kingdom
Pieter van Dijk – Netherlands
Torsten Wiesel* – USA
(*Nobel Laureate)

www.nas.edu.hrnetwork

Dr. Alzoubi is preparing a list of unjustly detained health professionals in Syria so that the Network can further investigate their cases and offer assistance.

Given this information the Members of the Network's Executive Committee lament and denounce the continuing deliberate and systematic targeting of health professionals and facilities in Syria that has resulted in a grave, national, public health crisis. On humanitarian grounds they urge all governments and national academies to appeal to the government of Syria, and all other parties involved in the conflict, to immediately:

- Release all detained doctors and medical staff, as well as others working to promote the wellbeing of the people of Syria, including human rights advocates.
- Cease military operations against medical personnel, equipment, and transport in all areas of the country and ensure their safety—under U.N. protection if necessary.

Deliberate attacks against medical personnel and health care systems are flagrant violations of the principle of medical neutrality and such acts constitute offenses prohibited by international human rights law under the Geneva Conventions. Specifically, in times of armed conflict, protections are accorded to medical facilities and personnel, ambulances and hospitals, and citizens assisting the wounded who are recognized as neutral and protected. Thus, the Network reminds the perpetrators that the heinous acts they are committing are crimes of war, for which they should eventually face prosecution.

The Network's three-day event began with a day-long symposium that featured a Keynote address by Sir Richard J. Roberts, a Nobel Laureate in Physiology or Medicine, titled "Mobilizing the Nobel Laureates for a Few Good Causes." Sir Richard described a number of human rights actions over the years by Nobel Laureates, including efforts to free Bulgarian nurses imprisoned in Libya and strong support by more than 200 Nobel Prize winners in behalf of Burmese Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

In addition to the talk and intense discussions about Syria, other talks addressed the status of human rights within the context of science, as well as medical neutrality and education, in countries including Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey.

Political scientist Emad Shahin, a professor at the American University in Cairo and currently a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC, spoke about "Scientists and Science Education in Jeopardy in Egypt." Although he did not describe his personal situation, while on leave in the United States, Professor Shahin has been indicted on very serious charges in Egypt. He is an academic who has never advocated violence and who has supported civilian control over the political process. The Network has intervened on Professor Shahin's behalf with the Egyptian authorities during the last few months and will continue to defend his right to freedom of opinion and expression until the charges against him are dropped.

According to a recent report cited by Shahin, among the 41,000 prisoners currently held in Egypt, some 1000 are engineers, physicians, and scientists. They have been incarcerated for nearly a year because of their involvement in protests against the military authorities. This

deplorable situation is of deep concern to the Network which strongly supports freedom of opinion and expression through non-violent means and is urging the Egyptian authorities to release incarcerated scientific colleagues pending a free and fair trial that meets international standards of justice.

The symposium also included lectures in memory of two Network founding members, Nobel Laureates Francois Jacob and Max Perutz. The Francois Jacob Memorial Lecture was given by Tunisian physicist, Professor Farida Faouzia Charfi. Her lecture, "Science behind the Veil," the title of her recently published book, considered the Islamic world's "Golden Age" of science, conflicts between science and Islam, as well as the obstacles and hopes for the advancement of science within the context of the new constitution currently being drafted in Tunisia.

The Max Perutz Memorial Lecture was given by Turkish political scientist, Professor Büşra Ersanli, who discussed "Science and Human Rights in Turkey Today." She described the mounting obstacles to academic freedom in Turkish universities and other education-related issues. Professor Ersanli is one of the accused in the ongoing "KCK Operations" trial against members of the Peace and Democracy Party, unjustly indicted on terrorism charges. For further information on her case, see: "Scientists, Engineers, and Medical Doctors in Turkey, A Report to the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies," at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/humanrights>.

A Symposium Program with bios is attached. The next meeting of the Network will be held in the spring of 2016.

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