



# Anwar al-Bunni

by Simcha Katsnelson

In April 2007, Anwar al-Bunni, a top Syrian human rights activist and attorney, was sentenced to five years imprisonment for “disseminating false information likely to undermine the morale of the nation ... slander- ing and insulting state institutions,” and “joining an international group without the government’s authorization.” Though his first sentencing, it followed years of constant harassment from the Syrian authorities, including threats against family members, smear campaigns aimed at dissuading potential clients from seeking his services, and around-the-clock surveillance.<sup>1</sup> Instead of taking any action on Bunni’s behalf, the bar association in Damascus suspended him from numerous cases he litigated and threatened him with disbarment.<sup>2</sup>

Bunni’s arrest in 2006 followed the signing of the “Beirut-Damascus, Damascus-Beirut” declaration urging the improvement of Syrian-Lebanese relations. Relations between the two countries have been strained for decades but reached an all-time low following the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri. The Lebanese blamed the Syrians, who responded with strenuous denials and a subsequent and long-awaited withdrawal from Lebanon under heavy international pressure. In 2008, Damascus established diplomatic relations with



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Lebanon after decades of evasion reflecting its perception of that country as a natural part of “Greater Syria.”<sup>3</sup>

Bunni has been detained under harsh conditions and has faced torture and beatings from prison guards.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, the Syrian regime placed increased travel restrictions on other human rights defenders including Bunni’s brother, Akram, who was prevented from flying to Brussels to discuss the human rights situation in Syria. Bunni estimates that members of his family have spent an aggregate of sixty years in prison.<sup>5</sup> While Bunni is currently serving his prison sentence, his brother, who also signed the Damascus declaration, was recently released along with two other dissidents after serving a 30-month prison sentence.

Bunni is a founding member of the Syrian Human Rights Association and the Freedoms Center for the Defense of Journalists and Journalism in Syria. He has denounced human rights violations including the use of torture and has advocated for democratic practices and reform in Syria.<sup>6</sup> He also formed a center for human

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1 “Call for the Release of Jailed Syrian Human Rights Lawyer,” Human Rights First, New York and Washington, D.C., Feb. 14, 2007.

2 Ibid.

3 “Timeline: Syria,” *BBC News*, accessed Sept. 14, 2010.

4 “Call for the Release of Jailed Syrian Human Rights Lawyer.”

5 Joe Pace, “Anwar al-Bunni: Interview with Syria’s Leading Human Rights Lawyer,” *Syria Comment*, Aug. 7, 2005.

6 “Call for the Release of Jailed Syrian Human Rights Lawyer.”

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## Bunni

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rights training funded by the European Union and established by a Belgian nongovernmental organization; part of his arrest and conviction stemmed from his collaborating with an international institution. The center has since been shut down before it could begin its activities.

Shortly after Bashar al-Assad became president of Syria in 2000, Syrians freely gathered together in forums to engage in intense political and social debate, known as the “Damascus Spring,” and to demand democracy and an end to corruption.<sup>7</sup> The government subsequently cracked down on these forums, and many activ-

ists were suppressed or imprisoned. Bunni has advocated freedom of nonviolent expression and has spent his legal career defending those who have faced persecution for such rights, including activists from the Damascus Spring.<sup>8</sup> He has also been a proponent and defender of the rights of Kurds, the largest minority group in Syria.

In a 2008 visit to Damascus, French president Nicolas Sarkozy pleaded with his hosts for Bunni’s immediate release to no avail. Bunni has insisted that he did not violate the Syrian constitution and is being held solely for his opinions. “I didn’t commit any crime,” he said. “This sentence is to shut me up and to stop the effort to expose human rights violations in Syria.”<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> *The Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> “Call for the Release of Jailed Syrian Human Rights Lawyer.”

<sup>9</sup> *BBC News*, Apr. 24, 2007.