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## NGO's say Syrian activists face 'terror' charges



The Syrian authorities must drop all charges against prominent peace activist Mazen Darwish and two of his colleagues, 19 human rights organizations said on Friday. Darwish, Hussein Gharir and Hani Zaitani “are facing trial on terrorism charges for their peaceful activism”, said the groups that include Human Rights Watch (HRW), Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Amnesty International. They and two other colleagues who were conditionally released in February are scheduled to appear on May 19 before the Damascus Anti-Terrorism Court, the groups said. “The Syrian government should not use its overbroad terrorism law to punish peaceful activists for their legitimate work,” said the watchdogs in a joint statement. “Further, their trial should not be held in the Anti-Terrorism Court, which does not afford defendants basic due process rights according to international fair trial standards,” they added. Darwish and his colleagues from the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression were detained more than a year ago. Their workplace was raided and they have since been held incommunicado, rights groups say. The indictment “accuses them of ‘publicizing terrorist acts’ under article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law, enacted by President Bashar al-Assad in 2012. If convicted the men may be imprisoned for up to 15 years,” the rights groups’ statement said. Their trial “illustrates the government’s repression against critical voices in Syria and fits in a wider pattern of systematic censorship and repression,” it added. Tens of thousands of people have been detained over the course of the anti-Assad revolt, which began more than two years ago with peaceful protests but quickly evolved into an armed conflict. Rights groups have frequently accused the authorities of making arbitrary arrests, enforced “disappearances” and torturing political detainees.