

## Syria: Gang Attacks Peaceful Demonstrators; Police Look On

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### Security Officer Threatens, Assaults Activist

(New York) - Syria's government should immediately cease its intimidation and harassment of demonstrators expressing solidarity with pro-democracy campaigners in Egypt, Human Rights Watch said today. With calls on Facebook and Twitter for large protests in Syria on February 4, 2011, Human Rights Watch urged Syria's authorities to respect the right of Syrians to assemble peacefully. On February 2, a group of 20 people dressed in civilian clothing beat and dispersed 15 demonstrators who had assembled in Bab Touma in old Damascus to hold a candlelight vigil for Egyptian demonstrators, one of the gathering's organizers told Human Rights Watch. The police, who were present nearby, failed to intervene, the sources said. When demonstrators went to the local police station to file a complaint, a security official insulted and slapped Suheir Atassi, one of the main organizers, and accused her of being a "germ" and an agent of foreign powers. Security services have also detained two young male demonstrators for a few hours, one on January 29, the day the protests began, and one on February 2, and have exerted pressure on organizers to cease any public gatherings, two Syrian demonstrators told Human Rights Watch. "President Bashar al-Assad seems to have taken a page out of the rulebook of his Egyptian counterpart," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "His security services are no longer content with simply banning protests; they seem to be encouraging thugs to attack peaceful demonstrators." One of the participants in the February 2 demonstration described the scene to Human Rights Watch: A group of guys and two women dressed in civilian clothes approached us. They asked us to disperse and told us that if you want to be with Egypt, go to Egypt. When we asked who they were, they said they were "baltajis" [the word commonly used in Egypt to describe paid goons]. Then some of them started beating us and running after us, while one of the women accompanying them pulled [off] her belt to whip us. Syrian activists have held daily protests in solidarity with Egyptian demonstrators since January 29. One of the main organizers of the protests told Human Rights Watch that the Syrian security services showed up at each of the gatherings, filmed the participants, and checked their identity papers. Atassi told Human Rights Watch that the security services contacted her family last week and urged them to pressure her to cease her activities. Following the attack on February 2, Atassi went with a number of other demonstrators to the police station in Bab Touma to file a complaint. The police separated her from the group, and a plainclothes officer in the security services came to interrogate her. Atassi recounted her experience: He immediately started insulting me; accusing me of mobilizing people and working for Israel. He called me a germ. He got angry when I would answer him back, and he finally slapped me heavily on the face and threatened to kill me. He then left. The police later released me but deleted the pictures I had taken. Increased pressure by the authorities to restrict any form of public gathering has come as groups have emerged on Facebook urging people in Syria to protest on February 4 and 5 to "end the state of emergency in Syria and end corruption." A state of emergency has remained in place in Syria since 1963. Syria, as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), is required under article 21 to recognize and protect the right to peaceful assembly. Restrictions on this right can only be imposed by clear laws, for strictly limited reasons, such as public safety, and only if proportionate, respecting the underlying right. Syria should also protect peaceful assemblies from disruption by third parties. The number of people who have joined the Facebook pages calling for protests on February 4 and 5 is still relatively small. Facebook is banned in Syria, but many Syrians manage to circumvent the restrictions and access the social networking site through proxy sites. In a long interview with the Wall Street Journal on Monday, President Bashar al-Asad spoke about the need for Syria to reform and contended that Syria is "immune" from the kind of unrest seen in Tunisia and Egypt. He acknowledged, though, that, "You cannot reform your society or institution without opening your mind." "President Bashar al-Asad should heed his own advice and allow Syria's people more freedom to express their views, whether online or on the street," Whitson said. "That means, for starters, that the security services need to stop repressing activists, harassing their families, and cracking down on legitimate dissent." [http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/02/03/syria-gang-attacks-peaceful-demonstrators-police-look?ALSO AVAILABLE IN:'D91\(J\)](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/02/03/syria-gang-attacks-peaceful-demonstrators-police-look?ALSO_AVAILABLE_IN:'D91(J))