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Syria: Amnesty International welcomes release of prisoner of conscience

Amnesty International today welcomed the release of Syrian prisoner of conscience Dr ‘Aref Dalilah.

“We hope that the long overdue release of Dr Dalilah is followed by the release of all other prisoners of conscience in Syria,” said Amnesty International.

Dr Dalilah -- who served seven years of a 10-year sentence mostly in solitary confinement -- was released following a presidential amnesty. The reason for his release is unclear, but may be related to his deteriorating health. Dr Dalilah said he was not informed of any conditions or restrictions on his release, but is unsure whether he will be able to travel outside the country.

Thousands of Amnesty International members around the world had been campaigning for Dr Dalilah’s release since his arrest on 9 September 2001, when Amnesty International declared him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Speaking to Amnesty International today, Dr Dalilah said: "I am thankful for all the efforts made by everyone at Amnesty International and all those who took part in actions on my behalf. We are united in the struggle for the causes of justice and democracy. This struggle is still ongoing."

Dr ‘Aref Dalilah was one of ten people detained during the “Damascus Spring”, a brief period of increased tolerance by the authorities for freedom of expression and pro-reform activities that followed Bashar al-Assad’s inauguration as President in July 2000. He was handed down the longest sentence.

Amnesty International said that Dr Dalilah’s release does not close the chapter of “Damascus Spring” detentions, as two other members of the “Damascus Spring” group who already served their sentences have been re-arrested and are now in detention. Kamal al-Labwani has been sentenced to a further 15 years for his pro-democracy activities and Habib Saleh is being tried for having published political articles on the internet.

Hundreds of political prisoners remain imprisoned in Syria. These include 14 people detained since late 2007 for their involvement in the pro-democracy umbrella group, the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change.

Notes to editors:

- Dr ‘Aref Dalilah was the Dean of the Faculty of Economics of Aleppo University but was dismissed from this post reportedly because of his outspoken views against government corruption and his calls for the government to grant freedom of expression to match its economic reforms.
- His arrest in Damascus followed his attendance at a seminar where political reform was discussed. His arrest was part of a wider clampdown by the Syrian authorities on civil society groups between August

and September 2001, in which at least 10 people were arrested.

- Dr Dalilah was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on 31 July 2002 by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), whose procedures fall far short of international standards, for "attempting to change the constitution by illegal means". It was the longest sentence handed down to any of those arrested for their participation in the "Damascus Spring".
- 'Aref Dalilah was reportedly beaten at 'Adra prison before his trial. His lawyer, 'Anwar al-Bunni, who is himself now a prisoner of conscience held in 'Adra prison, presented a bloodstained handkerchief as evidence of how 'Aref Dalilah had been beaten during an SSSC hearing on 3 June 2002. The president of the court, a military officer, ordered 'Anwar al-Bunni out of the court and banned him indefinitely from practising before the SSSC.
- 'Aref Dalilah is now seriously ill. He suffers from diabetes and deep-vein thrombosis, a condition which impedes or stops blood flow in his left leg. In May 2006, he suffered a stroke and lost some of the feeling on the left side of his body.