

Urgent Action In Focus

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Fawwaz Tello with his family after his release © AI

Syria: a glimmer of hope

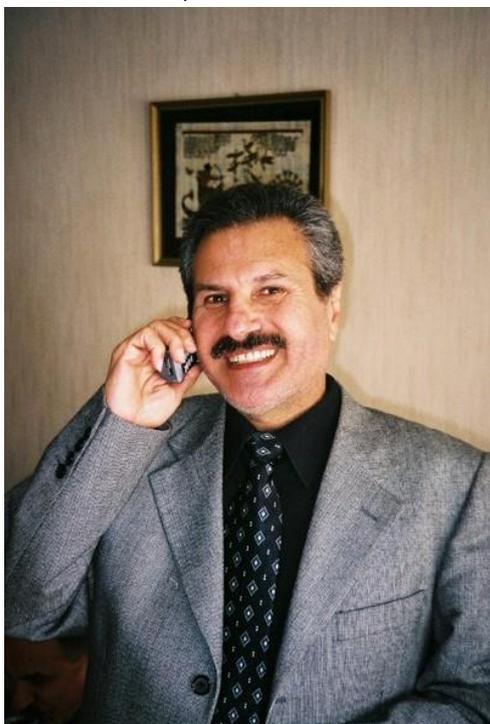
The first Amnesty International delegation to visit Syria since 1997 arrived in Damascus on 17 January and stayed until the 24th, at the invitation of the Syrian authorities, for talks with government officials. They met with the Deputy Ministers of Justice and of the Interior, the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour. The two-person delegation was also allowed to attend a session of the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), through which so many political prisoners and prisoners of conscience (POCs) have passed, including those of the so-called "Damascus Spring" period

which followed the 2000 election of President Bashar al-Assad, who indicated in his inauguration speech a desire to increase tolerance for free speech and to allow political reforms. This led people to set up a number of forums where public affairs, political reforms and cultural issues were discussed. The authorities started to clamp down on this new freedom of expression in early 2001, and by the summer of that year many of the people who had taken part in these forums had been imprisoned. During their visit the delegates were able to meet with former POCs – including all five of the those released on 18 January

2006. Ma'mun al-Humsi, Habib 'Isa, Riad Seif, Fawwaz Tello and Walid al-Bunni all passed on their thanks and appreciation to the UA network for the critical support they had given, and for helping shed light on the actions of the Syrian authorities.

Dr 'Aref Dalilah is still serving a 10-year sentence, in poor health and in solitary confinement. His name and case was raised repeatedly by people in Syria, including the Amnesty International delegates in meetings with government officials. Two of the previously released "Damascus Spring" detainees, Habib Salih and Kamal al-Labwani, were re-arrested last year, and the Amnesty International delegates were fortunate to meet with close relatives of them and of 'Aref Dalilah.

The delegation were also delighted to meet a number of other released POCs whose cases Amnesty International has supported over the years, including 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khayyir, Khaled Ahmad 'Ali and Hussayn Ramadhan. They also met Khaled Hamdu,



Habib 'Isa after his release © AI

brother of Mas'oud Hamdu (whom Amnesty International and others had incorrectly named Mas'oud Hamid – see

UA 188/03, MDE 24/021/2003, 26 June 2003).

Ma'mun al-Humsi (most recently UA 224/03, MDE 24/027/2003, 24 July 2003) welcomed the delegation into his family house in the capital, Damascus. He gave this message to Amnesty International:

"Big thanks to everyone who worked for and showed an interest in my and other cases. For sure, your work played a big role in saving our lives – otherwise the regime might have killed us, directly or indirectly. This dictatorship is afraid of the light, of media attention, of statements by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and Amnesty International helps put light on it."

Ma'mun's son 'Ammar, who had been living in Dubai, said that while on a 45-day holiday back in Syria he had gone every single day to prison to try to see his father, but had always been refused. Ma'mun said that in custody he had been subjected to indirect and psychological torture and annoyances, rather than actual physical torture. But he had also suffered from increased blood-pressure, and for 27 days was urinating blood without receiving medical assistance. Following the occasion when he had managed to make a public statement, he had been taken from his room and put into another room, without a bed, with common criminals who smoked heavily. For seven recent months in prison he had been denied all visits except from family members, and for his last three months he had not been allowed any visits at all.

Habib 'Isa (see UA 226/01, MDE 24/029/2001, 7 September 2001) received the delegation at his family home in Damascus, where many others were stopping to welcome him back from prison. Habib had left prison with a huge black beard and upturned moustache, but had then shaved them off. He said that for three-and-a-half years he had been in solitary confinement and allowed only 30 minutes outdoors once every 15 days, and for one year he had not left his cell at all. He has problems with his

stomach and back, as a result of torture, and will seek medical help when he has seen his family, friends and visitors again. He thanked Amnesty International for all its work.

Among the guests at Habib 'Isa's house were the wife and daughter of Habib Salih (subject of UA 156/05, MDE 24/039/2005, 7 June 2005), who remains in 'Adra prison in the capital, Damascus. He had been released in September 2004 but was re-arrested on 29 May 2005, apparently because of articles he had written that criticised the government. His wife, Wafa al-Zoghbi, and daughter Deema said that to arrest him the security forces had surrounded the house, rather than simply knocking at the door. This, they believed, was to send a message to others. He remains in 'Adra prison. Wafa and Deema said that this is Habib Salih's sixth time in prison. He is unable, they said, to stop speaking the truth, even if it means he spends the rest of his life behind bars.



Figure 1 Riad Seif, January 2006 © AI

The delegation visited Riad Seif at his family home on the outskirts of Damascus, and again there were other

groups of people there waiting to talk with him. Riad spoke with confidence and enthusiasm, in English, even saying that his "four years, four months and 12 days in prison was worthwhile, a wonderful price" for what they [the other "Damascus Spring" detainees] were doing, for what they will do and for helping him decide to leave business and become a full-time political man promoting democracy and human rights. "It is our holy duty," he said.

He thanked Amnesty International for all its work and said, like Ma'mun, that the authorities "would have let us die or be killed" if it had not been for the interest of Amnesty International and other international organisations.

Fawwaz Tello lives with his family in an apartment block in Damascus. With his wife and three children – Nowar (5), Leen (11) and Jihad (13) – he appeared very relaxed and happy.

In good English, which he taught himself in prison, he said: "I want to thank all the people who don't know me and yet tried to help...I'm so impressed...When my wife told me three years ago about this it kept me strong, and kept us all determined and stubborn." Twenty years ago, he said, they might have all been killed.

The delegation visited Walid al-Bunni at his flat in al-Tel, just outside Damascus, while many others were also visiting him. Walid too had taught himself English in prison. For three years he had had access to state-owned newspapers only, but then he was allowed to read English books; one of the first he read was a translation of Balzac.

He said – after asking his son to leave the room – that he was badly treated in prison. He thinks he was treated worse than some of the others as he was younger. He still has problems with his stomach, with his legs, and with his teeth. He said he found it so hard being away from his family that sometimes he cancelled the 30-minute visits he was allowed as they were too painful for him.

"Thank you," he said to Amnesty International. "Do whatever you can, whatever you want, to ensure slavery is broken and freedom prevails."

A subject that came up repeatedly during the Amnesty International visit to Syria was the fact that Dr 'Aref Dalilah remains in prison, despite the release of five other subjects of UA 226/01. He had been given the longest sentence, 10 years, and is the oldest of the group. The delegation was able to meet with his brother, Mustafa. He said 'Aref had appeared a little optimistic in the short period leading up to the release of the other five, but Mustafa feared that the next time he saw his brother he would appear depressed to have remained imprisoned himself. 'Aref Dalilah remains in solitary confinement, and even when he is allowed a few moments to walk around a yard he does this alone, with no one to talk to. He is allowed visitors sometimes, but only from his immediate family. Mustafa Dalila hoped the Amnesty International movement would continue to try to help. He said:

"We would like to thank all those, either from the human rights organizations, both local and international, especially Amnesty International, who have contributed to the campaign to free the political detainees and prisoners of conscience in Syria. We especially thank all who have led or participated in the support and solidarity campaigns to free my brother Dr 'Aref Dalilah."

There are many concerns about 'Aref Dalilah's health. He is said to need a heart operation, but is afraid of undergoing an operation in Syria, particularly while in custody.

The delegation also met with the wife and children of Kamal al-Labwani (UA 226/01), at their apartment in Damascus. The family can visit him regularly, and so can his friends and neighbours. The last visit lasted three hours. However, it takes place through two sets of metal grilles. Kamal is detained in the ordinary criminal section of 'Adra prison, but

apparently finds it impossible to read or write because of all the noise. He did not have a mattress or bed at the start of this detention, but has since bought one from a fellow prisoner.

One evening the delegation met 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khayyir, who was freed in November 2005: he had been arrested in February 1992 and sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment by the SSSC for membership of the Party for Communist Action (UA 45/92, MDE 24/04/92, 11 February 1992). In excellent English, 'Abd al-'Aziz spoke of his life before imprisonment, being on the run, the cruel four-year imprisonment of his ex-wife as a hostage to make him give himself up, and about his experiences in prison and his new life outside. He said that the night he was released he just walked, and walked, and walked, alone around Damascus, the city he loved.

The delegation also met with Khaled Ahmad 'Ali and Hussayn Ramadhan (UA 188/03, (MDE 24/021/2003, 26 June 2003 and follow-ups), and Khaled Hamdu, brother of Mas'oud Hamdu (UA 188/03). Khaled Hamdu had made a nine-hour journey from Qamishli in north-eastern Syria to meet the delegates in Damascus. He and the rest of the family have suffered continual harassment since Mas'oud was imprisoned in October 2004 for sending photos of a demonstration to the German-based Kurdish website www.amude.com.

They were able to meet eight of the released POCs from the town of Darya, just outside Damascus. The men had been arrested in May 2003 shortly after they took part in a silent march protesting at the expected invasion of Iraq. Inspired by Islam and by the principle of non-violent direct action, they were involved with a loose, voluntary network of townspeople in establishing a free library, showing occasional videos (such as one on the life of Gandhi; all materials were licensed), actively cleaning up their town and discouraging bribery and smoking. From

a total of 22 men initially detained, 11 were released in January 2004 and seven others on 1 April 2004 following secret trials before a Field Military Court. The remaining four, Muhammad Shehada and Mu'atez Murad were sentenced to three years' imprisonment and Haythem al-Hamwi and Yahya Sharabajee to four years for "attempting to establish a religious organisation, involvement in unlicensed social activities and attending unlicensed religious and intellectual classes". They were also released under the presidential Amnesty International of November 2005. (See UA248/04, MDE 24/054/2004, 16 August 2004.)

In October 2004, a copy of an Amnesty International document on the four men was smuggled into Sednaya prison. Haytham al-Hamwi saw the report and was overjoyed. He then read it to the other prisoners – even while some detainees advised him not to, for his own safety – but he couldn't stop himself.

Amnesty International is encouraged by the recent releases described here as well as the decision by the Syrian authorities to finally allow the organisation into the country, and we hope this visit will pave the way for future missions. There is still much work to be done, not least on the continuing detention and torture of scores of Syrians for political reasons.