

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Syria: Another wave of arrests of human rights defenders and civil society activists**

In the latest crackdown on freedom of expression in Syria, at least eight civil society activists have been arrested in the past week and two others charged with offences that carry the death penalty.

Most of the arrests are linked to the signing by about 300 Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals and civil society activists of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration of 12 May which seeks to normalise relations between Syria and Lebanon. The Declaration calls for a properly demarcated border and the exchanging of ambassadors, while opposing US and Israeli influence in the region.

Following a pattern of harassment against him over recent months, prominent writer and pro-democracy activist Michel Kilo was arrested on 14 May. Today he appeared in court where he was charged with five security offences including “weakening national morale” and “inciting sectarian strife”. His interrogation in court focused on the Declaration.

Yesterday, two other human rights defenders and signatories of the Declaration, Nidal Darwish, a member of the non-governmental organisation Committees for the Defence of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights in Syria, and Mahmoud Mer’i the secretary of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights in Syria, were also arrested. This morning, at least four other signatories – former prisoner of conscience and now member of the Kurdish Future Current Khalil Hussein, writer Khaled Khalife, Dr Safwan Tayfour and former prisoner of conscience Mahmoud ‘Issa were also arrested. All are reportedly detained by the State Security service. A number of other signatories of the Declaration have been summoned for questioning.

Today in Damascus, veteran human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni was arrested on the street by officers of the State Security service and taken to an unknown location. Anwar al-Bunni was to be the designated head of a European Union-funded centre for human rights training, the first in the country, but the centre's opening was blocked by the authorities in March.

Other recent arrests include that of human rights defender and former prisoner of conscience Fateh Jamus on 1 May, after a trip to Europe in which he addressed an Amnesty International conference in Sweden and appeared on a UK radio programme promoting Arab-Kurdish dialogue. On 14 May Fateh Jamus was reportedly charged with “aggression aiming to incite civil war and sectarian fighting and incitement to kill” and “leading an armed gang” seeking to attack the state. The maximum sentence, under the former charge, is the death penalty.

Also on 14 May, ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah and his son Muhammad were charged with “inciting a riot” and other offences, apparently in relation to their participation in a weekly demonstration that occurs outside the Supreme State Security Court - whose trials are grossly unfair - when it is in session. They were arrested on

23 March. 'Ali al-'Abdullah's other son, 'Omar, remains detained with seven other students as a result of their involvement in a pro-democracy youth movement.

On 11 May, former prisoner of conscience Kamal al-Labwani appeared before the criminal court and was reportedly charged with "weakening national morale" and "conspiring with a hostile nation to attack Syria". The latter charge carries a possible sentence of the death penalty.

Amnesty International considers all of the detainees mentioned above to be prisoners of conscience held solely for peacefully expressing their opinion and for their legitimate work in defence of human rights, and calls for their immediate and unconditional release as well as of all other prisoners of conscience in Syria.