

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Syria: 190 Political Prisoners Released, Hundreds Remain**

Amnesty International greatly welcomes the Syrian government's decision to release 190 political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, under a Presidential Amnesty marking the Muslim 'Eid holiday. Those freed include long-term prisoners of conscience whose unconditional release Amnesty International has demanded for years, and other political prisoners sentenced to prison terms after grossly unfair trials.

While welcoming these releases, Amnesty International is also calling on the Syrian government to free all other prisoners of conscience and to ensure that other political prisoners receive fair trials or are released. At least several hundred political prisoners continue to be held by the Syrian authorities, including prisoners of conscience, untried political detainees and prisoners who are serving sentences imposed after grossly unfair trials. The organisation is also calling on the Syrian authorities to account for many hundreds of Syrians and foreign nationals who have "disappeared" in the custody of Syrian security services, raising grave concern for their safety.

Those released on President Bashar al-Assad's orders include 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khayyir, a medical doctor who had been held continuously since February 1992. He was detained for more than three years and then sentenced in August 1995 to 22 years' imprisonment for membership of the Party for Communist Action. His trial was grossly unfair. In prison, he used his medical skills to treat other prisoners who became ill.

The four remaining prisoners of conscience from the so-called Darya group of peaceful community activists were also released. Haythem Muhammed Yasin al-Hamwi, Muhammed Khaled Shehada, Yahya Taha Sharabajee and Mu'atez Muhammed Zuheyr Murad were among 22 people who were arrested in May 2003 after participating in a silent march in Darya, a town near Damascus, to protest against the US-led 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 who established a free library, actively cleaned up their town and discouraged bribery and smoking American cigarettes. After a grossly unfair trial before a secret Field Military Court, Muhammed Shehada and Mu'atez Murad were sentenced to three years' imprisonment and Haythem al-Hamwi and Yahya Sharabajee received four year sentences for "attempting to establish a religious organisation, involvement in unlicensed social activities and attending unlicensed religious and intellectual classes".

Human rights lawyer Muhammad Ra'dun, head of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights in Syria (AOHR-S), was also released. He had been held since 22 May 2005, apparently after criticising abuses of human rights in Syria. Also, 'Ali al-'Abdullah was released. He had been held since 15 May 2005, one week after he read a statement on behalf of the exiled leader of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood at the unauthorised Jamal al-Atassi Forum, which the authorities then closed down.

Others who were released, according to information Amnesty International has received from several

lawyers and human rights defenders in Syria and Lebanon, include some 101 individuals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood; 20 members of Palestinian organisations; 20 members of the Democratic Socialist Arab Ba'th Party; six members of Hizb ul-Tahrir (the Islamic Liberation Party); six people sentenced as alleged "spies", at least two of whom are Lebanese; and people associated with other Islamist organisations.

It is unclear precisely how many prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners continue to be held in Syria, but they are believed to number at least several hundred. In addition, many hundreds of suspected opponents of the governments, both Syrian and foreign nationals, have "disappeared" over the years after being detained by Syrian security forces.

Those still held as prisoners of conscience include Kurdish student Mas'oud Hamid, AOHR-S member Nizar Ristnawi, lawyer Riad Drar and the six remaining 'Damascus Spring' detainees - 'Aref Dalilah, Riad Seif, Mamun al-Humsi, Walid al-Bunni , Habib 'Isa and Fawwaz Tello. They were arrested in 2001 during repression of a pro-reform movement. Amnesty International continues to call for their immediate and unconditional release and to urge the Syrian authorities promptly to implement meaningful reform of the justice sector and significantly curtail the powers of the security forces.