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## **Caught in a regional conflict: Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian political detainees and “disappearances” in Syria.**

Hundreds of foreign nationals languish in Syrian jails, their existence unacknowledged, totally cut off from the outside world, according to a report issued today by Amnesty International.

Arrested in the context of various regional political conflicts as long as 20 years ago, they were held as pawns, powerless to challenge their detention, while their families engaged in relentless efforts to establish their fate. Even now no one knows how many Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian nationals have “disappeared”, been summarily executed or remain held in various Syrian prisons and detention centres.

“Scores of these people “disappeared” after their arrest by Syrian security services, some as long as two decades ago,” the report said. “Relatives and friends who have inquired for years about their fate -often at risk of reprisals themselves- have been met with a wall of silence.”

The father of a Jordanian student arrested in Aleppo in 1980 described in an account typical of many others, the family’s efforts to ascertain the fate of Muhammad Jamal Taym who was 21 years old at the time. After tracking him down 15 days after his arrest the family was permitted to meet with him for one hour. He had apparently been severely beaten.

“That was the last time we saw him. Three months later when we returned to Aleppo we were informed that he was transferred to Tadmur [Military Prison]. Since then, despite all our efforts we were not able to get any information about him. Our lives have never been the same.”

Most of the arrests took place in the context of the Lebanese civil war, between 1975 and 1990, or during the conflict between Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1980s. Most Lebanese were arrested or abducted outside any legal framework by Syrian forces operating in Lebanon, or were handed over by Lebanese military intelligence or militias allied to Syria during the war. Palestinians and Jordanians were most commonly arrested at the Syrian/Jordanian border or inside Syria itself.

The report has documented the cases of more than 300 Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian political prisoners and “disappeared” in Syria, a number of which were repeatedly submitted to the Syrian Government together with a request for clarification. No substantive response has been forthcoming. Amnesty International believes that the cases it has on file may well be only a small proportion of the actual total.

Since 1991, the Syrian government has released thousands of political prisoners but hundreds of others are still in jail. Amnesty International welcomes these releases but calls on the authorities to break their silence on the fate of other political prisoners.

**'Abd al-Majid Nimr Zaghmout**, a Palestinian, was arrested in Syria in 1966. Accused of killing a Palestinian guerilla leader, he was sentenced to death after an unfair trial by a military court. The sentence was not carried out. In 1989, the Syrian Minister of Defence ordered his release. He was never freed and has been in jail for over 32 years. He is currently held in a prison hospital suffering from cancer and other serious illnesses.

**Dani Mansurati**, a Lebanese, was a former member of the Lebanese Phalange party. In 1992, three people in plainclothes ordered him into their car before driving away. Despite many attempts by his family to obtain information from the Syrian authorities, he has not been seen or heard from since.

**Wafa' Fahmi 'Ali 'Abidat**, a Jordanian national of Palestinian origin, was arrested in Damascus in 1986 on charges of spying for Jordan. It seems that her arrest is linked to her brother's connection with the Palestinian Fatah Revolutionary Council. Syria denies her detention but her family has received reports confirming her presence in a Damascus prison.

As a first step to redress the years of injustice, Amnesty International is calling on the Syrian authorities to acknowledge publicly the existence of all the Palestinian, Jordanian and Lebanese political detainees.

A thorough and urgent review of their cases should take place with a view to securing the unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience and those political prisoners held up without charge or trial; re-trying, or releasing all those currently serving prison terms after secret, summary trials; clarifying the fate and whereabouts of the "disappeared", and making this information known to relatives without further delay.

The report contains detailed recommendations to the Syrian government and the organization is calling on the Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian authorities to investigate the fate and whereabouts of their citizens who are detained or have "disappeared" in Syria.

### **Background**

Amnesty International has communicated its range of concerns to the Syrian government and held a series of talks with Syrian officials during visits to the country. In 1994, Amnesty International submitted to the Syrian authorities a list of more than one thousand victims of human rights violations. No response was received by the organization.

In July 1995, the Syrian government stated that individual human rights were protected by Syrian legislation, including the constitution. However, Amnesty International believes that the response failed to provide any clarification regarding the numerous cases it submitted in 1994. In March 1997, during talks with Syrian officials, the organization submitted a revised list of cases, including cases of Lebanese, Palestinians and Jordanians. The authorities have not yet responded to this query.

In October 1998, the organization once again submitted an updated list of Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian detained or "disappeared" in Syria. ENDS.../