

URGENT ACTION

JOURNALIST ARRESTED, RISKS TORTURE

Journalist Ma'an 'Aqel was arrested on 22 November in the Syrian capital, Damascus. He is now held incommunicado, putting him at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Ma'an 'Aqel writes for the state-owned newspaper *al-Thawra*. He was arrested at the newspaper's office in Damascus. Three days later, State Security officers took him in handcuffs to his home in Damascus, searched it and took his interview recordings, computer and camera. They reportedly told his family to wait a month before inquiring about him.

The authorities have provided no information about where Ma'an 'Aqel is being held, why he was arrested or whether he will be charged. The Deputy Head of the Syrian Journalists' Union, however, told a reporter in private that Ma'an 'Aqel had been arrested on "criminal grounds", for reasons unconnected with anything he had written. He also denied reports that Ma'an 'Aqel had been dismissed from his job two days after he was arrested, but added that this might be considered later. However, according to sources in Syria, a decision to dismiss him was indeed made on 24 November under the pretext that he was absent from work without permission.

Ma'an 'Aqel writes about corruption in Syria, among other matters. Because of his writing he has been summoned for questioning several times. In December 2008, members of one of Syria's security agencies came to his office to question him about an article he had written criticizing the appointment of a new editor-in-chief of another state-owned newspaper, *Teshrin*.

Ma'an 'Aqel spent nine years as a prisoner, from 1985 to 1994, after a trial before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), a special court which was set up to prosecute perceived political opponents and whose trial proceedings are grossly unfair. The SSSC convicted him for his then membership of the unauthorized Party for Communist Action, which engages secretly in non-violent political activities in Syria.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in Arabic, English, French or your own language:

- Expressing concern that Ma'an 'Aqel is being held incommunicado at an unknown location, putting him at risk of torture and other ill-treatment;
- Calling on the authorities to ensure that he is not tortured or otherwise ill-treated, and reminding them that Syria is a state party to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment;
- Urging them to immediately allow him visits from his family, a lawyer of his choosing, and any medical attention he may require;
- Calling on them to release Ma'an 'Aqel unless he is to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence and tried promptly in proceedings which meet international fair trial standards.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 22 JANUARY 2010 TO:

President

Bashar al-Assad
 Presidential Palace
 al-Rashid Street
 Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: +963 11 332 3410
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Interior

Major Sa'id Mohamed Samour
 Ministry of Interior
 'Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar Street
 Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: +963 11 222 3428
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:

Minister of Information

Dr Mohsen Bilal
 Ministry of Information
 al-Mezze Avenue, Ba'ath House
 Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: +963 11 661 7665
Salutation: Your Excellency

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Torture and other ill-treatment are widespread in Syria's detention and interrogation centres. In 2009, at least seven people have been reported to have died as a result of abuses in custody. The authorities have taken no action to investigate these allegations. "Confessions" extracted under duress are systematically used as evidence in Syrian courts, and the defendants' claims that they have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated are almost never investigated.

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