

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

4 February 2011  
AI Index: MDE 24/004/2011

### **Release Syrian prisoner of conscience ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah**

Amnesty International is calling upon the Syrian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release journalist and political activist ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah, who is to appear before a military court in Damascus on 7 February. He is charged with “spoil[ing] Syria’s relations with another country”, based on comments about elections in Lebanon and Iran that he made to a news agency.

Amnesty International considers ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah to be a prisoner of conscience held solely for the peaceful expression of his beliefs. It urges the authorities not only to release him but also to drop the charge against him, as it does not correspond to an internationally recognizable criminal offence.

On 17 June 2010 ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah completed a 30-month prison sentence, but rather than being released was referred to a military court. On 19 September he was charged by a military investigative judge with “spoil[ing] Syria’s relations with another country” (under Article 278 of the Penal Code), for which, if found guilty, he could be sentenced to up to 15 years’ imprisonment.

The charge relates to a statement he made by telephone in June 2009 to the Italian AKI news agency in which he praised the elections that had taken place in Lebanon and then criticized the Iranian authorities’ use of excessive force against peaceful protestors demonstrating that month against the disputed presidential election results.

The hearing on 7 February is due to take place before the Second Criminal Military Court in Damascus. Amnesty International is concerned that ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah’s right to a fair trial is being seriously undermined. Until now, his lawyers have been unable to meet him without an officer from the security forces listening to their conversations. In addition, they have not had access to the full case file.

‘Ali al-‘Abdullah has been imprisoned on four previous occasions. He spent six months in detention after returning to live in Syria from abroad in the 1990s. He served almost six months in prison in 2005 for his involvement with the unauthorized Jamal al-Atassi Forum, at a meeting of which he read out a statement by the exiled Muslim Brotherhood leader that called for pluralism and human rights to be respected in Syria.

In 2006 he served a six-month sentence for having participated in a protest outside the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), whose trials fall far short of international fair trial standards. In December 2007 he was sentenced to 30 months’ imprisonment for his involvement with the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, a broad-based opposition coalition.

‘Ali al-‘Abdullah is not the only member of his family to have been imprisoned by the Syrian authorities, although, as the main breadwinner, his detention has caused his relatives particular difficulties. One of his sons, ‘Omar ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah, is serving a five-year prison term following an unfair trial before the SSSC in 2007 in which he and six other young men were sentenced for advocating peaceful political reform. ‘Omar’s older brother, Mohammad ‘Ali

al-'Abdullah, who was also twice detained, has gone into exile. Their mother and 'Ali al-'Abdullah's wife, Omayya 'Abbas, died last month as a result of cancer; neither 'Ali nor 'Omar nor Mohammed was able to attend the funeral.

**Background**

Freedoms of expression and association are tightly controlled in Syria where the authorities continue to use state of emergency powers to punish and silence their critics, including political activists, human rights defenders, bloggers and Kurdish minority rights activists. Critics are arbitrarily arrested and detained for long periods without trial or imprisoned after unfair trials before the SSSC or military or criminal courts.

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