

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Syria: UN experts' opinion on arbitrary detention of Syrian human rights defender**

Amnesty International welcomes receiving last week the opinion by a UN body of legal experts that the detention of Syrian human rights defender Nizar Ristnawi, currently serving a four-year prison term, is arbitrary.

Amnesty International considers that the opinion of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) reinforces its position that Nizar Ristnawi is a prisoner of conscience detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression and reiterates its call for his immediate and unconditional release.

A founding member of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights – Syria (AOHR-S) and a civil engineer by profession, Nizar Ristnawi was arrested in April 2005 after a conversation he was having on human rights and other issues was overheard by a member of the security and intelligence services.

After his arrest, Nizar Ristnawi was held in secret detention for more than two weeks before Military Security informed his family that he was in their custody. He continued to be held incommunicado, that is without contact with the outside world, including his family and lawyers, until August 2005, from when his wife was allowed to visit him on a monthly basis. However, it was not until November 2005 that he was informed of the charges against him and permitted access to lawyers. During this period in custody, he was allegedly ill-treated.

After an unfair trial before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), he was convicted and sentenced on 19 November 2006 to four years' imprisonment for "spreading false news" and "insulting the President of the Republic". His sentence, like all convictions before the SSSC, cannot be appealed.

The WGAD was of the opinion that the detention of Nizar Ristnawi was arbitrary because it could not be justified on any legal basis and was the result, on the one hand, of his exercising his right to freedom of expression and, on the other, of the gravity of the SSSC's non-observance of international standards for fair trial. It requested the Syrian government "to take the necessary steps to remedy his situation".

The WGAD noted that it had found the detentions of other individuals tried before the SSSC to be arbitrary and observed that defendants "are often accused of vague, widely-interpreted and unsubstantiated security offences" and have "no legal redress for arrest or detention". It offered to cooperate with the Syrian government to bring the laws that govern the SSSC into line with international standards.

The SSSC is a special court which tries people charged with political and state security offences. Such offences are loosely defined and very widely interpreted, meaning that defendants are often convicted and imprisoned on the basis of charges relating solely to the peaceful expression of opinions that differ from those of the authorities. Given the gravity of its non-compliance with international standards for fair trials, Amnesty International continues to call for the SSSC to be fundamentally reformed or abolished.

For further information on the SSSC, see Memorandum on the Supreme State Security Court: A Summary of Amnesty International's concerns (Index: MDE 24/039/2007), published in August 2007.

Public Document

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