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Syria: End crackdown on human rights defenders

Amnesty International calls for the immediate release of eight more human rights defenders who were arrested at their homes at dawn on 24 May. Political Security officers arrested the eight, all members of the Board of Directors of the Jamal al-Atassi Forum, and took them to a Political Security branch in Damascus where they are detained without charge and without access to lawyers or to visits from family members.

The eight – named as Dr Suhayr Jamal al-Atassi (Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Forum), Hussein al-'Awadat (writer and owner of the publishing house Dar Al-Ahali), Nahed Badawiyah (housewife), Dr Hazem al-Nahar (medical doctor), Yusef al-Jihmani (writer and owner of the publishing house Dar Houran) and Jihad Massouti, Muhammad Mahfoudh and 'Abdel Nasr Kalhous (all freelance writers) – were arrested following the detention of 'Ali al-'Abdullah on the night of 15/16 May. Reports indicate that all nine may be charged with “promoting an illegal organisation”, namely the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood (MB), under a new, wider interpretation of Law 49 of 1980. Law 49 makes affiliation punishable by death, although in practice sentences are usually commuted to 12 years in prison.

The arrests are connected to 'Ali al-'Abdullah's reading in the Forum of a statement by exiled MB leader Sadr al-Din Bayanouni that called for pluralism and human rights to be respected in Syria. 'Ali al-'Abdullah has been transferred from the Political Security branch in Damascus to nearby 'Adra prison where he remains detained without charge and without access to visits from a lawyer or his family. His family were reportedly given permission to visit him yesterday but were refused access when they arrived at 'Adra. Reportedly he will be tried before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), whose procedures are grossly unfair.

Amnesty International is very concerned at the escalating clampdown on human rights defenders in the country. Human rights defender Muhammad Ra'dun, head of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights – Syria (AOHR-S), remains held at the same Political Security branch in Damascus, without charge and without access to lawyers or to visits from family members, since his arrest on 22 May. Prior to his arrest, Muhammad Ra'dun was one of several human rights defenders whom the authorities have prevented from leaving the country (others include Haytham al-Maleh, Anwar al-Bunni and Razan Zaytouneh).

Nizar Ristnawi, a founding member of the AOHR-S, remains held at an unknown location, also without charge and without access to visits from his family or a lawyer, since his arrest on 18 April. The decision of the SSSC is expected on 26 June regarding the case of Aktham Nu'ayse, President of the Committee for the Defence of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights (CDDLHR), who was arrested on 13 April 2004 and is charged with “disseminating false information” and “opposing the objectives of the revolution”. In addition, Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi, a Kurdish Imam who has spoken out on the rights of Syrian Kurds, “disappeared” in Damascus on 10 May after apparently being arrested by unknown security agents. He is reportedly held without charge and without access to visits from a lawyer or

his family at an unknown location.

Article 38 of the Syrian Constitution ensures that “every citizen shall have the right to express his opinion publicly and freely, in speech, writing and other forms of expression and to participate in the work ... and the voicing of constructive criticism aimed at ensuring the safety of the structure of the homeland and the Nation and to enhance the socialist regime”. Syria is also bound by the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, an international human rights treaty to which it acceded in 1969, and whose Article 19 affirms the right of everyone to enjoy freedoms of opinion and expression. It appears, therefore, that by carrying out the above arrests, the Syrian authorities have failed to honour their obligations under international human rights law and violated the provisions of their own Constitution.

The Jamal al-Atassi Forum, the CDDLHR and the AOHR-S are among a handful of unauthorised but generally tolerated organisations in Syria whose members are sometimes arrested or otherwise harassed on account of their activities. There are no authorised human rights organisations in Syria.