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Israel must stop harassment of human rights defender

Amnesty International has called on the Israeli authorities to end their harassment of a human rights activist whose week-long detention by the Israeli authorities was extended today.

Ameer Makhoul, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, was arrested in a dawn raid at his home in Haifa, northern Israel, by the Israeli security services and police on 6 May. He has been charged with "contact with a foreign agent" on the basis of "secret evidence".

"Ameer Makhoul is a key human rights defender, well-known for his civil society activism on behalf of the Palestinian citizens of Israel," said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"His arrest and continued detention smacks of pure harassment, designed to hinder his human rights work. If this is the case, we would regard him as a prisoner of conscience and call for his immediate and unconditional release."

Ameer Makhoul has been denied legal advice throughout his detention. The doctor at the prison where he is held has informed his lawyer that he is suffering from pains in his head.

On the morning of his arrest, Ameer Makhoul was taken to Petah Tikva interrogation centre and, at a hearing the same day, his detention was authorized for six days. Today it was extended until 17 May.

According to Ameer's wife, Janan Makhoul, during the raid on their home, security forces confiscated mobile phones, laptops, a camera, and documents.

The same morning, members of the Israeli security forces also raided the office of the association Ittijah in Haifa, where Ameer Makhoul works.

Ameer Makhoul had already been banned from travelling for two months on 21 April by the Israeli Minister of the Interior Eli Yishai, who said at the time that Ameer Makhoul's exit from the country "poses a serious threat to the security of the state".

The Palestinian activist was only made aware of the ban when he attempted to leave Israel on 22 April, where he was scheduled to begin a series of meetings with civil society activists in Jordan.

When Amnesty International spoke to Ameer Makhoul in late April he expressed his concern that the travel ban was part of a broader pattern of state repression against the peaceful political activities of Palestinian citizens of Israel, justified under "security concerns".

In January 2009, the Israeli Central Election Committee banned the National Democratic Assembly (NDA), a party which currently holds three seats in the Israeli parliament and calls for Israel to be "a state for all its citizens", and the United Arab List, which has four parliamentary representatives, from standing in Israel's general elections under the claim that the parties supported terrorism and "did not recognize Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state".

The Committee's ban on the two parties was subsequently overturned by the Israeli High Court.

On 24 April, Omar Said, an activist with the NDA was detained by the Israeli authorities.

Initially a gagging order was imposed on the Israeli press to prevent reporting of Ameer Makhoul's and Omar Said's detentions.

The lifting of the order led to reports in the Israeli media on Monday that the arrests of both men related to accusations of spying and contact with a foreign agent from Lebanese group Hizbullah.

Ameer Makhoul has been the General Director of Ittijah, which works on behalf of the Palestinian community in Israel, since its foundation in 1995.

He is also the chair of the Public Committee for the Defence of Political Freedom within the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee in Israel.

"In the unlikely event that there are genuine grounds to prosecute Ameer Makhoul he should be charged with recognizable criminal offences and brought promptly to trial in full conformity with international fair trial standards," said Philip Luther.

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