

## Middle East Studies Association of North America

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April 14, 1992

His Excellency President Hafiz al-As'ad  
Presidential Palace  
Damascus  
Syrian Arab Republic

Your Excellency:

The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association was pleased to learn that approximately 3500 political detainees were released by the Syrian government in late 1991. However, we wish to express our grave concern regarding the trial, detention, and mistreatment of Muhammad Ali Habib, University Lecturer in engineering and economics at University of al-Lathiqiyya and a member of the independent human rights organization, the Committee for the Defense of Democratic Reforms and Human Rights in Syria.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2300 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected International Journal of Middle East Studies and is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

We understand that Dr. Habib was arrested along with 14 other Syrian human rights workers in December of 1991, and held incommunicado until he was put on trial in February in state security court proceedings devoid of the basic elements of due process. We understand that Dr. Habib was tried without the benefit of being informed in advance of the charges against him, the assistance of defense counsel, or the time or facilities to prepare his defense -- in short, in violation of the basic requirements for criminal justice set forth in international human rights law. Reports are that Dr. Habib and other defendants showed signs of mistreatment and that he was not allowed family visits before or after the first trial session. He was sentenced to nine years imprisonment with hard labor at his trial on February 22.


The information we have received indicates that Dr. Habib was prosecuted under Syria's State Security Legislative Decree for his activities as a member of an independent human rights organization for membership in an illegal organization, distributing unlicensed political publications, and conspiracy to undermine the government. Classifying the peaceful advocacy of human rights as a state security offense is unacceptable not only under

international standards protecting freedom of expression, but also under the standards currently being drafted in the United Nations on the right to promote and protect international human rights.

We respectfully urge you to see to it that Muhammad Ali Habib be released immediately, that allegations of mistreatment of him and other detainees be thoroughly investigated and those responsible be prosecuted, that family visits be allowed all detainees, and that criminal prosecutions for all activities connected with peaceful advocacy of human rights be terminated forthwith.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Anne H. Betteridge".

Anne H. Betteridge  
Executive Director

cc:

His Excellency Khaled al-Ansari, Minister of Justice  
Ambassador Walid al-Mouallem, Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic  
Ambassador Christopher Ross, Embassy of the United States of America  
Mr. Claiborne Pell, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate  
Syria Desk, U.S. Department of State