

## Middle East Studies Association of North America, Inc.

The University of Arizona · 1232 North Cherry Avenue · Tucson, Arizona 85721

June 20, 1994

President Hafez al-Assad  
Presidential Palace  
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

Your Excellency:

The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America is writing to express our concern about the detention of Syrian academics for what our information indicates were political reasons. We believe that they were being detained in violation of international human rights law and principles of academic freedom. 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.

Our first concern is the case of Muhammad Ali Habib, lecturer in engineering and economics at Tishreen University. We believe that he was arrested in 1991 for his activities as a member of a Syrian human rights group known as the CDF, and that he was sentenced in March of 1992 to nine years at hard labor in the Saidnaya prison. We respectfully call to your attention that human rights principles are now part of international law and that demanding respect for human rights is the same as demanding respect for the law. The arrest and imprisonment of anyone for the peaceful advocacy of human rights is an egregious breach of international human rights law. We urge that Muhammad Ali Habib's sentence be cancelled and that he be reinstated in his university position forthwith.

We are also concerned about the fate of two academics who, we believe, were arrested for their political affiliations and opinions in 1987. These are Nizar Maradni, assistant professor of the Faculty of Civil Engineering at the University of Damascus and Ghassan Qassis, a lecturer in the same faculty. We respectfully call to your attention that under international human rights law, it is impermissible to imprison people for their peaceful associational activities. We understand that both these academics and Nizar Maradni's wife are being detained without any criminal charges being brought against them, and without opportunity for them to defend themselves in a fair trial. Such protracted detention without bringing charges or allowing the detainees to challenge the legality of their detention breaches fundamental international human rights norms. Reports that Ghassan Qassis has been tortured and is in poor health are added reasons for treating these cases as urgent matters. We respectfully urge prompt review of these cases.

We are troubled by indications that other prisoners of conscience have remained for over a decade, solely, as we understand, for reason of their political opinions and affiliations. These include Mounther Kaddam of Tishreen University, arrested in 1981, and Hussain Bakr, of the University of Homs or Damascus, arrested in 1982. Of course, these detentions also violate international human rights law, and, if it is correct that Hussain Bakr has been tortured, as reports indicate he has been, this inhuman treatment is a particularly serious violation of international law. We respectfully urge prompt



reconsideration of these cases.

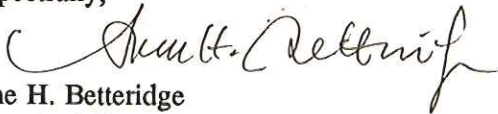
As we bring to your attention our concerns about the detention and mistreatment of our fellow academics, we wish to register our gratification at news of the releases of a number of academics previously detained for their political opinions or non-violent political activities. According to our reports, the released include Muhammad Nizar al-Daqr, a professor of dermatology; Abdelrahim Dmeriyya of the Department of Civil Engineering of the University of Damascus; May al-Hafez, a lecturer at the Department of Engineering in Aleppo; Jalal Khanji, a lecturer at the University of Aleppo; Ghassan Khouri of the Department of Architecture at the University of Damascus; Jihad Msouti of the Department of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering at the University of Damascus; Ghassan Najjar, a lecturer in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Aleppo; and Muhammad Nabil Salim of the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Aleppo. Although we are relieved to learn of their release, we are concerned about their professional futures. If deprived of a chance to resume work as academics, they would effectively be punished a second time for opinions and activities that are protected under international human rights law, thereby aggravating the original rights violations occasioned by their detention. We urge that all possible measures be taken to assist these released academics to be successfully reintegrated in their university faculties.

Due to the number and seriousness of these cases, we respectfully request that there be a full-scale review of criminal justice policies to bring Syrian police practices into conformity with the norms of international law. We further urge that detentions and prosecutions of academics for ideas and activities that are protected under international human rights law cease forthwith and that principles of academic freedom, essential for university faculty members to serve their functions as disseminators of ideas and knowledge, be respected.

Two other cases are of concern to us. One is the August 1993 arrest of Salah Mahmud Jadid, a computer science engineering specialist who was a lecturer at the University of Damascus. We believe that he was about to depart for Ph.D. studies in Japan when he was arrested in Latakiya after the funeral of his uncle, Salih Jadid. There seems to have been no reason for his arrest other than his family relationship to his uncle, a member of the political opposition. We are worried about his fate and urge you to secure his immediate release. Our last case involves a reported abduction. We have received information about Akram Salim Ishty, a Lebanese physician and lecturer at the American University of Beirut, indicating that he was arrested in 1992 in Beirut by Syrian agents and detained in order to exert pressure on his brother to turn himself over to the Syrian police. We respectfully call to your attention that, if this information is correct, it constitutes an exercise in lawlessness in breach of fundamental international norms of legality and human rights. Obtaining his immediate release must be accorded high priority.

We look forward to your receiving your response about action taken in these cases.

Respectfully,



Anne H. Betteridge  
Executive Director

cc: Ambassador Walid Al-Moualem, Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic  
His Excellency Khalid al-Ansari, Minister of Justice  
His Excellency Muhammad Harba, Minister of the Interior  
His Excellency Nusrat Menella Haider, President of the Supreme Constitutional Court