

January 11, 2002

President Bashar al-Asad

c/o Ambassador Rostom al-Zoubi  
Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic  
2215 Wyoming Ave. NW  
Washington D.C. 20008

Dear President Asad,

The Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF MENA) of the Middle East Studies Association of North America is writing to express our grave concern regarding the arrest on September 9 and subsequent detention of Professor Arif Dalila, the renowned economist and scholar, along with the arrest and detention in the same period of nine other Syrian citizens who participated actively in civic forums created following your election as president in July 2000. We view these arrests, and the restrictive new press and publications decree issued on September 22, as troubling evidence of your government's determination to stifle all manner of peaceful dissent, reversing earlier signs that you intended to expand opportunities for political participation in Syria.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa, and is the preeminent professional association in the field. The association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the region and in connection with the study of the Middle East and North Africa.

We call on you to acknowledge and protect the right of Syrian citizens, including academic researchers and faculty, to engage in political discussion and debate, and to express views that are critical of government policies, without fear of reprisal. We ask that you take all possible steps to secure the immediate and unconditional release of Professor Dalila and his colleagues, who are now facing criminal prosecution and potentially lengthy terms of imprisonment solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression and association.

According to information we have received, Professor Dalila was arrested following his participation in a meeting of the National Dialogue Forum, held on or about September 6 at the home of Member of Parliament Riad al-Seif, the forum's founder. Mr. al-Seif was himself stripped of parliamentary immunity and arrested on September 6. He and another parliamentarian, Mamoun al-Hamsi, who was arrested on August 9, are presently being tried in a criminal court. According to al-Seif's lawyer, he has been accused of, among other things, "organizing subversive gatherings" and "gatherings aimed at causing disorder," and "forming a secret society."

To our knowledge, no formal charges have been lodged against Professor Dalila. According to information we have received, the ostensible grounds for his detention are vague assertions that he and seven fellow detainees insulted and "threatened to change" the Syrian constitution. This accusation apparently derives from Riad al-Seif's announced plan's to launch a new political party, the Movement for Social Peace, whose platform called for

ending the monopoly of the Ba'th Party on political power in Syria, although to our knowledge not all of these detainees, if any of them, were engaged in that project, which is distinct from the civic forum efforts.

Professor Dalila and the seven other detainees are being held in Adra Prison, pending trial before the Supreme State Security Court. International human rights organizations have documented a history of grossly unfair trials before this tribunal, the verdicts of which are not subject to appeal to a higher judicial body.

Professor Dalila has previously been subject to penalties for his commitment to freedom of expression. In 1997, while serving as Dean of the Economics Faculty at the Syrian University, Professor Dalila organized a conference that was intended to encourage open debate about the state of Syria's economy. Then-Prime Minister Mahmoud Zoubi intervened personally to prevent the conference from taking place. In 1998 Prime Minister Zoubi ordered that Professor Dalila be fired from his post. After being deprived of his right to work for more than two years, and following a meeting with your excellency, he was reinstated, reportedly on your instructions, to his teaching position (although not to his position as dean) in August 2000.

On resuming his position, Professor Dalila helped to found the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, a nongovernmental organization. In addition to his participation in the civic forums, Professor Dalila was one of ninety-nine intellectuals who signed the Intellectuals' Manifesto of September 2000, also known as the "Statement of the 99," a document that is widely regarded as having paved the way for the emergence of civic forums in Syria. He subsequently helped organize a petition signed by 1,000 Syrian citizens demanding freedom of expression, pluralism, strengthening the role of women in public life, freedom of press, and the restoration of civil society.

Professor Dalila and his fellow citizen activists initiated these activities in response to steps you had taken, on becoming president, such as the release of hundreds of political prisoners, and the January 2001 announcement that the emergency law, in effect since 1963, had been "frozen" and "not applied." They obviously had understood these steps to signal your interest in seeing a renewal of independent political life in Syria.

While the civic forums did not receive government approval to operate with official legal status, they were nevertheless tolerated prior to the government clampdown. It is therefore extremely disturbing to see these courageous individuals subjected to imprisonment and the threat of harsh and arbitrary sanctions for attempting to exercise basic rights guaranteed to them under Syria's constitution and in keeping with Syria's treaty obligations as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

For these reasons, MESA calls on you to secure the immediate and unconditional release of Professor Dalila and those other detainees held in connection with their participation in civil society forums. We look forward to your response regarding this most serious matter.

Sincerely,

Anne H. Betteridge  
Executive Director