



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

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May 18, 2005

President Bashar al-Asad
c/o Ambassador Imad Moustapha, Ph.D.
Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic
2215 Wyoming Ave. NW
Washington DC 20008

By facsimile: 202-265-4585 or 202-232-4357

Dear President al-Asad:

We are writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America to express our grave concern about the detention and alleged torture of up to 40 Syrian university students during April 2005 in the Governorate of Latakia. Syrian security forces reportedly took these students into custody solely on the basis of their alleged membership in an unrecognized and unsanctioned student organization, in violation of their internationally recognized rights to freedom of association and freedom of expression.

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.

According to information we have received, these students were first detained by state security forces during the third week of April. Many continue to be held incommunicado and without charge. Last week, six of the students who were released reported to the Syrian Committee for Human Rights that they had been subjected to torture – including beatings and the use of electrodes.

As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights since 1969, Syria is obliged to respect and protect the exercise of those rights enumerated in Articles 18, 19, and 21—namely the right to freedom of thought, expression, and opinion. The Covenant also prohibits torture and inhuman treatment (Article 7) as well as arbitrary arrest and deprivation of liberty, except under legally established procedures (Article 9). The Covenant also requires that anyone arrested should be treated with respect and dignity (Article 10) and that they be informed of the nature of the charges against him/her (Article 14).

We therefore urge you to take the steps necessary to end the multiple infringements of their fundamental human rights. Those still in custody should be released or charged with a recognizable criminal offense and provided with a trial in a court of law that meets international fair trial standards. Those in custody should be allowed access to their families and to legal counsel.

We also urge you to affirm the right of students as well as others to organize social, political and cultural clubs and civil society organizations free from unnecessary governmental interference. If necessary, the government should revise legislation governing the right of association to comply with international standards.

We also request that the government make available information concerning the current whereabouts of those students still in detention, their conditions of confinement, and the nature of the criminal charges made against them.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this matter and look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ali Banuazizi', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ali Banuazizi

President, Middle East Studies Association

Professor, Boston College

cc Dr. Hani Murtada, Minister of Higher Education, Syrian Arab Republic
Dr. Amir Ibrahim, Rector, Tishrin University, Syrian Arab Republic
Dr. Imad Moustapha, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic
HE Kofi Annan, Secretary General, United Nations

AB/sp