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Syria: Syrian rights activists' rights to freedom of expression and opinion curtailed

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ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned by the arrest of at least ten human rights activists last week in Syria. In what has been perceived as an organised campaign by the government to clampdown on human rights activists, Syrian authorities charged the prominent writer and human rights campaigner Michel Kilo on Thursday May 18.

The writer was one of some 300 Syrian and Lebanese signatories to a petition dubbed the 'Beirut-Damascus, Damascus-Beirut Declaration', published on May 12th. The declaration called for a halt to Syria's interference in Lebanon, from where it withdrew its troops last year after a nearly 30-year presence, and urged Syria to establish diplomatic relations with its much smaller neighbour.

The petition was released on the eve of the introduction by the US, France and Britain of a draft resolution in the United Nations Security Council calling on Syria to respect Lebanon's sovereignty. The draft resolution urges Damascus among other things to demarcate the border between the two countries and to exchange ambassadors.

ARTICLE 19 Executive Director Dr. Agnes Callamard condemned these attacks and urged the Syrian government to release the detainees. *"The 'Beirut-Damascus, Damascus-Beirut Declaration' constitutes legitimate and protected expression of opinion. This trans-national call for the rule of law and diplomacy to prevail is particularly important for the two countries at this point of time. It would be in the public interest to encourage and protect such initiatives. Instead, the Syrian authorities have chosen to arrest the initiators, thus silencing the messengers of reason."*

The detainees, most of whom are linked to the Declaration, include prominent lawyer and human rights defender Anwar al-Bunni, head of the 'Free Political Prisoners Committee'; Nidal Darwish, a member of the presidential committee and the board of trustees of The Committee to Defend Public Liberties and Human Rights in Syria; human and political rights activist Khalil Hussein; Mahmoud Issa; Mahmoud Mar'i; Dr. Safwan Tayfour; Ghaleb Amer; Suleyman Shummer; Muhammad Mahfouz and writer Michel Kilo. Mahmoud Issa and Khalil Hussein had been incarcerated previously for eight and twelve years respectively. Of particular concern is the fact that two of the activists are charged with offences that carry the death penalty.



Arrested writer and human rights activist Michel Kilo

Michel Kilo has since been charged with five disconcerting offences including “weakening national morale” and “inciting sectarian strife.” ARTICLE 19 strongly condemns these arrests that have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and which seem to fall into a pattern of ongoing harassments targeting human rights activists.

Syrian human rights organisations have noted that the arrests constitute the largest roundup of human rights activists in years. They indicated that the arrests form part of an organized campaign by the government targeting activists in an attempt to end the “Damascus Spring” that followed President Bashar Assad’s July 2000 ascension to power. During the so-called spring, pro-democracy and human rights activists were allowed a degree of freedom previously denied during the presidency of Bashar’s father, Hafez Assad.

ARTICLE 19 demands the immediate release of the Syrian prisoners of conscience and urges the Syrian government to honour its citizens’ right to freedom of expression as guaranteed under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 19 of the ICCPR, to which Syria is a State party.

ARTICLE 19 calls upon the Syrian authorities to drop all charges against the signatories to the ‘Beirut-Damascus, Damascus-Beirut Declaration’ and safeguard all citizens’ rights to freedom of expression as guaranteed by the UDHR and ICCPR to which Syria is a signatory.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.