

Letter from the Damascus Central Prison

We, the prisoners of conscience and opinion in Damascus Central Prison of Adra, lawyer Anwar al-Bunni; writer Michel Kilo; doctor Kamal al-Labwani; activists Mahmoud Issa and Faek Al Mir; and Professor Aref Dalila who could not be reached as he remains in solitary confinement for the sixth successive year, would like to thank and greet our families, relatives, friends, and all the individuals, groups, institutions, organizations, associations, parties and political gatherings in Syria, whether Arab, Kurdish or Assyrian, as well as the official and institutional representatives, the governments, the media the websites in Arab countries, and all over the world, that have shown their solidarity with us and protested against our arrest and trials, and condemned the sentence that was delivered against our colleague, human rights activist and lawyer Anwar al-Bunni on April 24, 2007.

We would like to thank and send our heartfelt greetings to each one of you and hope that your noble and brave stand will not end at this point or be limited to a mere condemnation or show of solidarity.

Our imprisonment is part and an extension of the civil liberties and human rights crisis in Syria that began with the State of Emergency that has been in place for 44 years, and reached its height in the 1980s. This crisis is again coming to a climax today with the increasing and mounting repression, arrests and the suppression of fundamental freedoms.

Tens of thousands of Syrians have paid a very heavy price during this period; some have passed away and paid with their own lives, others have paid with the best years of their lives that they have spent in prisons and detention centers in inhuman conditions and suffering from cruel torture. Still more were forced to leave their country to escape tyranny and repression and went into voluntary exile to experience yet another kind of suffering. The rest of the Syrians have been forced to withdraw into themselves, rub salt on their wounds and suffering and hold their tongues to escape tyranny. The fate of those who could not bear these times of oppression and remain tongue tied was prison and marginalization. Only a very small minority climbed to the heights of oppression, repression and authoritarianism that have darkened the lives of the Syrians, and took part in corruption, plundering, impoverishment and despotism that have strangled the country and the population.

This is the fundamental cause we should fight for and your solidarity with the detainees is part of this struggle. The efforts to release them is not only needed to alleviate the suffering of the detainees and their families, but is also necessary to encourage the others, to make them feel that they are not alone in this struggle, and to give hope to society that the doors are not locked for good, that the road is not closed forever and that there is real hope that the crisis of freedom and human rights in Syria will be solved in a peaceful and secure manner.

Terrorism is the enemy of mankind, humanity and civilization. It finds its supporters and flourishes in environments affected by a freedom crisis, where the doors are closed to peaceful expression leaving the way open to violent means of expression and in societies affected by extreme poverty, where people do not find their needs and well being on earth and who, under the influence of wrong fanatical ideas, turn to the “heavens” and what was “promised” to them there.

The lack of basic freedoms and the violation of human rights are with poverty two sides of the same coin in third world countries and Syria is at the forefront of these countries especially as it is a totalitarian state ruled by a one-ideology and one-opinion system where the others are labeled as traitors.

The lack of freedom, of means of expression and of political participation and accountability leads to the increase of corruption, despotism, plundering of public money, and thus, to rampant poverty and the collapse of moral values.

The real fight against terrorism must not only be about combating extremist ideas. These ideas have existed throughout history but have always been on the periphery, isolated and rejected, unless they find a fertile soil to take root and grow. The fight against terrorism should aim to dry out this soil that receives these seeds and transforms them into poisonous plants that progressively invade the society and become criminal ideas targeting innocents and the entire society.

Addressing the causes of terrorism requires opening up pathways to free expression and the peaceful exchange of ideas; giving back to the people their freedom; removing the sword of injustice, oppression and despotism; granting them full political participation and access to decision-making and accountability; and preserving their right to equality and a dignified life. This is an international responsibility since security in the world has become a globalized problem.

The Syrians have paid a high price for their rights and freedom and we hope to be the last ones to pay this high and heavy price, after that, the Syrian people deserve to recover their rights and freedoms.

We need more than your solidarity and denunciations. We need your persistent efforts and perseverance to compel the Syrian authorities to respect human rights, and comply with international law and the treaties it has ratified and to implement them effectively and guarantee freedom of expression, opinion and political participation. The release of the political prisoners is a necessary first step toward that, as well as lifting the State of Emergency and other special laws, in particular the Decree 49 of 1980 and the Special Hasakah Census Decree of 1962; suppressing special courts and in particular the State Security Court and the “battlefield” tribunals; quashing their sentences, compensating those who have been unfairly sentenced by them; granting the judiciary its full independence, stopping and prohibiting torture and holding those responsible for it accountable; ending political arrests and guarantying freedom of the press and freedom of information; allowing political participation and the formation of parties, organizations

and civil society associations without government interference; and bringing an end to the plundering of public money and to the policies of impoverishment, oppression and despotism.

However, these measures are just the necessary first steps to put Syria on a secure path toward development, progress and the protection of national unity that is now suffering from rifts, divisions, crises, and tensions that cannot anymore be concealed under celebrations, folkloric dances and empty rhetoric about a supposed healthy society that is in reality suffering from many serious illnesses.

As prisoners of conscience and opinion we are worried about the future of our nation to which we are attached and the future of our children. It is our right to participate in shaping this future and express our opinions. We will not hesitate to strain ourselves to achieve a better future for our country and neither threats, intimidation, and repression nor long years of imprisonment will deter us from our convictions and commitments.

Adra Prison, April 28, 2007