

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should exonerate four political activists sentenced to prison on May 13 for signing a declaration calling for improved Lebanese-Syrian relations, Human Rights Watch said today.

The convictions of Michel Kilo, Mahmud `Issa, Sulaiman Shummar and Khalil Hussain came just days after human rights activists Dr. Kamal al-Labwani and Anwar al-Bunni were sentenced to long prison terms on politically motivated charges.

On May 13, the Second Damascus Criminal Court sentenced prominent writer and political activist Michel Kilo to three years in prison for weakening national sentiment and inciting sectarian strife. The court also sentenced political activist Mahmud `Issa, previously imprisoned for membership in a Syrian communist party, to three years in prison for weakening national sentiment.

[State Security \(Amn al-Dawla\) officials previously detained the two](#) after they signed a declaration on May 12, 2006 calling for improved Lebanese-Syrian relations based on respect for each country's sovereignty. The declaration called on Syria to recognize Lebanon's independence, highlighted the importance of improving economic ties on the basis of transparency, rejected attempts to impose economic sanctions on the Syrian people, and condemned attacks on Syrian workers in Lebanon.

Foreign diplomats frequently visit Damascus to discuss ways to improve relations between Lebanon and Syria, but when Syrian activists raise the same issues, they end up in prison, said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

Also on May 13, 2007, the same Damascus court sentenced in absentia both Khalil Hussain, a member of the Kurdish Future movement, and Sulaiman Shummar, a member of the political bureau of the unauthorized Workers Revolutionary Party and a leader of the National Democratic Gathering (a coalition of five Syrian opposition political parties), to five years in prison for weakening national sentiment and undertaking acts and writings unauthorized by the Syrian government that may expose Syria to aggressive acts or spoil its relations with another state. Lawyers attending the hearing were unclear whether the five-year sentences handed down against Hussain and Shummar for each of the offenses were meant to be served simultaneously or consecutively.

In May 2006, State Security arrested Hussain and Shummar at the same time as Kilo and `Issa in connection with their signing the Beirut Damascus declaration, but Hussain and Shummar went into hiding after their release on bail on September 25.

Three days prior to the sentencing of the four activists, [a Damascus criminal court on May 10, 2007 sentenced Dr. Kamal al-Labwani](#), a physician and founder of the Democratic Liberal Gathering, to 12 years in prison with hard labor for communicating with a foreign country and inciting it to initiate aggression against Syria after he had visited the United States and Europe in the fall of 2005. [On April 25, a Damascus criminal court sentenced prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni](#) to five years in prison for spreading false or exaggerated news that weaken the spirit of the nation in connection with a statement by al-Bunni claiming that a man had died in a Syrian jail because of the inhumane conditions under which he had been held. The government had also arrested al-Bunni on May 17, 2006 for signing the Beirut-Damascus declaration.

In a span of three weeks, the Syrian judiciary has sentenced six prominent activists to harsh sentences on politically motivated charges, Whitson said. The government has made crystal clear that it will not allow Syrians to express their political opinions, regardless of its obligations under international law.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Syria is a state party, guarantees that everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference and the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers.

Article 38 of Syria's constitution guarantees the right of every citizen to freely and openly express his views in words, in writing, and through all other means of expression and to participate in supervision and constructive criticism in a manner that safeguards the soundness of the domestic and nationalist structure and strengthens the socialist system.

On May 14, the Presidency of the European Union issued a statement expressing its profound concern over the three-year prison terms for Kilo and `Issa and regretted that they had been sentenced merely for expressing their political views. On the same day, the US State Department said that it condemns the unjust sentencing of political prisoners Michel Kilo, Mahmoud Issa, Suleiman Shummar, and Khalil Hussein, who have been punished for expressing their personal views, and called on President al-Assad to unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience.

It is a positive sign that the US and EU has condemned the sentences, but it is not enough, Whitson said. Now they need to incorporate demands for human rights improvements into any high-level negotiations with Syria.

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