

= Faeq al @-@ Mir arrest controversy =

The Faeq al @-@ Mir arrest controversy refers to the arrest , imprisonment , and calls for release of Faeq al @-@ Mir , leader of the Syrian People ' s Democratic Party , after he telephoned Elias Atallah , a Lebanese politician critical of Syrian policies there . In the call , taped by Syrian Intelligence forces , al @-@ Mir gave condolences to Atallah regarding the assassination of Pierre Gemayel , Lebanon ' s Minister of Industry . Al @-@ Mir was detained by Syrian security forces at his home in Latakia on December 13 , 2006 , and charged in March 2007 with " undertaking acts that weaken national sentiment during times of conflict " and " communicating with a foreign country to incite it to initiate aggression against Syria or to provide it with the means to do so . " On December 31 , 2007 , Damascus ' s First Criminal Court ruled him guilty of " circulating false or exaggerated news which would weaken the morale of the nation " and sentenced him to three years in prison , though the duration was immediately reduced to 18 months . Human rights groups , including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International , criticized the arrest and demanded al @-@ Mir ' s unconditional release .

= = Background = =

Having worked together for communist organizations in the mid @-@ 1980s , Faeq al @-@ Mir and Elias Atallah boasted a close relationship at the time of the arrest . Al @-@ Mir , a human rights activist , led the left @-@ wing People ' s Democratic Party , an unauthorized party critical of the Syrian government . Atallah was the leader and sole parliamentarian of the Democratic Left Movement , a leftist Lebanese party . He was also a senior figure in the March 14 Alliance , a Lebanese parliamentary coalition critical of Syrian policies . The two conversed over the phone several times prior to the arrest . They often lamented the assassinations of anti @-@ Syrian Lebanese figures like Samir Kassir . Al @-@ Mir , who was released from a previous ten @-@ year prison sentence related to political activism in 1999 , visited Lebanon in 2006 to mourn the killing of George Hawi , a former leader of the Lebanese Communist Party . According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch , this contributed to al @-@ Mir ' s arrest at the end of the year .

While the Syrian constitution liberally grants free speech , a state of emergency in effect since the Baath Party seized power suspends this freedom . Syria has stringently approached dissidents who question its policies in neighboring Lebanon ; Syrian authorities detained and imprisoned ten activists who signed the Beirut @-@ Damascus Declaration petition in May 2006 . The petition , of which al @-@ Mir was a signatory , advocated the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the normalization of relations between the two countries .

= = = The call = = =

In a December 2006 phone call , al @-@ Mir bestowed his condolences to Atallah regarding the November 21 assassination of Pierre Gemayel , Lebanon ' s Minister of Industry and an anti @-@ Syrian politician . The call was taped by Syrian intelligence forces , known as the Mukhabarat .

= = Arrest and Trial = =

On December 13 , 2006 , Syrian security forces arrested al @-@ Mir at his home in Latakia on Syria ' s western coast , and he has remained in detention since .

In March 2007 , Syrian authorities charged al @-@ Mir with " undertaking acts that weaken national sentiment " during times of conflict and " communicating with a foreign country to incite it to initiate aggression against Syria or to provide it with the means to do so . " The second charge bears a life sentence and could entail the death penalty if the foreign nation initiates aggression against Syria .

Al @-@ Mir ' s trial began before the Damascus First Criminal Court on August 29 , 2007 . His indictment stated he " contacted enemies of the state in Lebanon including members of the March

14 group , and he knows that the ideas and direction of this group are in accordance with the American and Zionist direction which are against the national approach of the Syrian government . " It accused al @-@ Mir of conveying " support for the approach and direction of March 14 " during the phone call . Al @-@ Mir denied this , stating that he called Atallah only as head of the Democratic Left Movement . On November 8 , the court adjourned his trial , postponing the verdict until November 28 as a result of the defense filing a petition to dismiss the judge in session .

On December 31 , 2007 , the Damascus First Criminal Court ruled al @-@ Mir guilty of " circulating false or exaggerated news which would weaken the morale of the nation " . In accordance with an amnesty provision , the court dropped the charge of " circulating knowingly false or exaggerated news abroad , which would harm the State or its financial standing " . He was sentenced to three years in prison , though the duration was immediately commuted to one and a half years . The court elected to consider al @-@ Mir 's detention before the trial as part of his prison term .

= = Aftermath = =

Deeming the charges against him " politically motivated " , Human Rights Watch called for al @-@ Mir 's immediate release . The organization included his arrest in the Syrian section of its 2008 World Report , a human rights assessment . Amnesty International judged al @-@ Mir a " prisoner of conscience " and called for " his immediate and unconditional release . " Atallah ? speaking to NOW Lebanon , a Lebanese newspaper ? praised al @-@ Mir 's human @-@ rights activism and commented " arresting someone for a phone call is unheard of ... every free and democratic Lebanese citizen is in solidarity with [ Mir ] and his comrades , and they demand that he is set free along with all the political prisoners in Syria . ?

According to NOW Lebanon , al @-@ Mir 's indictment implied that " any support for March 14 ? the ruling parliamentary majority in Lebanon ? is tantamount to treason , " a precedent that was " portentous for the future of Lebanese @-@ Syrian relations or for the revitalization of democracy inside of Syria . " In a letter smuggled out of Adra Prison and published by a Lebanese newspaper , al @-@ Mir and five other imprisoned activists denounced the " repressive climate " in their country and wrote " Our situation as prisoners of conscience is part ... of the crisis of public freedoms and human rights in Syria , which started with the state of emergency imposed 44 years ago . "

Al @-@ Mir was released from prison on July 13 , 2008 after spending a year and a half in prison .

= = During the Syrian Uprising = =

Faeq al @-@ Mir became actively involved in the Syrian uprising ( 2011 ? present ) right from the beginning . As a result , he went into hiding in Ghouta near Damascus to avoid arrest by the security agencies of the Syrian government . However , on Monday October 7 , 2013 , he was arrested during a visit to the city of Damascus .

Faeq al @-@ Mir is known among supporters of the Syrian opposition with the title " al @-@ e 'mem " ( Levantine Arabic : ?????? , meaning " the uncle " ) in recognition for his lifelong political activism against the dictatorship of Al @-@ Assad family in Syria .