

Open letter to Nicolas Sarkozy,

Président of the French Republic

Paris, the 4th of July 08



Mr. President,



In several days time you will receive, amongst other chiefs of state and heads of government, your Syrian counterpart President Bashar al-Assad. As part of the discussions that you will be having with him, the human rights organisations which have signed this letter ask you to pay particular attention to the fundamental issue of the human rights situation in that country.



The state of emergency – lasting continuously for forty-five years –, authorises all kinds of abuses of power. The Syrian authorities continue to harass and persecute political activists and human rights defenders. Torture and ill-treatment are employed with complete impunity. Trials brought against prisoners of conscience ignore international standards of equity. Of all these violations – of which we are unable to provide an exhaustive list as there are so many of them – the serious attacks on freedom of opinion and expression are systematic. In December 2007, for example, several members of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, one of the main groups supporting democracy, were placed into detention, sometimes beaten, in the days that followed one of their meetings.



Previously, in May 2006, the signatories of a text calling for the normalisation of relations between Syria and Lebanon were all arrested. Three of them, since found guilty, remain incarcerated on these grounds alone. Is it not the case however that you are currently calling for the improvement of relations between these two countries, making this a prerequisite for the resumption of dialogue between France and Syria? In such a case, is it acceptable that Michel Kilo, journalist and well-known author, Anouar al Bounni, reputed lawyer and human rights defender, and Mahmoud Issa, activist, still remain in prison?



Mr. President, the French presidency of the European Union and the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean provide a unique opportunity for France to be a leading force for the promotion of human rights in the region. During your appointment speech, you committed yourself to “*defend human rights wherever they are non-existent or under threat*”. In Syria, the situation regarding basic human rights is extremely worrying. The individuals in that country who are struggling peacefully for the recognition of their basic freedoms need your support.



For all these reasons, we ask you to urge President Bachar al-Assad to take the following measures:

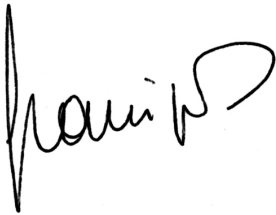
- 1/ The immediate and unconditional liberation of Anouar al Bounni, Michel Kilo and Mahmoud Issa, and of all prisoners of conscience,
- 2/ The protection of all detainees from torture and ill-treatment,
- 3/ The cessation of all forms of harassment and persecution against human rights defenders,
- 3/ Syria's respect of its international human rights obligations.

Yours sincerely,

Anne-Cécile Antoni
Président ACAT-France.



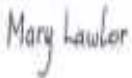
Geneviève Garrigos
Président of Amnesty International France



Marc Schade Poulsen,
Executive Director
Euro-mediterranean Network for Human Rights



Mary Lawlor
Director - Frontline



Sarah Leah Whitson
Executive Director
Middle East and North Africa division
Human Rights Watch



Souhayr Belhassen,
Président of the Fédération Internationale des Ligues
des Droits de l'Homme



Jean-Pierre Dubois,
President of the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme



Eric Sottas
General Secretary
World Organisation against Torture

