

URGENT ACTION

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE OF THREE SYRIAN MEN

There are fears for three Syrian opposition activists held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance for nearly six months after being arrested in Damascus.

On 20 September 2012, **Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir**, Head of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB) Foreign Affairs Office and a previous long-term prisoner of conscience; **Iyas Ayash**, and **Maher Tahan** were arrested at an Air Force Intelligence (AFI) checkpoint after arriving at Damascus Airport following a visit to China. The three men are members of the NCB, a mostly secular coalition of political groups and activists including leftists and Arab nationalists that advocates a peaceful transition of power.

The three men were in one of two cars that left the airport carrying individuals linked to the NCB. The first car proceeded past the AFI checkpoint; however, those in the second car (the three men) were taken away. Local sources indicate that the men were taken to the AFI detention centre at al-Mezzeh, Damascus, and that three weeks ago they were transferred to an unknown location. On 22 September 2012 the state news agency of the Ministry of Information, SANA, stated that the three men had been kidnapped by "members of a terrorist group". The Syrian authorities continue to deny holding the men. As such, they are held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance and are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment and other grave violations. The men were due to participate in a rare conference held in Damascus on 23 September 2012, which called for an end to the fighting and for a peaceful transition "to a pluralistic democratic system". In a statement condemning the arrests before the conference on 21 September 2012, an NCB spokesman said both the Chinese and Russian authorities had assured NCB members that they would protect the conference.

Please write immediately in English or your own language:

- Expressing deep concern that the Syrian authorities have denied detaining Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, Iyad Ayash and Maher Tahan despite information indicating that they are being held by AFI, in which case they are victims of enforced disappearance and their lives are in grave danger;
- Calling on the Syrian authorities to urgently inform the families of Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, Iyad Ayash and Maher Tahan of their fate and whereabouts. If they are held solely on account of their peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, they should be released immediately and unconditionally;
- If the three men are detained, urging the authorities to ensure that they are protected from torture and other ill-treatment, granted immediate contact with their families and lawyers of their choice, and are granted access to all necessary medical care.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 23 APRIL 2013 TO:

President

Bashar al-Assad

Fax: +963 11 332 3410 (keep trying)

(fax/phone line – say "Fax") (Fax is the

only reliable communication method;

please do not send letters)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Defence

'Imad al-Fraj

Fax: +963 11 223 7842 (keep trying)

+963 11 666 2460 (keep trying)

(fax/phone line – say "Fax")

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Walid al-Mu'allim

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

al-Rashid Street

Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic

Fax: +963 11 214 625 3 (keep trying)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir was a prisoner of conscience from 1992 to 2005, imprisoned for his peaceful activities as a member of the Party for Communist Action (also known as the Party for Communist Labour).

Torture and other ill-treatment are rife in Syrian detention centres and prisons. Amnesty International has received the names of over 980 people reported to have died in custody since unrest broke out in March 2011. For more information, see *Deadly Detentions: Deaths in custody amid popular protest in Syria*, Index: MDE 24/035/2011, 31 August 2011 and *I wanted to die': Syria's torture survivors speak out*, Index: MDE 24/016/2012, 14 March 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/016/2012/en>.

Many thousands of suspected opponents of the government have been arrested in Syria since largely peaceful protests calling for political reform began in February 2011 and many, if not most, are believed to have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated.

Since protests began, the situation has evolved into an internal armed conflict in much of the country, between the security forces and armed opposition groups intent on overthrowing the government. Systematic as well as widespread human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity and war crimes, have become rife, with civilians being the main victims. Amnesty International has documented numerous examples, most recently in documents such as *Syria: Government bombs rain on civilians* (MDE 24/009/2013), 14 March 2013, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE24/009/2013/en>

Other bodies such as the UN independent international Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic have made similar findings. Amnesty International has called on all sides in the conflict to abide by international humanitarian law and protect civilians. Although the vast majority of the human rights abuses documented by Amnesty International have been committed by the state's armed forces and pro-government *shabiha* militias, abuses have also been committed by armed opposition groups. This includes the torture and killing of captured members of the security forces and *shabiha* militia members as well as the abduction and killing of people known or suspected to support or work with the government and its forces, or the taking of civilians as hostages to try to negotiate prisoner swaps. Amnesty International condemns without reservation such abuses and has called on the leadership of all armed opposition groups in Syria to state publicly that such acts are prohibited and to do all in their power to ensure that opposition forces put an immediate stop to them. See *Syria: Summary killings and other abuses by armed opposition groups* (MDE 24/008/2013), 14 March 2013. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE24/008/2013/en/8d527c4e-2aff-4311-bad8-d63dbc97c96a/mde240082013en.html>

Amnesty International is therefore continuing to call for the situation in Syria to be referred to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. The organization is also calling for an international arms embargo aimed at halting the flow of weapons to the Syrian government, and an assets freeze on President Bashar al-Assad and his close associates. Additionally, states considering supplying weapons to the armed opposition should have in place the necessary mechanisms to ensure the material supplied is not used to commit human rights abuses or war crimes. The Syrian government should also allow the UN independent international Commission of Inquiry, as well as international human rights and humanitarian organizations, unfettered access to the country.

Go to the interactive Eyes on Syria map, www.eyesonsyria.org to see where human rights violations are being committed in Syria, and for further information on Amnesty International's global activism to seek justice.

Name: Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, Iyad Ayash, and Maher Tahan

Gender m/f: All male

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