

The Honorable Basher Jaafari  
Permanent Mission of The Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations  
820 Second Ave., 15th Floor  
New York, NY 10017

Your Excellency:

I write to urge the Syrian government to immediately begin the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience, including political activists, human rights defenders, and others imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights. I also urge the early or conditional release of prisoners at high risk, such as older prisoners or those with serious medical conditions.

With the COVID-19 pandemic threatening the Middle East region, including several neighboring countries, the concerns that the virus could use Syrian prisons to spread throughout the country suggests that these releases are in Syria's national interest. This governments history of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances means that the United Nations has estimated that as many as 100,000 Syrians are currently detained, abducted or missing in Syria.

Amnesty International has also documented how unhygienic conditions in prisons across the country will make it likely that prisoners, prison guards, and others interacting with the prisoners will be at high risk of contracting the disease.

Specifically, Amnesty International has documented conditions including severe overcrowding in cells; lack of access to medicine and medical treatment; and lack or inadequate access to sanitation, food and water. Former detainees have also told Amnesty International that they were held in cells with bodies of deceased detainees for several days. Others said that they were subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

Similar conditions in other countries have allowed the quick and catastrophic spreading of the COVID virus. You must not let this happen in Syria. I respectfully urge that the Syrian government follow the recommendations from UN agencies and international health groups and take action to allow for the immediate release of prisoners of conscience and other prisoners at high risk for the disease.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this urgent issue.

Sincerely,