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# Syria: Free Elderly Activist Who Called for Protests

## Democracy Advocate in his Mid-70s Detained

(New York) - Syrian authorities should immediately free Ghassan al-Najjar, leader of a small group called the Islamic Democratic Current, Human Rights Watch said today. Security services arrested him at his home on the morning of February 4, 2011, and detained him. Al-Najjar, who is in his mid-70s, had issued public calls in the last week for Syrians in Aleppo to demonstrate to demand more freedoms in their country.

His arrest comes amid other measures by security services to pre-empt any public gathering after Syrian activists issued calls on Facebook and Twitter for large protests in the country on February 4 and 5. Syria's security services have summoned more than 10

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activists in the last 48 hours, to pressure them not to demonstrate, a Syrian activist told Human Rights Watch. Security officials also detained three young demonstrators for a few hours on February 3 after the youths took part in a Damascus protest against corruption and high cell phone communication costs.

“President Bashar al-Assad should take a cue from events in the region and announce that he will lift the state of emergency and improve public freedoms,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Tunisians and Egyptians have shown that the old methods of repression cannot suppress a people’s yearning for freedom.”

Human Rights Watch urged Syria’s authorities to respect the right of Syrians to assemble peacefully. As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Syria is required under article 21 to recognize and protect the right to peaceful assembly. Restrictions on this right can only be imposed by clear laws, for strictly limited reasons, such as public safety, and only if proportionate, respecting the underlying right. Syria should also protect peaceful assemblies from disruption by third parties.

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