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NOTE

from: Netherlands delegation

to : CIREA

Subject: Overall situation in Syria (1)

Delegations will find attached a note from the Netherlands delegation on the overall situation in Syria.

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den hollandske CIREA-delegation dokumentet
til offentlig brug
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Date
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Reference
DPC/AM/No 539482

Subject
Overall situation in Syria

Section
Directorate for Movement of
Persons,
Migration and Consular
Affairs/Asylum and Migration
Affairs

Encl.: 1

Please find below further information on the overall situation in Syria, and in particular on developments regarded as important for the assessment of asylum applications, including decisions on possible expulsion of rejected Syrian asylum-seekers. What follows is based on information from the Netherlands representation in Damascus and from public sources. It concerns in particular information from authoritative governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as the 1996 Country Report on Syria from the US Department of State, and reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. (1)

This report does not go into the position of the Kurds and members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria; for that I refer you to my letters of 10 January 1997 and 28 November 1996 respectively.

(1) including a letter from Amnesty International dated 27 March 1996 'Syria: the Price of Dissent', Human Rights Watch July 1996 and 'Syria's Tadmor Prison', Human Rights Watch, April 1996.

1. Overall situation

1.1. General

Syria is a country of great religious and ethnic diversity. In addition to the Sunni Islamic majority, which makes up about 70% of the population ⁽²⁾, there is also a Shi'ite minority, of which the most important groups are the Alawites ⁽³⁾ (11%), Druze ⁽⁴⁾ (3%) and Ismaeli (1,5%) ⁽⁵⁾.

The Christian minority, which is divided among many churches, makes up about 12% of the population.

Syrian legislation makes no distinction according to ethnic origin. At least 8,5% of the population is Kurdish, 4% Armenian, 3% Turkmen ⁽⁶⁾ and 1% Circassian ⁽⁷⁾. In addition, there are about 200 Jews in Syria.

History

Present-day Syria came into being at the end of the First World War as a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire of which it had been a part since 1516 ⁽⁸⁾. Before 1914 the whole area which now comprises the States of Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan (Greater Syria) was known as Syria.

⁽²⁾ According to the 1994 census, the population of Syria is 13 812 248, of whom about 52% live in the cities. Average population growth is 3,5% per year (source: Country Report on Syria, Statistisches Bundesamt). With reference to minorities in Syria, see also Dr Nikolaos van Dam, "The Struggle for Power in Syria", I.B. Tauris Publishers, 3rd edition, London 1996.

⁽³⁾ Alawites (also known as Nusairis) are a branch of the Shi'ites. In addition to Shi'ite elements, their cult also includes Christian elements and rites and nature worship.

⁽⁴⁾ The Druze are an offshoot of the Shi'ites. They regard Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, as the most important prophet. Next to him, they revere Mohammed, Moses and Jesus. Their mystic cult is couched in many secrets. Most Druze live in the area of Jebel al-Arab (formerly Jebel al-Druz), in the south-west of Syria. The Druze form a closed community; they do not proselytize and it is impossible for outsiders to become Druze.

⁽⁵⁾ Ismaeli belong to the Shi'ites. However, they do not recognize all twelve Imams and venerate another, seventh, Imam. They believe that there were not merely twelve Imams, but that the line of Imams stretches as far as the current Aga Khan.

⁽⁶⁾ The Turkmen live mainly to the north of Aleppo and along the border with Turkey. They are descendants of Turkish-speaking nomadic tribes which settled in this area in the eleventh century.

⁽⁷⁾ Circassians (also known as Cherkev, Kabardians and Adyghians,) are a Caucasian people whose territory was finally annexed by the Russians in 1864 after many battles. From 1850 to 1880 between 800 000 and 1 million Circassians emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. The Circassian community in Syria is estimated at around 50 000, most of whom live in villages in the north of the country.

The Turks won Syria from the Mamelukes who included Circassians through their victory in the battle of Marj Dabik in August 1516.

In April 1920 present-day Syria became a French trust territory ⁽⁹⁾. Despite official recognition by France in September 1941, Syria only really became independent when the French and British troops withdrew in 1946. In 1950 the first Syrian constitution came into being ⁽¹⁰⁾. Subsequently from 1958 to 1961 Syria together with Egypt was part of the United Arab Republic. That came to an end with a coup d'état in Damascus. In 1963 the Arab Ba'ath Party ⁽¹¹⁾ seized power, also by means of a coup. The current President, Hafiz al-Assad, came to power in 1970.

1.2. Characteristics of the present administration

Syria is a secular State controlled by a regime based on a small oligarchy belonging to a large extent to the Alawite religious minority.

The constitution defines the Syrian Arab Republic as a "sovereign, Socialist popular democracy" and stipulates that the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party holds the leadership of the country. A few small parties are tolerated and allowed to form the so-called "National Progressive Front" (NPF) along with the Ba'ath Party.

However, these smaller parties have no influence on the government of the country; this applies equally to the Syrian Parliament. The President, and at the same time Secretary-General of the Ba'ath Party, Hafiz al-Assad, essentially leads the country by himself, along with a small group of trusted followers. On 12 March 1992 President Assad took the Presidential oath for a fourth seven-year term, after being elected in December 1991 by almost 100% of the votes cast.

Domestic policy is directed primarily at preserving the existing power structures and secondly towards socio-economic development. As a means of keeping the country under their control, those in power make use of an extensive network of security services.

The state of emergency proclaimed in 1963, which is currently still in force, offers the security services a basis for operating outside any judicial control.

Stringent measures are taken against anything seen as conflicting with the State order set up

⁽⁹⁾ On 10 June 1916 Sharif Houssein Din Ali, Emir of Mecca, called for Arab resistance to the Ottoman administration. This rebellion resulted in October 1918 in the capture of Damascus by troops led by the British generals Allenby and Barrow and the son of the Emir of Mecca (Faisal), assisted by British advisors, including T.E. Lawrence.

After the fall of Damascus, Faisal (whose brother Abdullah was later to become King of Jordan) formed a Greater Syrian government.

At that time, on the basis of the so-called "Sykes-Picot" pact (1916) between Britain and France, it was decided that Syria should come under French influence. The coastal strip was already under French control while the interior came under the control of Emir Faisal. In March 1920 the independent State of Greater Syria was proclaimed with Faisal as King. During the League of Nations Conference at San Remo in April 1920, France was granted the whole of Syria as a trust territory, and Emir Faisal went into exile. He later became King of Iraq.

The current Syrian constitution dates from 10 March 1970.

See page 10.

by the Socialist Ba'ath Party.

Assad's 26-year leadership has brought the country relative stability and basic services, but at the cost of individual liberties.

1.3. Legal system

The Syrian constitution provides for an independent judiciary. The legal system has civil and criminal courts, a Court of Appeal and a Court of Cassation. Matters relating to law of persons and family law are dealt with by religious courts (Muslim and Christian) on the basis of Sha'ria or canon law.

The High Constitutional Court is alone entrusted with examining legislation for compatibility with the Constitution.

In addition, Syria has military and two extraordinary security courts which operate on the basis of decrees promulgated under martial law. These extraordinary courts are not bound by constitutional guarantees regarding the independence of the administration of justice and judicial process and may be subdivided as follows:

1. The Supreme State Security Court (generally known as SSSC). This Court, set up by Decree No 47 of 28 March 1968 ⁽¹²⁾, deals with matters relating to political and national security. The Court is presided over by two civil judges and a military judge, all of whom are appointed by the President.

In the eighties in particular political prisoners were frequently not even tried. Only in 1992 did the SSSC begin to handle cases of people who for political reasons had already been imprisoned without trial for a long period – some of them for more than ten years. There are no reliable figures on the number of cases being processed. The sentences imposed varied between four and fifteen years and in a few dozen cases prisoners were pardoned, but only after they had already been imprisoned for years without any trial.

2. The Special Economic Security Court. This court deals only with offences of a financial nature.

The right to legal aid in trials before the two abovementioned courts is very limited. As a rule, lawyers have no access to their clients before the trial.

Citizens may be judged by military courts whenever there is a question of a conflict between citizens and the army. Where an offence has been committed by a group

¹² By this decree extraordinary military courts were replaced by the Supreme State Security Court. The Court is exempt from the procedural rules which apply to the administration of justice in Syria. The right to defence remains in force but the SSSC is not bound by Syrian legislation on procedural law and interrogation and investigation methods. Article 71a of Decree No 47 of 28 March 1968.

including one or more soldiers, the group as a whole is also tried by a military court. Trial of offences which have no security aspects generally does take place according to the rules of procedure as laid down in the law. In view of the fact that the Syrian State is all-powerful, the authorities can intervene to the advantage or disadvantage of a defendant if their interests are at stake.

It is possible to appeal against judgments of ordinary courts to the Court of Appeal in the relevant province and then to the Court of Cassation. It is not possible to appeal against judgments of the SSSC.

1.4. Security services (Moukhabarat)

The Syrian regime prevents the development of any opposition by a system of security services which operate under the state of emergency in force since 1963. Strong measures are taken against everything seen as conflicting with the form of government created by the regime.

Members of the security services are omnipresent on the Syrian streets. The services also make use of an extensive network of informants. The different security services operate independently of each other and outside any judicial control. Their areas of work overlap and they also check up on each other. The security services come under different Ministries but are all ultimately responsible to the President. It is estimated that there are ten different services employing many tens of thousands of people. ⁽¹³⁾

It often happens that people suspected of dissident activities are arbitrarily picked up by the security forces and kept incommunicado for several days.

The security forces are so pervasive that in recent years there have been scarcely any expressions of public unrest. ⁽¹⁴⁾

1.5. Socio-economic situation

The Syrian regime used to be based on State socialism, which was reflected at economic level in a planned economy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Government decided to liberalize the economy but this policy is being implemented fairly slowly.

⁽¹³⁾ Estimates of numbers of people working for the security services range from 50 000 to 150 000. For an overview of the secret services in Syria, see "Syrien, Länderreport, Februar 1997" published by the Federal Office for the Recognition of Foreign Refugees, Nürnberg.

⁽¹⁴⁾ According to unconfirmed reports, in March 1996 around a hundred political activists were arrested in Dayr Al-Zur. Furthermore, in May 1996 around eight hundred Turkmens were arrested in connection with small explosions which had occurred in some towns in the north of Syria. The great majority of the group has since been freed according to reports. US State Department: there are still about one hundred in prison. Also, eleven people were killed as a result of a serious bomb explosion in Damascus on 31 December 1996. It is not yet clear who was responsible.

Important economic activities in Syria are trade, agriculture and oil extraction ⁽¹⁵⁾. In the last few years economic growth ⁽¹⁶⁾ has been slowing and unemployment has risen. Only a restricted group of people have a say in important sections of the economy, including State enterprises.

The situation during Assad's Presidency has meant that political shifts have had repercussions on the composition of the economic elite. While previously the important economic operators were mainly Sunni business families and large landowners, the current regime has brought wealth to a large group of "nouveaux riches", generally people who in one way or another are connected to the regime. This development is seen by many Syrians, especially by the Sunni majority, as unjust.

Every Syrian does have access to social services such as health care and primary and secondary education. ⁽¹⁷⁾ The regime pays a great deal of attention to matters such as rural drinking water supplies and electrification. Although wage levels are low, absolute poverty is more or less unknown in Syria.

1.6. Entry and exit procedure

In order to leave Syria legally, it is necessary to be in possession of a passport and exit visa. Exceptions to this are journeys to Egypt and Jordan (for which no exit visa is necessary) and Lebanon (where an identity card will suffice in place of a passport).

Every Syrian over the age of fourteen must be in possession of an identity card issued by the Ministry of the Interior.

In order to obtain a passport, it is necessary to apply to the Immigration and Passports Service, which has branches throughout the country. Syrian passports have a period of validity of six or ten years. Syrian passports state that they are not valid for Iraq. An exception can be made to that rule on special grounds such as a visit to close relatives. Every passport application triggers a security check to ascertain whether the applicant still has obligations with regard to military or civil service (the latter applies for example to recently qualified engineers and doctors), or appears on the list of people banned from leaving the country. Generally speaking, the passport can already be collected the following day; this may also be done on behalf of family members. It is almost impossible to obtain an exit visa for young men who have reached their eighteenth year of age and still have to complete their military service. An exception may be made for study abroad. Anyone liable for military service can obtain a passport with a maximum validity of three months.

¹⁵ 38% of the official State budget goes on defence and security. The greater part of public service salaries goes to the security services. Given that in Syria the civil and military sectors are intertwined it is difficult to obtain reliable figures. Economist Intelligence Unit, Country Report on Syria, 2nd quarter 1997. The infant mortality rate is 16.6% and average life expectancy 67 years. The literacy rate in 1990 was 64%.

The legislation makes no distinction between population groups as regards the issuing of passports to people with a Syrian identity card. Palestinians can leave Syria with the help of a special Palestinian passport issued by the provincial authorities. In the case of Jews, (of whom there are still about two hundred in Syria) religion is specified ⁽¹⁸⁾.

The Immigration and Passports Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for checking passengers and luggage at Damascus airport. In addition, officials of various security services are present at the airport to carry out checks.

With the aid of a computerized list comprising the names of those wanted for political activities, financial or common offences or for desertion/refusal of military service, it is decided whether passengers may leave Syria. This combined list makes a distinction between serious and less serious cases.

Political cases belong by definition to the serious cases and are included in the list by order of the security forces. People who are wanted for common offences are added to the list by order of the courts and police. The third category covers people placed on the wanted list by order of the military authorities, for example for desertion.

It is virtually impossible for people wanted by the authorities to leave Syria by way of Damascus airport.

Syrian women under eighteen may not leave the country without their parents' consent. Married women need their husbands' formal consent to be allowed to leave the country. Where a woman has been permitted to leave the country previously, this rule is no longer strictly enforced in practice. Nevertheless, a husband always has the right to inform the authorities that he forbids his wife to travel abroad.

Illegal crossing of national borders is very common in Syria. The borders with Turkey and Lebanon are highly porous ⁽¹⁹⁾. The local population visits family members without using passports. The borders with Iraq are closed off by the army. Currently, under the Food for Oil programme ⁽²⁰⁾, three border crossings with Iraq are open. Travel to Israel, with which Syria is officially at war, is not permitted and is severely punished. Anyone who infringes that prohibition must be prepared to be tried on return by the State Security Court. People who live on the Golan Heights may in exceptional cases and in certain circumstances visit families through the agency of the United Nations.

¹⁸ The word "Muzawi" Mosaic is stamped on their identity cards and passports.

¹⁹ The greater part of the border with Turkey runs alongside the railway track from Aleppo to Kamishi.

²⁰ United Nations Security Council Resolution 666 - April 1995 and
4 June 1997

2. Human rights situation

2.1. General

Syria is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The human rights situation in Syria gives cause for concern. Basic human rights, such as the right to freedom of expression, protection from arbitrary arrest and to the physical integrity of the person are not observed by the regime. In particular, the unlimited powers of the security forces have worrying implications for human rights observance. Human rights violations take place to a large extent as part of the repression of Islamic fundamentalism following the violent acts committed by the Muslim Brotherhood in the eighties ⁽²¹⁾. In 1995 the Syrian Government allowed a mission by Human Rights Watch, which reported in particular on the SSSC's procedures ⁽²²⁾. As far as is known, there have been no extrajudicial executions in Syria in the last few years.

2.2. Inviolability of the person

2.2.1. Prisoners

Large numbers of political prisoners are regularly released in Syria on the basis of amnesty laws. In 1991 the number was around 2 700, principally pro-Arafat Palestinians. In 1992 there were around 2 800, mainly members of the Muslim Brotherhood, but also dissident Ba'ath members, members of prohibited Communist groups and of the fundamentalist Sunni Lebanese Tawhid movement ⁽²³⁾. During the general amnesty as part of the 25th anniversary celebrations of President Assad's government in November 1995, about two thousand political prisoners were released. The majority of these were again members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Estimates of the number of political prisoners in Syria range from a few hundred to about three thousand. Most political prisoners are kept in miserable conditions in special prisons, such as the infamous Tadmor prison in the Syrian desert.

⁽²¹⁾ With reference to the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, see my letter of 28 November 1996, ref. DPC/AM No 523241.

⁽²²⁾ From 11 to 24 March 1997 an Amnesty International delegation visited Syria and spoke there with various Ministers and SSSC judges (source: Al News Service 52/97).

⁽²³⁾ Tawhid was a fusion of three movements, viz. Jum'dallah, the Lebanese Arab Movement and the Popular Movement. The movement was formed at the beginning of the eighties in Tripoli (Lebanon) and is related to the Muslim Brotherhood. In the middle of the eighties the movement split and the vast majority of Tawhid members ranged themselves on the side of the Syrian authorities. Since then there has been no more talk of dissident activities by former members of the movement.

2.2.2. Torture

Although torture is explicitly prohibited by law, mistreatment and torture do occur, particularly during interrogation by the security services. It is clear from many reports on human rights that during interviews conducted by the security forces confessions were extracted which were used in cases before the SSSC.

These practices are quite common in the context of political repression. In 1994 about 40 police officers stood trial for mistreatment of persons suspected of common offences:

2.2.3. Death penalty

Syrian criminal law provides for the death penalty for murder, while military law prescribes it for desertion or mutiny in time of war. Implementation of the death penalty must be confirmed by the Head of State. On 25 March 1996 seven members of a gang were hanged in public in Damascus for multiple robbery with murder.

2.3. Other civil rights

2.3.1. Freedom of the press

Since the Ba'ath Party came to power, the press has been transformed on the party model. There are no independent daily newspapers in Syria; the Ministry of Information monitors everything written in the press. Radio and television stations are also controlled by the Government or the Ba'ath Party.

The most important dailies are: Al Ba'ath, (the party mouthpiece); Al-Thawra (Government mouthpiece); Khouli; Teshrine (mouthpiece of the President's office). The Syria Times is the only English-speaking daily newspaper and is published by Teshrine with a circulation of about five thousand.

In addition, Al-Jamahir and Al-Arabia are published in Aleppo. Al-Fidaa is published in Hama with a circulation of about four thousand and Al-Uruba is published in Homs, with a circulation of about five thousand.

The authorities take no action against the now widespread use of satellite dishes for television reception.

2.3.2. Trade unions

Although the Syrian constitution provides for a right of association, which expressly includes trade unions, it is not permitted in practice to set up a trade union or any other association without official approval.

All Syrian trade unions must be affiliated to the General Federation of Trade Unions (often known by the English acronym, GFTU), which is dominated by the Ba'ath Party. The GFTU is in fact part of the Government bureaucracy.

The protection of workers against dismissal is very high. Strikes are strictly prohibited. The last known strikes organized by professional associations of doctors, engineers and lawyers, inter alia, took place in 1982.

2.3.3. Right of assembly

The consent of the authorities is required for public meetings, demonstrations and assemblies. If permission to hold a meeting has been requested and refused and the meeting is regarded by the authorities as "a political threat", there are grounds to fear persecution.

2.4. Political rights

2.4.1. Political parties

In Syria there is no question of a multi-party democratic system. In addition to the dominant Ba'ath Party, six parties are represented in Parliament (Majlis al-Shaab) and these together with the Ba'ath make up the National Progressive Front (NPF). These parties are hardly independent.

The parties in the NPF have undertaken not to conduct any activities in the army and among students. Their press freedom is limited. The influence of these small legal parties on the running of the country is virtually nil. The last parliamentary elections in Syria took place on 24 August 1994.

In addition to political parties, farmers' and workers' organizations are also represented in Parliament. Of the 250 seats, 135 are occupied by the Ba'ath Party, 32 by the other NPF parties and 84 by independents. Among the last group are also Members of Parliament who belong to religious and ethnic minorities such as Christians, Kurds and Druze. These independents do not, however, represent religious or ethnic parties but have seats in the Parliament on a personal basis. The Parliament has little or no influence on policy. As a rule it restricts itself to confirming the line taken by the President.

2.4.2. Legal parties

The Ba'ath Party.

The origin of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party goes back to 1947. In 1966 the party seized power ⁽²⁴⁾. The party ideology strives for unity of the Arab world and a form of Arab socialism. It is a secular party which also accommodates non-Muslims. The Ba'ath Party also works for women's emancipation.

The Syrian constitution guarantees the Ba'ath Party a majority in all government and "people's" organizations, such as trade unions and women's groups. Membership of this

(24) The Arab Ba'ath Party was founded in 1947 on the initiative of Michel Aflaq en Salah-Uddin al Bitar. In 1952 it combined with the Arab Socialist Party of Akram al Hourani, giving rise to the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. In the same year an Iraqi section was set up which only ceased to be illegal in 1958 after the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq.

On 23 February 1996 the radical wing (neo-Ba'ath) seized power in Damascus by means of a military coup under the leadership of Saad Haddad. As a consequence of that coup, the original founders of the Ba'ath were exiled or killed. Many fled to Baghdad where the Ba'ath came to power in 1968. Since the seventies the Syrian opposition has found support in Iraq and vice versa.

party must be seen as a privilege and only a small proportion of the population can be members ⁽²⁵⁾. Young people often join the party in order to obtain privileges with regard to studies or work.

The role of the party and of pan-Arabian and socialist ideology seems to be increasingly limited. Cabinets are made up of technocrats and a number of old Assad loyalists.

The smaller parties which make up the NPF along with the Ba'ath are:

- * the Syrian Communist Party (el Hizb el Shuyu'i) ⁽²⁶⁾. This has broken up into three groups:
 - an orthodox tendency led by Wisal Fahren, the widow of the former leader Khalid Bakdash (4 seats) ⁽²⁷⁾
 - a reformist tendency led by Yussuf al-Faisal which enjoys more sympathy from the Ba'ath (4 seats)
 - an illegal wing (see illegal parties).
- * the Arab Socialist Union (el Ittihad el Ishtiraki), a continuation of the Nasserist Party which was the only party during the union with Egypt (1958-1961), led by Safwan al-Qudsi and Dr Jamal Atasi (7 seats).
- * the Socialist Unionist Movement (el Wahdawiyyun el Ishtirakiyyun), an offshoot of the Ba'ath, which aimed at re-establishing the union with Egypt, led by Fayiz Ismail (7 seats).
- * the Democratic Socialist Union Party (el Wahdawiyyun el Dimuqratiyyun), a more liberal party, led in Parliament since 1990 by Ahmed al-Assad (4 seats).
- * the Arab Socialists (el Ishtirakiyyun el Arab), the remains of the former Socialist Party, led by Abdel Ghani Quannout (4 seats).
- * the Arab Socialists, Osman group (2 seats).

In addition to Syrian parties, there are also a number of foreign parties which have their headquarters in Syria. This applies in particular to the Iraqi opposition parties, such as the section of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party which follows the ideology of its Syrian namesake, the Islamic Front, the Kurdish parties and the Iraqi Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM). These small foreign opposition groups are tolerated in Syria as long as they operate within the limits set by the Syrian authorities.

In addition, a number of Palestinian organizations have their bases in Syria. These are mainly organizations which are members of the so-called "coalition of ten". (See Annex).

⁽²⁵⁾ It is estimated that about 7 to 8% of the population are members of the party.

⁽²⁶⁾ This party, established in the twenties, supported Assad from 1970 and since 1972 has been a part of the NPF.

The split with the Syrian Communist Party dates from the beginning of the seventies.

The faction under the leadership of Khalid Bakdash, died in 1995, supported the Ba'ath while the faction under Fad al-Turk turned against the regime.

2.4.3. Semi-legal parties

This means parties which are not officially permitted but whose (marginal) activities are tolerated. For example, a blind eye is usually turned to the dissemination of Kurdish party newspapers. Sometimes activists are picked up and detained for a few weeks or months and then released again without trial. The most important of these parties are:

Syrian Social National Party (el Hizb el Qaumi el Ijtima'i el Suriy)

This is an ultra-nationalist party working towards a "Greater Syria", which has for a long time been led by In'am Ra'd. After years of persecution of its members, the party now leads a shadowy existence. It is said that the party is still active in Lebanon.

Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO)

The ADO is an international pressure group on behalf of the Assyrian people. It is hardly active in Syria and practically unknown as a political movement. The few activities carried out by the organization in Syria are mostly of a cultural nature. The leader of the organization, Bashir Sa'adi, also sits in the Syrian Parliament as an independent. It is true that the organization is not authorized, but it is no longer really persecuted. In October 1986 a few dozen Assyrians were arrested for propagating Assyrian nationalist objectives. They were all released after the Assyrian Church had intervened.

Another Assyrian party, known as the Assyrian Democratic Party (ADP), is smaller and completely underground.

A party linked to the ADP is the Party of the Mesopotamian/Assyrian Democratic Movement (Bayn al-Nahrayn/ADM). This party, which is officially not authorized in Syria, is tolerated because of its opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

2.4.4. Illegal parties

Despite the presence of a large number of small illegal opposition parties and groups, the regime seems concerned in the first place about opposition from the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood (28). This fundamentalist movement sets itself up as the representative of the Sunni majority. The fundamentalist opposition has suffered greatly from the violent suppression of the religiously inspired uprising in Hama in 1982. Extreme left-wing groups, in particular various Communist groups and dissident Ba'ath Party members, can likewise expect to attract the attention of the security services.

The Syrian opposition is sharply divided and spread throughout various Arab and European countries. The names of opposition groups can sometimes be found only on their publications or statements. As a result of new alliances and splits, names of new groups appear from time to time or two groups come into being with the same name. The illegal

²⁸ With regard to the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria see the letter of 18 November 1996, reference DFO AM No 52324.

parties are usually smaller groups clustered round people who live a shadowy existence, at least in Syria itself. However, the Syrian regime does not make any fine distinctions when it comes to punishing dissident activities. Thus, even the dissemination or possession of writings can lead to severe punishment.

Opposition to the regime is grouped under three headings, viz.:

1. The "Rassemblement Démocratique", dating from 1980, in which four opposition parties cooperate:
 - * the Democratic Arab Ba'ath Party (Hizb el-Ba'ath al Dimuqrati el-Ishtiraki el-'Arabi), represented by the Marxist-oriented wing of the Ba'ath, which was in power from 1966 to 1970.
 - * the Communist Party – Politburo (al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-Maktab el-Saisi) (CP-PB), which arose out of a schism within the Communist Party. The leader of the party, Riad al-Turk, has been in prison since October 1980 without a trial of any kind. He refused an offer to sign a statement agreeing to avoid political activities in exchange for his freedom. In September 1987 a number of members, including the then leader Msuti, were imprisoned. In April 1990 there were reports of large-scale arrests of members of the CP-PB. Among other things, the party distributes the illegal publication "Nidal al Shaab" and the newspaper "Al-Massar" (The Way). Membership of this prohibited communist organization is severely punished in Syria.
 - * the Arab Socialist Union (Hizb el-Ittihad el-'Arabi el-Isshtiraki fi Suriyya), Nasserists under the leadership of Jamal Atassi.
 - * the Socialist Arab Party (Hizb al-Ishtiraki al-'Arabi) also has a legal counterpart in the "Arab Socialists".

One Communist party which has remained outside this collaboration is the Party for Communist Action (PCA/Hizb el-Amal a-Shuyu'i), set up in 1976. Membership of this party can result in long detention by the security services, often without any trial ⁽²⁹⁾. In 1984 and 1988 arrests of PCA members took place. The PCA operates completely underground and rejects the use of force. It is led by Tuyssir Yamous. There are unconfirmed reports that the party is currently to merge with the CP-PB.

PCA publications include:

"al-Rayah al-Hamra" (The Red Flag), the main party newspaper, "al-Shiyu'i" (The Communist), "al-Nida'al-Sha'abi" (The Call of the People) and "al-Prolitari" (The Proletarian).

As a result of repression, the prohibited Communist parties cannot conduct any more activities in Syria. Recently there has been no sign of any activities or illegal pamphlets.

²⁹ On 3 April 1997 Amnesty International launched an Urgent Action for Mulid Mulhim who has been in prison since August 1981 because of involvement in the PCA. His trial before the SSSC did not take place until February 1994. He should have been released in August 1983. According to Amnesty International, however, he had still not been released in April 1997.

2. The National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria, set up in Damascus in 1982. This is an organization in exile in which various parties and independent personalities cooperate, viz.
 - * the Syrian Ba'ath, which follows the Iraqi line,
 - * Nasserists,
 - * Islamic elements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

One of the independents is General Amin Al-Hafez, President of Syria from 1963 to 1966. He set himself up in 1990 as leader of the Alliance. Another leader of the movement is said to be Hammud al Shufi, once Syrian ambassador to the United Nations and currently living in Paris.

3. The "Rassemblement National Démocratique" attempts to unite all these opposition parties; this movement has its headquarters in Baghdad. It emphasizes Syria's Arabic and Islamic identity.

2.5. Specific groups

The Arab nationalist State ideology does not recognize any cultural rights for non-Arabic ethnic minorities. Exceptions to this rule are the Armenians and the Jews, who are allowed to teach the language of their religions in their own schools ⁽³⁰⁾. Syrian citizens ⁽³¹⁾ are all registered in the same way. In Syria there is complete freedom of worship, which includes Jews. However, attempting to convert Muslims to another faith is not permitted.

2.5.1. Position of women

Women participate in the Syrian political system without restrictions. Thus, there are two women ministers and 24 women members of parliament. Six per cent of Syrian judges are women, as are twenty per cent of university teachers. The Syrian Government promotes education for women.

One obstacle to equal development for women in Syrian society is the enforcement of traditional Islamic family law. This results in women having an inferior position, particular in the case of divorce. According to Islamic law, fathers are awarded custody of children in divorce cases, from the age of seven for boys and nine for girls.

The law of inheritance is the same for all Syrians and is based on the Shari'a, with the result that women receive a smaller share of an inheritance than men; however, men are obliged to support their unmarried sisters.

Islamic law only applies to Muslims. As far as divorce is concerned, Christians fall under canon law. Christian churches in Syria barely recognize divorce, if at all.

³⁰ The Syrian Orthodox Christians use Aramaic as their language of worship. However, their education is conducted in Arabic with the exception of Jews.

2.5.2. Position of homosexuals

Article 520 of the Syrian Penal Code provides that "unnatural physical intercourse" is punishable by a maximum of three years' imprisonment. In practice, however, there is no policy of prosecution, except in cases of relations with minors.

Although in the Arab context there is a formal taboo against homosexuality, as a general rule it is possible in Syria to express homosexual feelings provided one is prepared to show the necessary discretion.

2.5.3. Position of Christians

In Syria there are various Christian groups, which in total make up a minority of about 12% (1,4 million) of the Syrian population. Although in principle the Syrian authorities keep an eye on all the activities of individuals and (religious) groups, there are no reports of discrimination on the grounds of religious belief as such.

Christians can participate fully in political, social and economic life and play an important role within the current Ba'ath regime. The ideology of the Ba'ath (mainly developed by Michel Aflaq, a Christian teacher from Damascus) guarantees the secular nature of the Government. This has a protective effect on religious minorities in the country. Christians in particular fear increasing fundamentalism under the Sunni majority.

Most churches in Syria are split into Orthodox (Eastern Churches) and Western Churches associated with Rome. The four biggest churches are the Syrian Orthodox (about 600 000), the Greek Orthodox (320 000), the Greek Catholic (166 500) and the Syrian Catholic (100 000) ⁽³²⁾. About 80% of Christians in Syria belong to one of these churches. The other 20% are divided among many churches including those of Western Catholic and Protestant origin; the largest of these smaller communities are the Armenian and Assyrian. About 1 000 families still belong to the Chaldean Church ⁽³³⁾.

2.5.3.1. Syrian Orthodox Christians (Jacobites ⁽³⁴⁾)

The position of Syrian Orthodox Christians is different from that of other Christians in Syria in that they mainly live in the countryside. Syrian Orthodox Christians are, together with the Assyrians, the least integrated into Syrian society of all Christians. They live mainly in the Jazirah, which is economically backward compared with the rest of Syria. About

⁽³²⁾ The Syrian Catholic community in northeast Syria comprises about 5 000 souls and is shrinking. There are still three parishes in the community. In Hasake there are still two monastic orders, the Ephraimites and the Franciscans (sisters of Saint Clara).

⁽³³⁾ This community, which originated in Iraq, lives mainly in Hasake and in the villages along the Khabour river. Chaldeans were originally Nestorians who joined the Church of Rome in 1553.

⁽³⁴⁾ The Syrian Orthodox Church takes its origin from the monophysite teaching based on the doctrine formulated by Jacobus Baradaeus (500-578) in the sixth century.

60 000 Syrian Orthodox live in this region. The patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church has since 1980 been Ignatius Zaka I (³⁵).

Al-Jazirah

Until the end of last century this area was practically uninhabited. The collapse of the Ottoman empire during the First World War coincided with large-scale massacres of Armenians and other Christian communities in the area which now forms the border between eastern Turkey, northern Iraq and north-west Iran. This resulted in an influx of refugees to Al-Jazirah made up of Armenian and Syrian Christians from the north (the area of Tur Abdin) and Assyrian and Chaldean Christians from the east. It was those refugees who first cultivated Al-Jazirah (³⁶). Shortly afterwards the Kurds came, following the first big Kurdish uprising in Turkey. In recent years the Kurdish population in the area has sharply increased.. Consequently, the Christians are now in a proportionally weaker position. They may, if problems arise between them and the Kurds, call on the authorities for protection. This cannot prevent incidental conflicts arising nevertheless. To escape these, Christians may migrate to the cities where such problems scarcely ever arise.

2.5.3.2. Assyrians

Assyrians speak their own language (Aramaic) and regard themselves as belonging to a separate people to which the Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholics and Chaldeans also belong. Most Assyrians live in Iraq, which they look on as their country of origin. The Assyrian Church is split into the Eastern Church (which follows the Patriarch of Baghdad) and the Western Church (which follows the Patriarch Mar Denkha IV, currently living in Chicago). The living conditions for Assyrians in Syria are better than in the surrounding countries of Turkey and Iraq (³⁷).

Adherents of the Assyrian Eastern Church – usually known as Nestorians (³⁸) – come from southeast Turkey. This group mainly lives in northeast Syria, particularly in the towns of Hasake and Kamishli. Compared with the total Christian population in Syria, the Assyrian Christians are a minority (about 25 000). In contrast to other Christians in Syria, the Assyrians emphasize their ethnic, cultural and historical as well as religious unity. There are

³⁵) The Patriarch of Antioch and the whole of the East, overall head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, has his seat in Damascus.

³⁶) More than half of Syria's grain and cotton production now comes from this area.

³⁷) See also article in "Shemshe" the newspaper of the Assyrian Democratic Organization in the Netherlands October 1996 pp. 7-8

³⁸) During the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) followers of Bishop Nestor adhered to the dogma that Christ had two separate personages: one divine and the other human

no reports of discriminatory acts against members of the Assyrian community as such ⁽³⁹⁾.

2.5.3.3. *Armenians*

Both from an ethnic and a religious point of view, Armenians are a minority in Syria. Estimates of their number differ considerably: according to representatives of the Armenian community, there are 125 000 Orthodox, 50 000 Catholics and about 5 000 Protestant Armenians in Syria. The Armenians live mainly in the towns of Aleppo and Kamishli. Armenians, like other Christian minorities, enjoy complete freedom to practice their religion. They are particularly well-represented in trade and among the self-employed. The socio-economic position of the Armenian community is clearly above the Syrian average. Armenians have their own schools in which teaching is in Armenian. Although most Armenians are bi-, tri- or even quadri-lingual, for those who are Orthodox, Armenian is the everyday language within their own community. The links between Armenian Christians in Syria and their co-religionists in Armenia are strong ⁽⁴⁰⁾. More than half of the Armenians in Syria are linked with the left-oriented Pan-Armenian Dashnak movement (also known as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) ⁽⁴¹⁾; which is not politically active in Syria and concentrates its activities on Armenia. In addition, there are some other groups (known as Henschlah and Ramkavash) active among the Armenian community in Syria, but this does not cause any problems with the Syrian authorities.

2.5.4. *Palestinians*

In 1996 there were 347 391 officially registered Palestinian refugees in Syria, 28% of them in the ten refugee camps run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Three quarters of the Palestinians live in and around Damascus, particularly in the Yarmuk camp ⁽⁴²⁾. However, there are also many Palestinians who have become completely integrated and are not dependent on aid.

Most Palestinians take their origins from the stream of refugees which left Israel in 1948. The position of Palestinian refugees in Syria hardly differs from that of Syrian citizens. They have the same rights, apart from the right to vote. They may hold positions in the public service and they have the right to education. There are also many cultural and social

⁽³⁹⁾ According to unconfirmed reports, 4 Assyrians who were involved in a drinking water project were arrested on 24 June 1997.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Between 1947 and 1965 there was considerable migration of Armenians from the Jazirah to the (then) Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia. Given the current economic circumstances in independent Armenia, Armenians currently prefer to remain in Syria. There is a weekly flight between Aleppo and Yerevan (source: BAP, report

on reference to the past, see also the letter of 25 June 1997)

Reference DPO 41 10 61816-

There is also a weekly flight between Aleppo and Yerevan (source: BAP, report on reference to the past, see also the letter of 25 June 1997)

organizations for Palestinians in Syria. Criticizing the Syrian regime is not permitted. Most Palestinians in Syria have since 1960 been in possession of a Syrian travel document for Palestinian refugees. Since 1983, if they want to leave the country, they have needed an exit visa from the Palestinian division of the Military Intelligence Service. They complete their compulsory military service in the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA), which forms part of the Syrian army.

It is difficult for Palestinians who do not live in Syria to enter the country. The Syrian authorities do not allow any Palestinians resident in the Gaza Strip to enter Syria.

Relations with the PLO are characterized by mutual distrust, although there have been some reports of improvement in recent years. In March 1991 Syria released the last three hundred Arafat loyalists from prison, with the result that relations between the PLO and Syria were more or less put on a normal footing. Currently, as far as is known, there are no PLO members still imprisoned in Syria.

Damascus is an important meeting place for the Palestinian opposition to the Middle East peace process, the so-called "coalition of ten". This cooperative organization, which operates from Syria and whose constituent movements have in common only their opposition to Arafat's policy in the peace process, embraces both groups which formally belong to the PLO and other Palestinian groups (for an overview of Palestinian groups active in Syria, see Annex). In spring 1997 the four biggest groups, viz. DFLP, PFLP, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, withdrew from the coalition of ten (see Annex). However, they still refuse all cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and on the West Bank.

2.5.5. Other groups

In Syria, in addition to Palestinians there are around 37 000 other refugees. These mainly come from Iraq, including Iraqi Kurdistan. For them Syria is the first host country and permanent residence status is not granted. An Iraqi Ba'ath agency operates in cooperation with the Syrian authorities to establish the identity of these refugees. The agency issues identity documents which are recognized by the Syrian authorities. However, it has happened that Iraqis have been expelled to Iraq.

In El Hol, near the town of Hasake in north-east Syria, there is a separate camp for Iraqi refugees, where there are still around 1 400 people living. They receive help from the UNHCR, which attempts to settle the inmates elsewhere.

3. Compulsory military service, refusal to serve and desertion

In Syria there is a general compulsory military service of 2½ years for all men from eighteen years of age. In theory men can be called up until their fiftieth year to serve as reservists for a six-month period. At the moment this does not happen in practice. Syrians who belong to a religious or ethnic minority serve the same length of time as other Syrian conscripts, with the exception of members of the Jewish community and stateless Kurds – whether or not registered – who are not called up for military service. In principle, stateless Palestinians carry out their military service in the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA or Yarmuk army), a Palestinian division of the Syrian army. However, they may also be accepted into the regular Syrian army.

When entering the service a Syrian has to hand over his identity card.

There are special rules on military service for students, which mean in practice that they only have to serve two years instead of 2½. Six months are waived if students fulfil a commitment to attend one hour of military instruction every month.

Where a person is studying (including studying abroad) a postponement may be granted until the 26th year of age (and in the case of medical studies until the 29th year of age).

Exemption is granted in the following cases:

- where a man is the only son in his family;
- for serious physical or mental disability;
- if a man has already completed military service in another country (⁴³).

It is possible to buy exemption from military service for \$5 000. However, this is only possible if one has lived in an Arab country (with the exception of Lebanon) for more than five years; in particular, this applies to Syrian immigrant workers in the Gulf States and Syrian students studying abroad (⁴⁴).

Syrian legislation does not provide for exemption on grounds of conscientious objection.

Refusal to serve is an offence. Under Syrian law anyone who fails to respond to the call-up to attend a medical examination, or to do so in time, has his service increased by three months. In addition, a fine of 150 Syrian pounds (about H Fl. 6) may be imposed. This also applies to those who have not responded to their call-up and moved abroad.

A conscript who fails to report after receiving his final call-up or to do so in time will be detained and thereafter his period of service will be doubled. In addition, a prison sentence may be imposed varying from one to six months. In practice the prison sentence imposed is usually shorter and the subsequent period of service is still double.

A conscript who deserts is subject to a penalty of from one to five years if he has remained in Syria and from five to ten years if he has left the country as a deserter. Only after three months of military service is unauthorized absence regarded as desertion in the legal

sense ⁽⁴⁵⁾. If a conscript deserts, he has to serve twice his remaining period of service in addition to his sentence.

The sentence may amount to a maximum of fifteen years in the case of a repeated offence, taking of weapons or desertion during a military operation.

Every few years in Syria amnesty laws are passed which also apply to deserters. This happened in 1988, 1992 and, as far as we know, most recently in 1995. Desertion during actual hostilities is punishable by the death penalty.

4. Return

It is standard procedure for a Syrian who has been expelled from another country to be detained on his return so that his particulars can be checked; this happens especially in the case of Syrian nationals who are not in possession of a passport but travelling on a laissez-passer. When they enter or leave Syria a check is carried out to make sure their names do not appear on the national list of persons banned from entering or leaving. These checks may last from a few hours to a few days, during which they remain in detention. There have been a few instances of returned asylum-seekers coming from other West European countries who have been detained for questioning because their names appear on the national list of banned persons. These concerned cases of failure to perform military service or compulsory periods of employment (for engineers and doctors who after their studies are obliged to work as government employees for five years). These people then had to report back to their work. Anyone who crosses the border illegally can be detained for questioning and fined.

There are no known cases of rejected asylum-seekers expelled from West European countries who on return to Syria experienced serious problems simply because they had left the country without permission or requested asylum elsewhere. Although it is theoretically possible for someone to be given a prison sentence for use of false documents or absence from work ⁽⁴⁶⁾, this penalty is not applied in practice. All that is known is that some Syrians who have emigrated illegally are subject to a small fine on their return. Simply requesting asylum abroad does not result in penalties on return to Syria.

On 20 December 1995 the Syrian authorities proclaimed an amnesty whereby, among other things, all penalties for leaving government service without permission were waived, on condition that those concerned made themselves available to resume work within a year of the date on which the amnesty was proclaimed. Although after the deadline for the amnesty had passed the law on leaving government service without permission formally came into force again, no cases of prosecution have since come to light.

⁴⁵ The penalties are as described under article 17, i.e. doubling of the remaining period of service and possible prison sentence of up to six months.

⁴⁶ There are no known cases of people who after their return had to submit a formal letter of resignation so that there could be no more talk of unauthorized absence from work.

4.1. *Expulsion policy pursued by other Western countries*

The following emerged from a survey of the policies of a number of Western countries with regard to the expulsion of rejected Syrian asylum-seekers:

In the first nine months of 1996 Germany expelled 44 people to Damascus.

Rejected Syrian asylum-seekers are expelled by France to their country of origin, and no distinction is made between them and other illegals. In 1996 twelve Syrians were expelled from France to Damascus ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

In principle, Norway expels all Syrians whose asylum applications have been refused.

In all cases checks are made to ascertain whether those concerned may experience problems with the Syrian authorities on return to Syria.

Sweden has considerable experience of repatriation of rejected asylum-seekers. Since 1992, about one hundred Syrians per year have been expelled from Sweden.

The experience of these countries demonstrates that expelled Syrians have been able to return to their homes unhindered. If their identity cannot be proved by means of documents, they are detained until it has been established.

⁴⁷ As at November 1996

5. Conclusion

The human rights situation in Syria continues to be a matter for concern. The Syrian regime has such formidable power at its disposal that any expressions of unrest are nipped in the bud. The repressive machinery of power and the complex system of security services limit the rights of virtually all Syrians.

Opposition is so effectively suppressed that it is not possible for opposition parties to operate in the open. Most of these parties are more active outside Syria than in the country itself. The Parliament and the parties represented in it in addition to the Ba'ath party do not play any significant role in Syrian politics.

Although it may be argued that the Syrian legal system as a whole is impartial, this does not apply to cases with a political dimension. It is certainly not possible to speak of a fair trial in cases brought before the SSSC.

People who are openly critical of the regime or are discovered by the authorities to be members of a banned party can expect problems. In this context, the Syrian regime is particularly afraid of opposition from fundamentalist quarters, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, dissidents from the Communist factions not attached to the NPF are also persecuted.

Syria is a secular State where adherents of different religions enjoy complete freedom of worship. There are no indications that a particular group would be discriminated against on grounds of its beliefs.

Every few years the regime promulgates amnesty laws providing for the release of large numbers of (political) prisoners.

Various countries expel rejected asylum-seekers to Syria.

In view of the overall situation in Syria, I consider that returning Syrian asylum-seekers who do not qualify for admission as refugees, or on humanitarian grounds, is not on the face of it irresponsible.

THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

pp.

The Deputy Director of Movement of Persons, Migration and Consular Affairs

(s.) R. Zeldenrust

Annex on Palestinian groups in Syria

Most Palestinian groups are part of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), but are by no means always loyal to Arafat's political line. All Palestinian groups outside the PLO may be regarded as opponents of the current Middle East peace process.

The overwhelming proportion of the Palestinian groups represented in Syria were until the spring of 1997 part of the "coalition of ten" set up in 1992 which opposes the line taken by the PLO in the peace process. In the spring of 1997 the four largest groups (DFLP, PFLP, Hamas and Islamic Jihad) withdrew from the coalition. However, they still refuse all cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and on the West Bank.

- * **Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)**, previously known as "People's Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine". This movement established in 1969 has its headquarters in Damascus and is led by a Christian and Marxist originally from Jordan, Nayif Hawatmah.

During the conflict between Arafat and Syria (1983-1985) the DFLP chose the side of Damascus. In 1985 the DFLP was again reconciled with Arafat, after which it played an important role during the Intifada in the occupied areas.

At the beginning of the nineties the DFLP split: part of it, under the leadership of Yasser Abed Rabbo, continued as the Democratic Palestinian Union (DPU) and chose Arafat's side, while the leadership of the DFLP was critical towards the peace process. The DFLP is part of the PLO. Since 1993 the DFLP and the PFLP have been holding talks to try to form a common leadership.

- * **The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)**, a Marxist-Leninist organization, set up in 1967 by George Habash, is part of the PLO. The central organization of the PFLP is in Damascus and the organization is funded by Syria. The Front publishes the monthly entitled "Democratic Palestine". The PFLP has always been on the radical wing of the PLO and used guerilla operations and terrorism as instruments for political ends. After Fatah it is the largest Palestinian movement.

- * **The Popular Struggle Front (PSF)** was set up in Jordan in 1968 by Bahjat Abu Gharbiyah. Since 1974 Dr Samir Ghosheh has been the leader of the PSF and has allowed the movement to be increasingly directed by the Syrian position in the Middle East peace process. (There is a splinter group with the same name in the pro-Arafat camp).

- * **The Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)** came into being in 1977 as an offshoot of the PFLP-GC under the leadership of Tal'at Ya'qub (who died in 1988). In 1984 the PLF split into three parts. The radical trend under the leadership of Tal'at Ya'qub had its headquarters in Damascus and was part of the "Salvation Front". The three parts were reunited again in 1987 under the leadership of Mahmud Zaydan (also known as Abu al-Abbas). This movement was responsible, among other things, for the hijacking of the Achille Lauro in 1985 and an attack on the coast of Israel in 1990.

- * The Fatah-Revolutionary Command (Fatah-RC), better known as the Abu Nidal group. This movement regards Fatah, from which it split in 1973, as traitors and therefore as a legitimate target for attacks. In 1987 the Abu Nidal office in Damascus was closed. Its headquarters may still be in Libya. The organization is also present in Lebanon, although to a decreasing extent.
- * The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC). This group broke off from the PFLP in 1968. The organization is under the leadership of Ahmad Jibril and has its headquarters in Damascus. The PFLP-GC is suspected of involvement in various terrorist attacks. It is increasingly adopting an Islamic profile and is currently very close to Teheran.
- * The Vanguard of the Popular Liberation War (Sa'iqah). This pro-Syrian Palestinian Ba'ath Party is led by Issam al-Qadi. The group was established in 1968 by the Syrian Ba'ath Party and in 1983 broke with the PLO.
- * The Palestine Revolutionary Communist Party (PRCP) led by Arbi Awad. Not much more is known of this extreme Communist party than that it is part of the "coalition of ten".
- * The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). This is a Sunni fundamentalist organization formally set up in 1988, which is mainly active in the Gaza Strip. The organization is led by Sheik Ahmad Isma'il Yasin and has offices in Amman and Damascus. In view of the Syrian aversion to fundamentalist movements, Hamas has limited room for manoeuvre in Syria.
- * Islamic Jihad. A small, very extremist organization with a cellular structure. The Jihad is said to be led by Sheik Abd al-Azis and to cooperate with the PFLP-GC. It has only one representative in Damascus.

The following groups do not form part of the coalition of ten:

- * The Democratic Palestinian Union (DPU) led by Yasser Abed-Rabbo, which currently also has a seat on the committee of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza: this is an offshoot of the DFLP. This organization counts as one of Arafat's most loyal allies.
- * The Palestinian People's Party (PPP) was until 1990 known as the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) and in that connection collaborated with the Israeli Communist Party. This party is one of the moderate forces within the PLO. The PPP has an office and an official representative in Syria. The leader of the movement is Suleiman Najab.

The Fatah-Intifada ("Abu Musa") and Arab Liberation Front (ALF) are currently no longer active in Syria.

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*Palestinian groups in Syria

