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COUNTRY SUMMARY

Syria

Syria emerged from its international isolation in 2008, but its human rights record remains very poor. The authorities arrested political and human rights activists, censored websites, detained bloggers, and imposed travel bans. Emergency rule, imposed in 1963, remains in effect and Syria's multiple security agencies continue to detain people without arrest warrants.

The Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional court with almost no procedural guarantees, sentenced 75 people in 2008, mostly Islamists, to long prison terms. Syrian Kurds, the country's largest ethnic minority, continue to protest their treatment as second-class citizens. Months after military police shot and killed rioting inmates at Sednaya military prison, no information has been disclosed about casualties.

Political Activists on Trial

Starting in December 2007, the Syrian security services detained over 40 political activists who attended a meeting of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration, comprising a number of opposition groups. While most were released within 48 hours, the authorities referred 12, including former member of parliament Riad Seif, to the Damascus Criminal Court, which sentenced them on October 29, 2008, to 30 months in prison on charges of "weakening national sentiment," and "spreading false news affecting the country's morale." On May 7, 2008, security services detained writer and political analyst Habib Saleh for articles critical of the government and in defense of opposition figure Riad al-Turk. He is awaiting trial on multiple charges, including "weakening national sentiment."

The SSSC sentenced over 75 people in 2008 on various grounds, including membership in the banned Muslim Brotherhood, Kurdish activism, membership in unauthorized political groups, and independent criticism of the government.

On April 23 the Military Court in Damascus sentenced Kamal al-Labwani, a physician and founder of the Democratic Liberal Gathering, to a three-year prison term for reportedly “insulting the authorities” while in prison, in addition to the 12-year term he received in 2007 for having advocated peaceful reform while visiting the United States and Europe.

In a welcome move, on August 7 authorities released economics professor Dr. `Arif Dalila, a proponent of political liberalization who was serving a 10-year sentence for “attempting to change the constitution by illegal means.”

Freedom of Expression

Syrian authorities continue to restrict freedom of expression, and an independent press remains nonexistent. The government has extended to online outlets restrictions it applies to other media, detaining journalists for posting information online. Syrian internet censorship extends to popular websites such as Google’s blogging engine, Blogspot, as well as Facebook and YouTube.

On April 7 the SSSC sentenced writer and poet Firas Sa`ad to four years in jail for “weakening national sentiment” after he published articles on the website www.ahewar.org in which he defended a call for improved relations between Lebanon and Syria and criticized the Syrian army’s role in the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. On May 11 the SSSC sentenced to three years in prison blogger Tarek Biasi, 23, whom the government detained in July 2007 for “insulting security services” and “weakening national sentiment.” At this writing, Karim `Arbaji, 29, moderator of popular online youth forum www.akhawia.net, is on trial for “spreading false information that may weaken national sentiment.”

Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and “Disappearances”

Syria’s multiple security services continue to detain people without arrest warrants and frequently refuse to disclose their whereabouts for weeks and sometimes months, in effect forcibly disappearing them. On August 15 Syrian security services detained Mash`al al-Temmo, spokesperson for the Kurdish Future Current in Syria, an unauthorized political party, while he was driving alone at night, and held him incommunicado for 11 days. The security services are also believed to hold a small

number of detainees who were arrested in Pakistan in recent years and held for a time in secret CIA custody.

Human Rights Watch received numerous reports of ill-treatment and torture by security agencies. In January, eight of the 12 detainees of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration reported that State Security officers beat them during interrogation, including prominent writer `Ali al-Abdullah who suffered ear injuries. A Kurdish activist showed Human Rights Watch photos of bruises he said Political Security officers inflicted on him in July 2008 during interrogation. At least 11 of the 75 people sentenced in 2008 by the SSSC had told the court that security agencies tortured them.

On July 5 military police opened fire on rioting inmates in Sednaya prison. A number of inmates and prison guards were reportedly killed, but authorities have released no information on the number or names of those killed and wounded.

As in previous years, the government failed to acknowledge security force involvement in the “disappearances” of an estimated 17,000 persons, mostly Muslim Brotherhood members and other Syrian activists detained by the government in the late 1970s and early 1980s as well as hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians detained in Syria or abducted from Lebanon. The vast majority remains unaccounted for and many are believed to have been killed.

Human Rights Defenders

Human rights activists continue to be targets of government harassment and arrest. On April 22 a military court sentenced Ahmad al-Hajji al-Khalaf, a board member of the Arab Organization for Human Rights in Syria, to five days in jail for criticizing appointments at the Ministry of Education. Similarly, on June 23 a military court sentenced Mazen Darwish, president of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, to five days in jail for reporting on violent clashes in the Damascus suburb of `Adra. On June 29 a military court sentenced Muhammad Badi` Dek al-Bab, a member of the National Organization for Human Rights, to six months in jail for articles in which he criticized the government for detaining intellectuals.

The government continues to prevent activists from traveling abroad, and in some cases, their families also. The number of activists banned from traveling is estimated to be in the hundreds.

All Syrian human rights groups remain unlicensed, as officials consistently deny their requests for registration.

Discrimination and Repression against Kurds

Kurds, Syria's largest non-Arab ethnic minority, comprise about 10 percent of the population of 19 million. They remain subject to systematic discrimination, including the arbitrary denial of citizenship to an estimated 300,000 Syria-born Kurds. Authorities suppress expressions of Kurdish identity, including the teaching of Kurdish in schools. On March 20, 2008, Syrian internal security forces opened fire on Kurds celebrating the Kurdish New Year in the town of Qamishli, leaving three dead.

On September 14 a military court sentenced 50 Kurds to six months in jail for demonstrating against the 2005 assassination of Kurdish leader Sheikh Ma`shuq al-Khaznawi. Security officials detained a number of Kurdish political activists, including Muhammad Musa, secretary of the Syrian Kurdish Left Party, and Mash`al al-Temmo and Omran al-Sayyid, leaders in the Kurdish Future Current in Syria. At this writing, all three face trial.

Women's Rights

Syria's constitution guarantees gender equality, and many women are active in public life, but personal status laws and the penal code contain provisions that discriminate against women and girls. The penal code allows a judge to suspend punishment for a rapist if the rapist chooses to marry his victim, and provides leniency for "honor" crimes. While the number of honor crimes is unknown, the Syrian Women's Observatory, an unlicensed group, documented at least 10 in 2008, including the killing in April of a 14-year-old by her brother because she had a relationship with another teenager.

According to media reports, a committee tasked with drafting a law against human trafficking submitted a draft to the Council of Ministers in July 2008. At this writing, the draft had not yet been made public or referred to Parliament.

Situation of Refugees Fleeing Iraq

Syria hosts the largest number of Iraqi refugees, estimated at 1 to 1.5 million, and provides them with access to public hospitals and schools but prohibits them from working. Since 2007 Syria has implemented increasingly restrictive visa and entry requirements for Iraqi refugees. Combined with the lack of employment in Syria and a relative improvement in the security situation in Iraq, this led thousands of Iraqi refugees to return to Iraq in early 2008: in May the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that only slightly more Iraqis entered Syria each day than left for Iraq. Syria continues to refuse entry to Palestinians fleeing Iraq. At this writing, several hundred remain at makeshift camps in the no-man's-land between Iraqi and Syrian border checkpoints; with thousands more in camps on the Iraqi side close to the border.

Key International Actors

Syria emerged from its international isolation in 2008, with French President Sarkozy and other high-level foreign dignitaries visiting Damascus. However, the renewed ties have had little impact on Syria's human rights record. During 2008 the European Union issued public statements expressing concern over the human rights situation in Syria and calling for the release of all political prisoners, although in September Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy chief, indicated that the EU might be willing to resume talks on an Association Agreement, which were frozen following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri in February 2005.

Iran continues to be Syria's main regional ally, and the two countries increased their cooperation in the military and economic spheres. Saudi Arabia and Syria exchanged sharp criticism over regional roles, highlighting tensions between the two countries.