

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

<b>Bilagsnr.:</b>	<b>150</b>
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	"World Report 2007, Country Summary"
Udgivet:	Januar 2007
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2007

## Syria

Syria's poor human rights situation deteriorated further in 2006. The government strictly limits freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Emergency rule, imposed in 1963, remains in effect, despite public calls by Syrian reformers for its repeal. The authorities continue to harass and imprison human rights defenders and non-violent critics of government policies.

Following the May 2006 Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for improved relations between Lebanon and Syria, security forces apprehended some dozen activists who had signed the petition, including prominent writer Michel Kilo and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni. On August 15, 2006, a military court sentenced Habib Saleh, a regular contributor to online forums, to three years for "spreading false and exaggerated information." Saleh had earlier served a three-year sentence for his involvement in the Damascus Spring initiatives of 2001.

Thousands of political prisoners, many of them members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party, remain in detention. Syrian Kurds, the country's largest ethnic minority, continue to protest their treatment as second-class citizens. Women face legal as well as societal discrimination and have little means for redress against sexual abuse or domestic violence.

### **Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and "Disappearances"**

In January 2006 the government released five of the eight remaining Damascus Spring prisoners, including former members of parliament Ma'mun al-Humsi and Riad Seif, as well as Fawaz Tello, Walid al-Bunni, and Habib Issa, but all five continue to face harassment. The authorities briefly detained Riad Seif twice following his release. Rights activist Ali al-Abdullah, who was released after six months in prison in November 2005, was detained again in March 2006 along with two of his sons. Syrian authorities disavowed any knowledge of their whereabouts for over a month.

Al-Abdullah and one son were convicted in October 2006 for spreading false news and undermining the state but were released as they had already served their six-month sentences.

The authorities brought additional charges against activist Kamal al-Labwani, who has been detained since November 2005 after meeting abroad with European and US officials. He now stands accused of "communicating with a foreign country and prompting it to direct confrontation," which carries a sentence of life imprisonment or death.

Dr. `Arif Dalila, a prominent economics professor and a proponent of political liberalization, continues to serve a 10-year prison term imposed in July 2002 for his non-violent criticism of government policies. His health deteriorated sharply in 2006; reports indicate that he suffered a stroke.

The London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) estimates that about 4,000 political prisoners remain in detention in Syria. The authorities refuse to divulge information regarding numbers or names of people in detention on political or security-related charges.

The government also targets university students and other youths who exercise their right to freedom of expression and assembly. In early 2006 Syrian Air Force Intelligence arrested eight young men who tried to establish a youth movement. The authorities referred all eight—Husam Melhem, Ali Nazir al-Ali, Tariq al-Ghourani, Ayham Saqr, ‘Ulam Fakhour, Maher Ibrahim Asbar, Omar al-Abdullah, and Diab Siriya—to the Supreme State Security Court, but as of mid-November 2006 the charges against them were still unknown.

Torture remains a serious problem in Syria, especially during interrogation. The September 2006 report of the official Canadian Commission of Inquiry into the 2002 US deportation to Syria of Maher Arar, a Syrian-born Canadian, concluded that “the SMI [Syrian Military Intelligence] tortured Mr. Arar while interrogating him during the period he was held incommunicado at the SMI’s Palestine Branch facility.” The report also concluded that Arar had come under Canadian and US suspicion on the

basis of information the SMI extracted by torture from two other Canadian nationals of Arab origin, Abdullah al-Malki and Ahmad El Maati.

Syrian human rights organizations reported a number of cases of torture in 2006. One such case involved 26-year-old Mohammad Shaher Haysa, who reportedly died in a Damascus interrogation center as a result of severe torture.

2006 passed without any government acknowledgement that its security forces had “disappeared” an estimated 17,000 persons. The “disappeared” were mostly Muslim Brotherhood members and other Syrian activists who were detained in the late 1970s and early 1980s as well as hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians who were detained in Syria or abducted from Lebanon by Syrian forces or Lebanese and Palestinian militias.

## **Human Rights Defenders**

Human rights activists continue to be targets of government harassment and arrest. Among those arrested in 2006 and still in detention is human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, arrested May 17 on charges of “belonging to a secret organization intending to topple President Bashar al-Assad.” Fatih Jamus, arrested May 1, was released on October 12, 2006, but awaits trial for “spreading false information.”

The government continues to prevent human rights activists from traveling and in 2006 expanded its list of those banned from leaving the country. The Syria-based Committees for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights has published a list of over 110 activists banned from traveling; the actual number is considerably higher. Among those banned from traveling in 2006 are Radwan Ziadeh, director of the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies; Suheir Atassi, head of the Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue, which Syrian authorities shut down in 2005; and Walid al-Bunni, a physician who helped found the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society.

Syrian officials consistently have denied registration requests by human rights organizations. For instance, in August 2006 the Ministry of Social Affairs refused the

request of the Syria-based National Organization for Human Rights to register, without providing any explanation.

## **Discrimination and Violence against Kurds**

Kurds are the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in Syria, comprising about 10 percent of the population of 18.5 million. They remain subject to systematic discrimination, including the arbitrary denial of citizenship to an estimated 300,000 Syria-born Kurds.

Tensions have remained high since serious clashes between Kurdish demonstrators and security forces in Qamishli in 2004 that left more than 30 dead and 400 injured. Despite a general presidential pardon for those involved in the March 2004 clashes, dozens of Kurds still face trials in the criminal court of Al-Hasake, reportedly on charges of inciting disturbances and damaging public property.

Syrian authorities also suppress expressions of Kurdish identity. On March 20, 2006, security services arrested dozens of Kurds for participating in a candle-lit night procession in celebration of the Kurdish new year, Nowruz, and used tear gas and batons to break up the march.

## **Discrimination against Women**

Syria's constitution guarantees gender equality, and many women are active in public life, but personal status laws as well as 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 so-called "honor" crimes, such as assault or killing of women and girls by male relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. Wives require the permission of their husbands to travel abroad, and divorce laws remain discriminatory.

## **Situation of Refugees Fleeing Iraq**

An estimated 450,000 Iraqis are now living in Syria. While Syria initially welcomed Iraqi refugees and provided them with access to public hospitals and schools, Syrian attitudes and policies towards these refugees hardened in 2006 with the implementation of increasingly restrictive national immigration rules. Access to public hospitals has also

become more limited. This has created difficulties for an increasing number of Iraqis, some of whom have started to leave the country seeking asylum elsewhere.

Syria has also hardened its position towards Palestinians fleeing Iraq. Since May 2006 Syria closed its border to Iraqi Palestinians and several hundred remain now at a makeshift camp in the no-man's land between the Iraqi and Syrian border checkpoints.

### **Key International Actors**

Syria's relationship with the United States, United Kingdom, and France remained strained in 2006 over Syria's role in Lebanon and its ties to Iran. On May 17, 2006, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1680, which called on Syria to cooperate in the implementation of Resolution 1559 requiring the complete withdrawal of all foreign—that is, Syrian—troops from Lebanon. Following the war between Israel and Hezbollah in July 2006, a number of European countries began to question the policy of ostracizing Syria and started thinking about how best to reengage dialogue with al-Assad's regime.

Syria remains under pressure to cooperate with the ongoing international investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. In his September 2006 interim report, Serge Brammertz, the head of the UN International Independent Investigation Committee, wrote that Syria's cooperation "remained generally satisfactory, and the Commission continues to require its full support in providing information and facilitating interviews with individuals located on Syrian territory." At this writing, four senior pro-Syrian Lebanese intelligence and security officers remained in detention in Lebanon on suspicion of involvement in the Hariri assassination.

Iran continued to be Syria's main regional ally and in June 2006 the two countries signed an agreement for military cooperation aiming at consolidating their defense efforts.

The Association Agreement between Syria and the European Union, initialed in October 2004, contains a clause requiring respect for human rights. At this writing, the agreement remained suspended at the final approval stage as European countries remained divided over how to engage with Syria.