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Freedom in the World 2009 - Syria

Capital: Damascus**Population:** 19,900,000

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 6

Status: Not Free

Overview

In early 2008, Syria completed a major crackdown on dissident and opposition leaders that had begun in late 2007. The country was rattled by an unusual series of political assassinations and explosions targeting the regime. Freedoms of expression, association, and assembly remained tightly restricted throughout the year, and the government continued to hold an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 political prisoners. On the international front, Syria established formal relations with Lebanon in October.

The modern state of Syria was established by the French after World War I and gained formal independence in 1946. Democratic institutions functioned intermittently until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup and transformed Syria into a one-party state governed under emergency law. During the 1960s, power shifted from civilian ideologues to army officers, most of whom belonged to Syria's Alawite minority (adherents of an Islamic sect comprising 12 percent of the population). This trend culminated in General Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.

The regime cultivated a base of support that spanned sectarian and ethnic divisions, but relied on Alawite domination of the security establishment and the suppression of dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern city of Hama to crush a rebellion by the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, killing as many as 20,000 insurgents and civilians.

Bashar al-Assad took power after his father's death in 2000, pledging to liberalize Syria's politics and economy. The first six months of his presidency featured the release of political prisoners, the return of exiled dissidents, and open discussion of the country's problems. In February 2001, however, the regime abruptly halted this so-called Damascus Spring. Leading reformists were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others faced constant surveillance and intimidation by the secret police. Economic reform fell by the wayside, and Syria under Bashar al-Assad proved resistant to political change.

Reinvigorated by the toppling of Iraq's Baathist regime in 2003, Syria's secular and Islamist dissidents began cooperating and pushing for the release of political prisoners, the cancellation of the state of emergency, and the legalization of opposition parties. Syria's Kurdish minority erupted into eight days of rioting in March 2004. At least 30 people were killed as security forces suppressed the riots and made some 2,000 arrests.

Despite hints that sweeping political reforms would be drafted at a major Baath Party conference in 2005, no substantial measures were taken. In October 2005, representatives of all three segments of the opposition – the Islamists, the Kurds, and secular liberals – signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, which called for the country's leaders to step down and endorsed a broad set of liberal democratic principles.

In May 2006, exiled opposition leaders announced the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) to bring about regime change. Also that month, a number of Syrian political and human

rights activists signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for a change in Syrian-Lebanese relations and the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty. Many of the signatories were subsequently detained or sentenced to prison as part of a renewed crackdown that reversed the previous partial leniency on personal freedom.

In 2007, al-Assad won another term as president with 97.6 percent of the vote. In results that were similarly preordained by the electoral framework, the ruling Baath-dominated coalition won the majority of seats in that year's parliamentary and municipal polls. Meanwhile, the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change renewed its activities in 2007, prompting a government crackdown on its members.

The government began another campaign against dissidents in December 2007, and the effort continued into early 2008. Forty signatories of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration were arrested, and 12 were sentenced to three-year prison terms; two Kurdish leaders were arrested; and scores of suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist groups were imprisoned. Also in 2008, a military court sentenced former vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam, a leader of the NSF, to life in prison in absentia for inciting foreign attacks against Syria. Yet as Syria recognized Lebanon's sovereignty by establishing formal relations in October, and entered into sustained indirect peace negotiations with Israel, European countries began to ease its diplomatic isolation.

Syria also experienced an unusual wave of internal instability in 2008. A car bombing in March killed Imad Moughniyeh, a senior member of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. Mohammed Suleiman, an army officer said to be a close adviser to the president, was assassinated in August, and a September car bombing killed 17 people near an office of the country's internal intelligence service. The media also reported intermittent violence between security forces and residents of the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Syria is not an electoral democracy. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by popular referendum for seven-year terms. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime, as are elections for the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council, whose members serve four-year terms and hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch.

The only legal political parties are the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners in the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF). Independent candidates, who are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime, are permitted to contest about a third of the People's Council seats, meaning two-thirds are reserved for the NPF. The ruling party pledged to legalize other political parties that are not based on religious or ethnic identity (a condition that would exclude the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish opposition groups) at its June 2005 conference, but no legislation implementing this pledge has been forthcoming.

Regime officials and their families monopolize many lucrative import markets and benefit from a range of illicit economic activities. Syria is slowly opening itself economically by removing heavy tariffs and eliminating subsidies, but these limited reforms benefit a small minority at the expense of average citizens. Corruption is widespread, and bribery is often necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. Equality of opportunity has been compromised by this rampant graft. Syria was ranked 147 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Vaguely worded articles of the penal code, the Emergency Law, and a 2001 Publications Law criminalize the publication of material that harms national unity, tarnishes the image of the state, or threatens the "goals of the revolution." Many journalists, writers, and intellectuals have been arrested under these statutes. Apart from a handful of radio stations with non-news formats, all broadcast media are state owned. However, satellite dishes are common, giving most Syrians access to foreign broadcasts. While more than a dozen privately owned newspapers and magazines have sprouted up in recent years, only one – owned by the son of Syria's defense minister – is allowed to publish serious criticism of the government. The 2001 press law permits the authorities to arbitrarily deny or revoke publishing licenses and compels private print outlets to submit all material to government censors. It also imposes punishment on reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to government requests. Since the Kurdish protests in 2004, the government has cracked down on journalists calling for the expansion of Kurdish rights.

The sale of *Al-Hayat* – a Saudi-owned, pan-Arab daily – was banned indefinitely in September 2008; the government had repeatedly banned individual issues of the paper in the preceding months. The authorities also forced *Al-Hayat's* Damascus correspondent to resign after 18 years in the post because of "the campaign waged by *Al-Hayat* against Syria." Another Saudi-owned, pan-Arab newspaper, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, has been banned since 2006, when it reported negatively on Hezbollah during its summer conflict with Israel. Journalists in Syria are subject to harassment and intimidation in the form of short jail terms, travel bans, and confiscations of their notes.

Syrians access the internet only through state-run servers, which block more than 160 sites associated with the opposition, Kurdish politics, Islamic organizations, human rights, and certain foreign news services, particularly those in Lebanon. User-generated websites such as Facebook and YouTube were blocked in 2007 and remained blocked through early 2008. The blocks are turned on and off sporadically, but many internet users are able to find ways to access most internet sites. E-mail correspondence is reportedly monitored by the intelligence agencies, which often require internet cafe owners to monitor customers. The Ministry of Telecommunications introduced new measures in 2007 that called for all posters on blogs and websites to publish their names and e-mail addresses. In practice, internet users find ways around restrictions, and poor connections hinder access more effectively than government regulations. Still, the government has succeeded in fostering self-censorship through intimidation; five cyberdissidents are currently imprisoned. A blogger, Tariq Biassi, was sentenced to three years in prison in May 2008 for criticizing the government. Mohammed Badi Dak al-Bab was sentenced to six months in prison in June for "attacking the prestige of the state" in an online article he wrote for the National Organization for Human Rights.

Although the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion in Syria, and freedom of worship is generally respected. Both Latin and Orthodox Christians celebrated the year of Saint Paul in 2008, and Syria hosted many pilgrims and sponsored an official program of events in Damascus. However, all nonworship meetings of religious groups require permits, and religious fundraising is closely scrutinized. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the military and security forces. The government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim clergy.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. Several private universities have recently been founded, and the extent of academic freedom within them varies. University professors have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent.

Freedom of assembly is heavily circumscribed. Public demonstrations are illegal without official permission, which is typically granted only to progovernment groups. The security services intensified their ban on public and private gatherings in 2006, forbidding any group of five or more people from discussing political and economic topics. This rule has been enforced through surveillance and informant reports. Such activity by the intelligence services has ensured that a culture of self-censorship and fear prevails, and ordinary Syrians are unwilling to discuss politics under most circumstances.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. All nongovernmental organizations must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist or human rights groups. Leaders of unlicensed human rights groups have frequently been jailed for publicizing state abuses. Professional syndicates are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. Strikes in nonagricultural sectors are legal, but they rarely occur.

While the lower courts operate with some independence and generally safeguard defendants' rights, politically sensitive cases are usually tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional tribunal established under emergency law that denies the right to appeal, limits access to legal counsel, tries many cases behind closed doors, and routinely accepts confessions obtained through torture. SSSC judges are appointed by the executive branch, and only the president and interior minister may alter verdicts.

The state of emergency in force since 1963 gives the security agencies virtually unlimited authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Many of the estimated 2,500 to 3,000 political prisoners in Syria have never been tried. The majority of these prisoners are probably Islamists; those suspected of involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood or radical Islamist groups are regularly detained by the authorities. In July 2008, a riot broke out at the Sidnaya prison, which houses political prisoners. Human rights groups estimated that at least 25 inmates were killed while demanding better conditions.

The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining their family members. After release from prison, political activists are often monitored and harassed by security services. The Syrian Human Rights Committee has reported that hundreds of government informants are rewarded for or coerced into writing reports on relatives, friends, and associates who are suspected of involvement in "antiregime" activities.

The Kurdish minority faces severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. The 2001 press law requires that owners and top editors of print publications be Arabs. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and are unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates, which in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and public-sector jobs. In March 2008, three Kurds were killed and another five were wounded in clashes between civilians celebrating the Kurdish new year and state security forces.

Two Kurdish leaders were arrested in 2008 – Talal Mohammed, who is associated with Turkey's

Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) rebel group, and Mashaal Tammo, an official in the opposition Kurdish Future Movement. Tammo was charged with arming Syrians to start a civil war, and faced the death penalty. The government has continued its crackdown on the PKK, which it previously supported. It has arrested hundreds of other Kurdish activists in recent years and prevented many from traveling to Iraq's Kurdish region.

Opposition figures and relatives of exiled dissidents are routinely prevented from traveling abroad, and many Kurds lack the requisite documents to leave the country. However, Syrians are generally allowed freedom of movement, residence, and employment.

The government has promoted gender equality by appointing women to senior positions, including the vice presidency. Syria also has the highest proportion of female parliamentarians in the Arab world. The government provides women with equal access to education, but many discriminatory laws remain in force. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women are generally barred from leaving the country with their children without proof of the father's permission. Violence against women is common, particularly in rural areas. An accused rapist can be acquitted if he marries his victim, and the law provides for reduced sentences in cases of "honor crimes" committed by men against female relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. However, a prominent Syrian mufti declared "honor crimes" un-Islamic in 2007, and the government allowed the first shelter for abused women to open in September 2008. Personal status law for Muslim women is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters; church law governs personal status for Christians, which in some cases prevents divorce.

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