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## SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Head of State	Bashar al-Assad
Head of government	Muhammad Naji al-'Otri
Death penalty	retentionist
Population	20 million
Life expectancy	73.6 years
Under-5 mortality (m/f)	20/16 per 1,000
Adult literacy	80.8 per cent

**The state of emergency, in force since 1963, continued to give security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention. Freedom of expression and association were severely restricted. Hundreds of people were arrested and hundreds of others remained imprisoned for political reasons, including prisoners of conscience and others sentenced after unfair trials. Human rights defenders were harassed and persecuted. Women and members of the Kurdish minority faced discrimination in law and practice. Torture and other ill-treatment were committed with impunity. Public executions resumed.**

### Background

Syria hosted up to 1.4 million Iraqi refugees, including many who entered during 2007, as well as some 500,000 Palestinian refugees who are long-term residents. Tens of thousands of Syrians remained internally displaced due to Israel's continuing occupation of the Golan.

In February, Syria ratified the Arab Charter on Human Rights.

On 6 September Israeli Air Force planes bombed a building in north-eastern Syria. Israeli media reports suggested that the target was a nuclear facility; President Bashar al-Assad said it was an unused military building. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency criticized Israel for "taking the law into its own hands" and said the Israeli authorities had provided no evidence that the target was a secret nuclear facility.

The ninth report by the UN Independent Investigation Commission on the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, issued in November, said "more precise preliminary conclusions" had been reached and reaffirmed Syria's co-operation with the Commission.

### Arbitrary arrests and detentions

#### Political prisoners

Some 1,500 people were reportedly arrested for political reasons, including prisoners of conscience. Hundreds of others arrested in previous years remained in prison. The majority of more than 170 people sentenced in 2007 after grossly unfair trials before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), Criminal Court or Military Court were alleged to be Islamists.

- On 11 March, the SSSC convicted 24 men from the Qatana area, near Damascus, of being part of a “group established with the aim of changing the economic or social status of the state” and “weakening nationalist sentiments”, apparently solely on the basis of “confessions” which the men alleged were obtained under torture. The SSSC sentenced them to between four and 12 years in prison. Arrested between May and November 2004, the men had been held incommunicado for over a year at the Palestine Branch of Military Intelligence, Damascus, notorious for torture and other ill-treatment. The SSSC failed to investigate the men’s torture allegations.
- On 10 May, the Criminal Court convicted Kamal al-Labwani of “scheming with a foreign country, or communicating with one to incite it to initiate aggression against Syria” and sentenced him to 12 years’ imprisonment. The charge related to his 2005 visit to Europe and the USA where he met human rights organizations and government officials and called for peaceful democratic reform in Syria. Kamal al-Labwani previously spent three years in prison for his involvement in the peaceful pro-reform movement of 2000-2001 known as the “Damascus Spring”.
- On 13 May, the Criminal Court convicted Michel Kilo and Mahmoud ‘Issa of “weakening nationalist sentiments” and sentenced them to three years’ imprisonment. They were among 10 people arrested in May 2006 in relation to the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, a petition signed by 300 Syrian and Lebanese nationals calling for the normalization of relations between the two countries.
- Of some 40 people arrested for attending a meeting on 1 December of the unauthorized umbrella grouping, the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, seven remained detained incommunicado at the end of the year.

## **UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention**

It was announced in February that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had declared in May 2006 that the detention of Riad Drar al-Hamood was arbitrary because of the non-observance of fair trial standards and because he was convicted for exercising his right to free expression. Riad Drar al-Hamood was convicted by the SSSC in April 2006 of belonging to a “secret organization”, “publishing false news” and “inciting sectarian strife”, and sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. The charges related to a speech he gave at the funeral of Kurdish Islamic scholar Sheikh Muhammad Ma’shuq al-Khiznawi, who had been abducted and killed.

In June 2007, the Working Group stated that Ayman Ardenli, held for three years in Syria without charge, had been detained arbitrarily as the detention could not be justified “on any legal basis”, and that Muhammad Zammar, held for nearly five years without charge before being sentenced by the SSSC on 11 February to 12 years’ imprisonment, was being detained arbitrarily because of non-observance of fair trial standards (see below).

## **Freedom of expression**

Freedom of expression remained strictly controlled.

- On 17 June, the SSSC convicted Maher Isber Ibrahim, Tareq al-Ghorani, Hussam ‘Ali Mulhim, Diab Siriyeh, ‘Omar ‘Ali al-‘Abdullah, ‘Allam Fakhour and Ayham Saqr of “taking action or making a written statement or speech which could endanger the State or harm its relationship with a foreign country, or expose it to the risk of hostile action” for their involvement in developing a youth discussion group and for

publishing pro-democracy articles on the internet. Maher Isber Ibrahim and Tareq al-Ghorani were also convicted of “broadcasting of false news” and sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment while the other five received five-year prison terms. All were arrested by Air Force Intelligence officials in early 2006 and reportedly detained incommunicado until November 2006. The men repudiated “confessions” they had made in pre-trial detention, alleging that they were obtained under torture and duress. However, the SSSC failed to investigate their allegations and accepted the “confessions” as evidence against them.

- Fa’eq al-Mir, a leader of the People’s Democratic Party, was convicted by the Criminal Court on 31 December of “spreading false information harmful to the nation”. This apparently related to a telephone call he made to a Lebanese politician to express condolences over the assassination of a Lebanese government minister. He was sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment.
- Kareem ‘Arabji was arrested on 7 June by Military Intelligence officers in Damascus, allegedly for moderating the internet youth forum [www.akhawia.net](http://www.akhawia.net). He was still held incommunicado at the end of the year.

## **Torture and other ill-treatment**

Detainees continued to be tortured and otherwise ill-treated; five reportedly died, possibly as a result. The authorities took no action to investigate torture allegations.

- ‘Aref Dalilah, aged 64, remained in solitary confinement in a small cell in ‘Adra prison, serving a 10-year sentence for his involvement in the “Damascus Spring”. He suffers from diabetes, high blood pressure and the effects of a stroke, but was denied access to adequate medical care.
- The body of ‘Abd al-Mo’ez Salem was reportedly returned to his family in Areeha on 4 July and buried in the presence of Military Intelligence agents who did not allow the body to be seen or prepared for burial. He had apparently been held incommunicado for up to two years, including at the Palestine Branch.
- ‘Aref Hannoush, 16, was among up to nine youths allegedly tortured and otherwise ill-treated while detained in Damascus in August. They said they were confined in cramped and degrading conditions, denied sleep or access to a toilet, and beaten, including by the dulab (being forced into a car tyre and beaten).

## **‘War on terror’**

- Muhammad Zammar, arrested in Morocco and forcibly transferred to Syria in December 2001 apparently under the US-led renditions programme, was convicted in February after an unfair trial on four charges, including membership of the outlawed Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organization. No evidence of such membership was presented during the trial and the Muslim Brotherhood denied that Muhammad Zammar had ever been a member or had any active links with it or any of its members.

## **Violence and discrimination against women**

The Minister of Social Affairs and Labour was reported in January to have declared the Syrian Women’s Association illegal. It had been functioning since 1948. In February, the Minister ordered the dissolution of another women’s rights group, the Social Initiative Organization, and in September refused to license five NGOs, including the Organization to Support Women and Victims of Domestic Violence.

In February, Syrian Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Badreddin Hassoun said that “honour” crimes were wrong, that proving an act of adultery requires four witnesses, and that he had asked the Minister of Justice to set up a committee to amend the law on “honour” crimes.

In June, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommended that the Syrian authorities take steps to improve the status of women. The Committee called for: the repeal or amendment of discriminatory laws, including relevant provisions of the Personal Status Act, Penal Code and Nationality Act; the criminalization of marital rape; perpetrators of “honour” crimes not to be exonerated or to benefit from any reduction in penalty; the establishment of shelters and other services for women who are victims of violence; and women’s rights and other human rights NGOs to be allowed to function independently of the government.

## **Discrimination against the Kurdish minority**

Syrian Kurds continued to suffer from identity-based discrimination, including restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language and culture. Tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds remained effectively stateless and therefore denied equal access to social and economic rights.

- Kurdish artist Salah ‘Amr Sheerzad was detained and ill-treated at a security branch in Aleppo after participating in a music concert, according to reports in March.
- Eight Kurds were arrested on 5 April and detained for 10 days at a Political Security branch in Damascus, according to reports. They appear to have been arrested for wearing wristbands showing the colours of the Kurdish flag.

## **Human rights defenders**

Several unauthorized human rights organizations remained active even though their members were at risk of arrest, harassment and being prevented from travelling abroad.

- On 24 April the Criminal Court convicted Anwar al-Bunni, a lawyer and head of the Syrian Centre for Legal Studies and Research, of “spreading false information harmful to the nation” and sentenced him to five years’ imprisonment. This related to a statement he made in April 2006 about the death in custody of Muhammad Shaher Haysa, apparently as a result of ill-treatment possibly amounting to torture. Anwar al-Bunni, a prisoner of conscience, was beaten severely by prison guards on 25 January.
- On 1 November, the authorities prevented human rights lawyers Muhannad al-Hasani, Khalil Ma’atouq, Mustafa Osso, Radif Mustafa and Hasan Masho from travelling to Egypt to attend a workshop organized by the International Federation for Human Rights and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.

## **Death penalty**

The death penalty remained in force for a wide range of offences. At least seven people were executed, reportedly in public. They had been condemned to death following grossly unfair trials before the Field Military Court in which defendants have no legal representation and to which there is no right of appeal.

- Five prisoners – Radwan ‘Abd al-Qadr Hassan Muhammad, Kheiro Khalif al-Fares, ‘Abd al-Hai Faisal ‘Abd al-Hai, Saleh Youssef Mahmoud and Hassan Ahmed Khallouf – were hanged in public in Aleppo on 25 October. The latter two were no more than 18 years old at the time of their execution and so may have been child offenders. According to Syrian state media, those executed had committed “various murders, and armed robberies and had terrorized innocent citizens”.

## **Enforced disappearances**

The fate of some 17,000 people, mostly Islamists who were victims of enforced disappearance after they were detained in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians who were detained in Syria or abducted from Lebanon by Syrian forces or Lebanese and Palestinian militias, remained unknown.

## **Amnesty International visit/report**

- Amnesty International visited Syria in June to look into the situation of Iraqi refugees and to gather information about human rights abuses in Iraq.
- Iraqi refugees in Syria (MDE 14/036/2007)