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Human Rights Annual Report 2009 - Countries of Concern: Syria

Syria's human rights record continued to deteriorate in 2009. An Emergency Law, in place since 1963, continues to restrict the rights of Syrian citizens. This is based on the justification that Syria is still at war with Israel. We remain deeply concerned about arbitrary arrests, intimidation, torture, travel bans, lack of freedom of expression, and lack of respect for the rights of the Kurdish minority.

There is no accurate figure for the number of political prisoners in Syria. The NGO Freedom House estimates that 2,500–3,000 political prisoners remain imprisoned in Syria. Some Syrian human rights defenders and lobby groups estimate a much higher figure of around 4,000. In January, the NGO Syrian Human Rights Information Link published their annual list of political prisoners. Though not definitive, the list shows an increase in new political prisoners, from 800 imprisoned in 2008 to 974 in 2009.

In 2009, the UK has consistently raised its concerns about the human rights situation in Syria. A new EU joint strategy on human rights was instigated by the UK in 2009.

On 3 August, Foreign Office Minister Ivan Lewis raised major issues of human rights concern during his meeting with Foreign Minister Muallam. The Foreign Secretary has publicly reiterated the UK's concerns in Parliament, making clear that "the UK is particularly concerned with the deterioration in the situation for opposition politicians and Syria's Kurdish population, and the restrictions of basic civil rights and freedom of the media".

Human Rights Defenders

The security services are pervasive in Syrian society. They monitor opposition figures, human rights lawyers and defenders. These groups are often subject to arbitrary arrest and detention. In addition, demonstrations are routinely broken up and participants arrested.

As well as a number of similar incidents there are also prominent examples of individual cases of human rights breaches. In March, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that the detentions of political prisoners Nizar Ristnawi and Kamal Labwani were arbitrary and thus unlawful. Ristnawi is a founding member of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights (Syria), and Labwani is an advocate of peaceful democratic reform. It noted that the detentions of other individuals tried before the Syrian State Security Court were also arbitrary. It observed that defendants "are often accused of vague, widely interpreted and unsubstantiated security offences" and have "no legal redress for arrest or detention".

Syrian security services arrested 78 year-old Haitham al-Maleh, a leading Syrian human rights lawyer and founding member and ex-director of the Human Rights Association in Syria, on 14 October. We believe that the Syrians detained Mr al-Maleh after he criticised the regime on a programme broadcast on 13 October by UK-based Barada television. The security branch where Mr al-Maleh had been held referred him to the military court on 20 October, which interrogated him in a closed session. Three charges have been brought against him – “disseminating false information that weakens the morale of the nation”, “insulting the President” and “bringing the Syrian judiciary into disrepute”. The charge of insulting the President has subsequently been dropped.

On 12 November, Mr al-Maleh appealed against the charges filed by the military judge at the Court of Cessation. The outcome of that appeal is not yet known.

On 28 July, Mohannad al-Hasani was arrested by the Syrian intelligence services. He is a lawyer and human rights defender and head of the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights. His detention is related to his monitoring of trials at the State Security Court and he faces up to 15 years in prison. He has reportedly been beaten and remains in custody. On 10 November, he was also disbarred by the Syrian Bar Association. Mr al-Hasani has been accused of “weakening national sentiment”, “spreading false or exaggerated news”, “harming the prestige of the State”, and having “illegal links with people residing in an enemy country”. The British Embassy and our EU partners will continue to monitor the situation of Mr al-Maleh and Mr al-Hasani and continue to press the Syrians for their release.

Freedom of Expression

The Syrian government monitors internet use closely. Internet cafés are a focus of the Syrian security services, which act to catch people who blog against the government. In 2009, three Syrian bloggers were imprisoned for writing anti-government statements. Websites, such as Facebook and YouTube, are blocked. The Ministry of Information closes media organisations that are critical. In June, the Ministry banned the distribution of youth magazine Shabbalek and the Lebanese newspaper Al Ahkbar Daily and in September, the Syrian security authorities closed the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression.

Rights of Kurds

Syria’s estimated 1.7 million Kurds continue to suffer from discrimination, lack of political representation, and tight restrictions on social and cultural expression. In particular, there are a number of measures in place repressing Kurdish identity, through restricting the use of the Kurdish language in public, in schools and in the workplace. Kurdish-language publications are banned and celebrations of Kurdish festivities, such as Nowruz, the traditional Kurdish New Year, are prohibited.

In addition, as many as 300,000 Kurds continue to be denied recognised citizenship. Presidential Decree 49, which was passed in October 2008, still remains in force. This questions the rights of Syrian citizens to hold property rights in the border areas of the country and particularly affects the Kurdish population. Kurds in Syria claim that it effectively prohibits them from selling, buying or inheriting land.

At least 150 Kurds were detained as political prisoners in 2009. In February, 26 Kurds were arrested during a ten-minute silent demonstration in Qamishli. On 20 March, six people were arrested in Hassake during Kurdish New Year celebrations, including Suleiman Osso, a leader of the Yekiti Party, which represents Kurdish interests. Three others were arrested in nearby Kurdish villages. On the same day, in the northeast of Syria, the police used a bulldozer to break the main stages at the celebrations in five towns and villages. Security services also arrested over 120 Kurds in Aleppo and were reportedly physically and verbally abusive to Kurdish women during a candlelit New Year party.

On 23 November, Kurdish conscript Sadik Hossein Mousa was reported to have died during military service. Nineteen such cases have been reported in the last five years: six deaths of Kurdish conscripts in 2004; one in 2006; eight in 2008; and four in 2009. The Syrian authorities say the deaths are suicides, but human rights defenders say autopsy evidence points to death by torture or shooting that could not have been self-inflicted.