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2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - Syria

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
February 25, 2009

Syria, with a population of approximately 19 million, is a republic under the authoritarian presidential regime of Bashar al-Asad. The president makes key decisions with counsel from a small circle of security advisors, ministers, and senior members of the ruling Ba'ath Party (Arab Socialist Renaissance). The constitution mandates the primacy of Ba'ath party leaders in state institutions and society. President al-Asad and party leaders, supported by various security services, dominated all three branches of government. In May 2007 President al-Asad was confirmed for another seven-year term in elections that were considered by international and local human rights advocates as neither free nor fair. Civilian authorities maintained effective control of the security forces, and members of the security forces committed numerous, serious human rights abuses.

The government's respect for human rights worsened, and it continued to commit serious abuses. The government systematically repressed citizens' abilities to change their government. In a climate of impunity, there were instances of arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life. Members of the security forces tortured and physically abused prisoners and detainees. Security forces arrested and detained individuals without providing just cause, and lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention remained a serious problem. Considered common practice since 2006, the government violated citizens' privacy rights and imposed significant restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association, amid an atmosphere of government corruption. Security services disrupted meetings of human rights organizations and detained activists, organizers, and other regime critics without due process. In addition, throughout the year the government sentenced to prison several high-profile members of the human rights community, especially individuals affiliated with the national council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), an umbrella organization bringing together a range of reform-minded opposition groups. Violence and societal discrimination against women continued. The influx of Iraqi refugees, moreover, exacerbated the incidence of sexual exploitation, including of minors. The government discriminated against minorities, particularly the Kurds and the Ahvazis, and severely restricted workers' rights.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

During the year there were reports of arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life.

On March 20, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), security forces fired into a crowd of Kurds celebrating the New Year holiday (Nowruz) in Qamishli. The attack killed Muhammad Yahya Khalil, Muhammad Zaki, and Muhammad Mahmoud Hussein, all between the ages of 18 and 25. The three men were among approximately 200 celebrants gathered around a bonfire in the middle of a street. After firefighters and security forces failed to disperse the crowd with bullets and tear gas, individuals in civilian dress drove by in a truck and fired assault rifles at the group.

On July 5, prison guards and military officials fired on rioting inmates at Sednaya prison, reportedly killing between 25-50 inmates. According to HRW, military police officers triggered the riot when they insulted inmates and stepped on copies of the Koran during an aggressive search of the prison. Only nine of the fatalities were identified by year's end: Zakariyya Affash, Muhammad Mahareesh, Mahmoud Abu Rashid, Abdul-Baqi Khattab, Ahmed Shalaq, Khaled Bilal, Mo'ayad al-Ali, Muhanad al-Omar, and Khidir Alloush.

In September, according to local human rights observers, government authorities arrested Ahmed Musa al-Shukaifi, a teacher from the town of Jarjanaaz of Maarat Al-Numan in Idlib Province, for unknown reasons. A week later his corpse was returned to his family. He allegedly died as a result of torture. At year's end there was no investigation into the circumstances surrounding his death.

On October 14, a customs patrol shot and killed Sami Maatouk, the nephew of human rights lawyer Khalil Maatouk, and Joni Suleiman in the village of al-Mushrifah, near the Syria-Lebanon border, according to a report from a local human rights group. The report stated that the patrol purportedly was pursuing smugglers in the area and killed Maatouk while he was sitting outside his house. On October 20, unidentified individuals reportedly destroyed evidence at the scene to hamper any investigation.

On December 27, according to local human rights observers, military officials stationed inside Sednaya prison killed approximately 50 inmates. Reportedly, a military officer, in the company of a group of soldiers, verbally threatened to shoot inmates. The inmates took the threat seriously enough that they rushed the soldiers, prompting the soldiers to open fire.

Authorities failed to conduct independent investigations into any of these deaths by year's end, except for the case of Sami Maatouk and Joni Suleiman, which the government claimed it would look into. At year's end there was no further development in that case. Likewise, there were no investigations or developments in the 2007 deaths in detention of Fahed Mohammed Omar in June, Abdul Moez Salem in July, or Ghafoor Abdul-Baqi in December, all of which reportedly followed torture or mistreatment by security services, or the November 2007 killing of Issa Khalil, a Qamishli resident who reportedly participated in a demonstration following a pro-Kurdistan Workers Party protest (PKK).

At year's end the UN International Independent Investigation Commission had not issued a final report on the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri and 22 other individuals. In March and July 2007, the chief investigator for the commission issued interim reports that described general satisfactory cooperation from Syrian authorities into the investigation, neither concluding nor ruling out their possible involvement.

b. Disappearance

There were reports of politically motivated disappearances during the year.

In mid-December 2007, according to a January 18 human rights group report, authorities arrested Abdul Rahman Wazzan upon his arrival at Damascus International Airport. Wazzan, a civil engineer, had been living in France for the last 20 years and was en route to Aleppo to spend the Eid al-Adha holidays with family and to sort out legal issues connected to the death of his mother. At year's end the reason for his arrest and his

whereabouts were unknown. However, according to the Muslim Brotherhood Web site IkhwanWeb.com, he was arrested because of his religious belief, presumably perceived by authorities as overly Islamist.

On February 21, according to human rights organizations, Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) authorities summoned Kamal al-Mwayel to Damascus for questioning, likely regarding his presence at a December 2007 DDDNC meeting. He went missing after meeting with the SMI and was not released until September 18, according to local human rights observers. The government imprisoned Al-Mwayel previously from 1982 to 1989 for involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood.

On March 27, unidentified authorities reportedly arrested Mustafa Sheikh, an orthopedic surgeon, at the hospital where he worked. The reason for the arrest, according to a human rights organization, may have been connected to his religious beliefs, which authorities presumably viewed as overly Islamist. However, the exact charges, the arresting authority, and where Sheikh was incarcerated remained unknown at year's end.

On July 5, during a riot at Sednaya prison, detainee Sameer al-Bahar disappeared after he attempted to negotiate with prison officials on behalf of his fellow prisoners, according to a local human rights group. When al-Bahar met the officials and conveyed the prisoners' refusal to surrender, he was beaten and taken away in an armored car. His whereabouts remained unknown at year's end.

On the night of July 16, according to a human rights organization, Mu'awiyah Ali al-Dablan, a police officer from the village Al-Taaminah in Hama, and his friend Bashar Aziz were arrested in al-Dablan's home. The reason for the arrest and the whereabouts of the two men were unknown at year's end.

On October 28, a local human rights organization announced that in the first half of August, 10 individuals from Deir al-Zour were arrested by local authorities: Muhammad Ameen al-Shawa (high school math teacher), Burhan Juneid (shop owner), Nabeel Khleewi (arrested on August 13), Abdul Hadi al-Salameh (university student), Bilal Sufyan, the brothers Ahmed and Sufyan Dumaim, Iyad Hussein, Hassan Muhammad, and Muhammad Taha. According to the organization, all the men were "religious men of a moderate outlook," and none were political activists. The specific reasons for their arrest and whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

In July, according to human rights observers, security forces released Egyptian citizen Amro Ahmad Mohamad Yousef, who had been detained since May 2007.

There were no new developments in the 2007 disappearance of Khalid Muhammad Ahmed or the 2006 disappearance of Rami Ahmad Farhat.

The government continued to withhold information on the welfare and whereabouts of persons who disappeared in previous years; little was known other than the approximate date of their disappearance. The government had a long record of allegedly "disappearing" individuals, some of whom were believed to have died while others were likely in long-term detention, and it did not investigate or punish any security force members for their role in disappearances.

The government continued to deny reports that security forces "disappeared" an estimated 17,000 persons in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to HRW, the "disappeared" were mostly detained Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members and other Syrian activists, 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. The Lebanese nongovernmental organization (NGO) Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE) estimated that more than 600 Lebanese prisoners remained in Syria. During the year various Lebanese news outlets quoted Lebanese Member of Parliament (MP) Fouad al-Saad as saying the number of missing Lebanese citizens in Syria numbered 91. On August 20, Lebanese Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar stated in a televised interview that there were 745 Lebanese citizens missing in Syria, divided into two

categories: convicted criminals and victims of "enforced disappearances."

A visit by Lebanon's President Michel Sleiman to Damascus in August produced an agreement to address detainee issues; by year's end the two governments had made no further progress on the issue. On September 7, the Syrian delegation of the joint Lebanese-Syrian commission charged with investigating the missing individuals presented a list of 115 convicted Lebanese citizens held in Syrian jails; however, the Syrian list failed to include any of those classified as "enforced disappearances." According to SOLIDE, at year's end the Syrian delegation had not formally approved the allowing of Lebanese judges to check on the 115 named prisoners. Various NGOs and family members of those who allegedly remained in prison continued to dispute the 1999 government claim that all abductees had been released.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, and the penal code provides punishment for abusers. Under Article 28 of the constitution, "no one may be tortured physically or mentally or treated in a humiliating manner." However, security forces reportedly continued to use torture frequently.

Local human rights organizations continued to cite numerous cases of security forces allegedly abusing and torturing prisoners and detainees and claimed that many instances of abuse went unreported. Individuals who suffered torture or beatings while detained refused to allow their names or details of their cases to be reported for fear of government reprisal.

Former prisoners, detainees, and reputable local human rights groups reported that methods of torture and abuse included electrical shocks; pulling out fingernails; burning genitalia; forcing objects into the rectum; beating, sometimes while the victim was suspended from the ceiling; alternately dousing victims with freezing water and beating them in extremely cold rooms; hyperextending the spine; bending the detainees into the frame of a wheel and whipping exposed body parts; using a backward-bending chair to asphyxiate the victim or fracture the victim's spine; and stripping prisoners naked for public view. Throughout previous years the international NGO Amnesty International (AI) documented 38 types of torture and ill-treatment used against detainees in the country. AI reported that torture was most likely to occur while detainees were held at one of the many detention centers operated by the various security services in the country, particularly while authorities attempted to extract a confession or information. Courts systematically used "confessions" extracted under duress as evidence, and defendants' claims of torture were almost never investigated.

For example, on January 9, police in Raqqa arrested Ibrahim al-Khoja on the charge of theft, according to a human rights organization. While he was in jail, local police reportedly tortured al-Khoja, resulting in a broken leg and crushed hand. In February al-Khoja's lawyer, Abdullah al-Khalil, filed a lawsuit against the police. At year's end no progress had been made on this case.

On January 28, according to human rights organizations, eight political activists who had been incarcerated at Adra prison for political crimes informed the third investigative judge in Damascus, Muhammad Subji al-Sa'ur, during a trial hearing that security officials had beaten them during interrogation to force them to sign confessions. The men testified that they were punched in the face, kicked, and slapped. The eight men were part of a group of 12 signatories to the Damascus Declaration who were jailed in late 2007 and early 2008.

Also on January 28, according to HRW, authorities at Adra prison transferred 'Ali al-Abdullah, a signatory to the Damascus Declaration, to a medical examiner to receive treatment for an ear injury sustained at the hands of his interrogators. The examiner declined to issue a report, claiming that he was not a specialist in ear injuries.

In September authorities detained and reportedly tortured to death Ahmed Musa Al-

Shukaifi, according to a human rights organization. The reasons for al-Shukaifi's detention and torture were unknown. He was a teacher in Idlib Province.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions generally were poor and did not meet international standards for health and sanitation. At some prisons security officials demanded bribes from family members. Overcrowding and the denial of food remained problems at several prisons. The government did not permit visits by international human rights observers.

According to local and international human rights organizations, prisoners and detainees were held without adequate medical care, and some prisoners with significant health problems reportedly were denied medical treatment. Throughout the year local and international human rights organizations highlighted the case of political prisoner and former MP Othman Haji Suleiman, who died on February 18, soon after his February 5 release from al-Maslamieh prison in Aleppo, where he had been held incommunicado since November 2007. Authorities previously detained Suleiman in 1995, 2002, 2005, and 2006. The November 2007 arrest was for his alleged involvement in organizing a demonstration in Ein al-Arab to protest against Turkish military interventions in Kurdistan, Iraq. Suleiman's health reportedly deteriorated rapidly after he was tortured in prison.

On January 28, security forces arrested the Damascus Declaration National Council secretary general, Riad Seif, who suffered from prostate cancer and a heart condition. His lawyers told HRW that prison authorities forced Seif to sleep in the general hall of the prison with nothing more than a single blanket after his arrest. On October 29, the Damascus criminal court sentenced him to two and one-half years in prison. At year's end Seif was reportedly receiving medical care and was moved to a cell with a bunk in Adra prison.

On August 28, a local human rights group reported the death of Abdul Sattar Qattan, whom authorities had imprisoned at three different times for a total of 28 years. During his last period of incarceration, his kidneys degenerated, and he never received appropriate treatment. Sednaya prison officials released him in June 2007 after his illness became critical. Qattan attempted previously to leave the country for medical treatment and a transplant, but the government banned his travel.

The government failed to provide adequate security for prisoners and detainees during the year, including during the July 5 and December 27 Sednaya riots (see section 1.a.). In past years there were reports of prisoners being beaten by other prisoners while guards stood by and watched. For example, in March 2007 criminal convict Jaber Yousef beat prisoner of conscience Habib Saleh while prison guards and other prisoners watched, according to local human rights organizations.

There were separate detention facilities for men, women, and children; however, minors reportedly were sometimes held in adult facilities. Pretrial detainees, particularly those held for political or security reasons, were usually held separately from convicted prisoners. However, according to local human rights organizations, political prisoners were sometimes deliberately placed in crowded cells with convicted and alleged felons and subjected to verbal and physical threats. For example, prisoner of conscience Habib Saleh cut himself on a razor blade hidden in his prison bunk by a fellow inmate on October 23, according to Reporters Without Borders. Saleh has been held in Adra prison since May 5.

Some former detainees reported that the government denied political prisoners access to reading materials, including the Koran. Facilities for political or national security prisoners, especially accused Islamists, were generally much worse than those for common criminals. Released political detainees confirmed reports of poor prison conditions, including overcrowded cells and a shortage of beds.

Each branch of the four security services operated its own detention centers. The

majority of reported torture or mistreatment cases occurred in these facilities, according to local human rights organizations.

The government prohibited independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions and publishing of any materials on prison or detention center conditions; however, diplomatic and consular officials were granted limited access in rare cases during the year. During the year the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not officially allow consular visits to prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, in practice these activities persisted and remained significant problems.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The role of the security services extends far beyond necessary security matters due to a state of emergency, which has been in place since 1963. The government justified the ongoing Emergency Law on the basis of its conflict with Israel and threats from terrorist groups. The SMI and Air Force Intelligence are military agencies.

The four major branches of security forces include the SMI, Political Security Directorate (PSD), General Intelligence Directorate (GID), and Syrian Air Force Intelligence (SAFI), all of which devote some of their overlapping resources to monitoring internal dissent and individual citizens. The four branches operate independently and generally outside of the control of the legal system.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) controls the police forces, which consist of four separate divisions: emergency police, traffic police, neighborhood police, and riot police.

Corruption continued to be a serious problem in the police forces and security services. Human rights lawyers and family members of detainees cited solicitation of bribes for favorable decisions and provision of basic services by government officials throughout the legal process in both courts and prisons. Traffic police officers regularly solicited bribes from drivers.

No mechanisms for investigations of security force abuse existed.

Arrest and Detention

Upon arrest an individual is brought to a police station for processing and detained until a trial date is set. At the initial court hearing, which may be months or years after the arrest, the accused may retain an attorney at personal expense or be assigned a court-appointed attorney, although lawyers were not ensured access to their clients before trial. The individual is then tried in a court, where a judge renders a verdict. While the prison code provides for prompt access to family members, human rights organizations and families reported inconsistent application of the code, with some families waiting as long as a year to see relatives. Civil and criminal defendants had the right to bail hearings and possible release from detention on their own recognizance. However, this right was not applied consistently throughout the legal system and was rarely available to detainees under the emergency law.

The 1963 Emergency Law authorizes the government to conduct preventive arrests and overrides constitutional and penal code provisions against arbitrary arrest and detention, including the need to obtain warrants. In cases involving political or national security offenses, arrests were often carried out in secret with cases assigned in a seemingly arbitrary manner to military, security, or criminal courts. Suspects were detained incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and denied the right to a judicial determination regarding pretrial detention. Unlike defendants in regular criminal and civil cases, security detainees did not have access to lawyers prior

to or during questioning, as well as throughout the preparation and presentation of their defense. In most cases detainees were not informed of charges against them until their arraignment, which often was months after their arrest. Additionally, those suspected of political or national security offenses were arrested and prosecuted under ambiguous and broad articles of the penal code and subsequently tried in either the criminal or security courts.

The government did not notify foreign governments when their citizens were arrested or detained, as required under Article 36 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, or did so only after the person was released or deported. For example, on November 7, Syrian police arrested three Jordanian men, Nidal Kayed, Ayman Hawarat, and Ahmad Abu Durais, for inquiring about sensitive locations. The Jordanian embassy was not notified, and the Syrian Prime Minister's Office denied that the three were in custody, according to the Jordan Times. Authorities eventually released the men on November 23.

Arbitrary and false arrests were problems, and detainees had no legal redress. The authorities detained those critical of the government under the emergency law and charged them with a wide range of political crimes, including treason. Continuing a trend that began in 2006, the government tried some political prisoners in criminal courts, although the charges were security related and not covered by the criminal code. For example, the trial of 12 members of the DDDNC for their political opposition activities took place in the Damascus First Criminal Court on October 29. Similarly, cyber-dissident Habib Saleh, arrested on October 16 for his critical writings, had his initial defense hearing in the Damascus Second Criminal Court on December 1.

Incommunicado detention was a severe problem. Many persons who disappeared in past years were believed to be in long-term detention without charge or possibly to have died in detention. Many detainees brought to trial were held incommunicado for years, and their trials often were marked by irregularities and lack of due process. Arrest and search warrants were issued only for non-security related cases; however, police bypassed this requirement in many instances by claiming security or emergency grounds for entry. Protracted court proceedings were caused by a shortage of available courts and the absence of legal provisions for a speedy trial or plea bargaining.

On September 30, President al-Asad issued legislative decree 69. The new law states that in the case of a crime committed by military officers, members of the internal security forces, and customs police officers in the pursuit of their normal duties, only the General Command of the Army and Armed Forces can issue a warrant of arrest. The new decree also requires that any pending criminal cases against such officers be transferred from criminal to military courts.

During the year security forces reportedly continued to arrest alleged Islamists. Local human rights organizations estimated that approximately 1,600 Islamists were arrested during the year, although it was unclear how many of those remained in detention at year's end.

On January 22, intelligence services reportedly arrested 13 Islamists in the al-Sfeerah area of Aleppo, including students Hamza Haaj Hamza, Hossam Qana'a, and Muhammad Moaz Qana'a, primary school teacher Muhammad Raheem, and pharmacist Barakaat al-Aswad. Their whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

On July 11, a local human rights group reported the arrest of Sheikh Yusuf Omar Mobayyedh, a religious scholar known for his moderate views and disavowal of violence. His whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

During the year the government continued its sustained crackdown on civil society and human rights activists. Under the authority of laws that criminalize membership and activity in organizations the government deems illegal, security forces arrested a number of persons with links to local human rights groups, prodemocracy student groups, as well as scores of other minorities, particularly Kurds, members of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and suspected Islamic extremists.

For example, on January 3, security agents arrested Fayez Sarah, a writer, journalist, and member of the DDDNC. Sarah's arrest signaled the continuation of the government's 2007 efforts to neutralize the newly formed prodemocracy movement. Security forces subsequently arrested Muhammed Haji Darwish on January 8, Marwan al-Esh on January 15, Riad Seif on January 28, and Talal Abu Dan on January 30. Human rights observers reported that authorities arrested these individuals for attending a DDDNC meeting in December 2007. At year's end authorities held the individuals at Adra prison, along with six other attendees of the DDDNC meeting arrested in December 2007: Ahmad Toumah, Akram al-Bunni, Jaber al-Shoufi, Muhammad Yasser al-Eitti, Ali Abdullah, and Walid al-Buni. Authorities transferred DDDNC chairperson Fidaa al-Hourani, who also was arrested in December 2007, from prison to Ibn al-Nafis hospital on February 25, after she suffered health problems. On October 29, the Damascus criminal court sentenced all of the aforementioned DDDNC members to two and one-half years in prison.

On February 17, authorities arrested Kurdish university student Hozan Muhammad Amin Ibrahim in Damascus, according to a local human rights organization. Ibrahim had previously spent a year in prison after his arrest at a demonstration in front of the Damascus branch of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2003. Ibrahim remained in prison at year's end.

On February 27, according to a local human rights organization, security authorities arrested activist Osama Edwar in Hasakah, reportedly for writing an article critical of the government. He was released on March 8.

On March 2, the SMI arrested Mohammad Badih Dak al-Bab, a former political prisoner and an alleged MB member. Dak al-Bab was previously arrested in 2000 for his MB affiliations and sentenced to 15 years in prison but received a presidential pardon in 2005. The most recent arrest reportedly stemmed from articles he had written that criticized Minister of Information Moshen Bilal. Authorities released Dak al-Bab on September 17.

According to a local human rights group, the Syrian Air Force Security Service detained Pierre Rustum on March 15. Rustum was an activist, writer, a member of the Kurdish Democratic Party in the country, and a council member for the Damascus Declaration group. Rustum was released on March 22.

On April 2, unidentified agents took Qais Ahmed Ali, a Kurd, from his home in Damascus. He was released on July 28.

On May 5, according to human rights observers, the SAFI arrested political and human rights activist Hammam Ahmad Haddad, presumably for his public writings on human rights abuses. His whereabouts were unknown until his release in July.

On June 16, security forces reportedly arrested independent member of the DDDNC, Mahmoud al-Najjar, in Aleppo. Authorities did not provide a reason for his arrest, according to the report. He was released on July 24.

On July 9, GIA detained Hassan Younes Kasim, a member of the Committees for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights in Syria (CDF), according to a local human rights group. Authorities released him on July 24.

On August 3 and 4, the PSD arrested Jawan Abdo, Ra'id Fawaz al-Ali, Markeen Mustafa, and Salahidin Baro. All four individuals were Kurds living in Aldirbasiah in the northern part of the country. Their whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

On August 11, intelligence authorities arrested human rights activist and Damascus Declaration member Ghazi Qadoor in his home in Aleppo, according to human rights observers. His whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

On August 15, security forces abducted Mashaal Tammo, the head of the Kurdish Future

Movement Party, as he was driving near Aleppo. The government held Tammo incommunicado for two weeks, after which he appeared at a preliminary court hearing in Damascus on August 27. At his first court hearing, no specific charges were announced. At year's end he remained detained at Adra prison in Damascus.

On August 26, according to a local humanitarian organization, security forces arrested Khaldoun al-Jaza'iri, a dentist, at his home in Damascus. Al-Jaza'iri is the son of prominent nuclear scientist Makki al-Hassani al-Jaza'iri. His whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

On October 26, security forces in Hasakah Province reportedly arrested Muhammad Sa'id Husayn and Sa'dun Mahmud Shekho, both general executive members of the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria. At year's end their whereabouts remained unknown.

On November 6, according to Jordanian news dailies, three Jordanian men, Nidal Kayed, Ayman Hawarat, and Ahmad Abu Durais, entered Syria together for a three-day vacation. On November 7, they were arrested by security authorities for allegedly inquiring about "sensitive locations." The government denied that the three men were in custody. The three men were held incommunicado until their release on November 23. Their release followed Jordanian Prime Minister Nader Dahabi's visit to Syria, where he raised the subject with officials.

On November 15, according to human rights observers, security forces arrested Osam Hamdan Makarem, a businessman in Suweida, a small city south of Damascus. At year's end, the reason for his arrest and his location were unknown. However, observers speculated that the arrest might have been connected to a recent financial dispute that Makarem took to court and won. The day after the courts decided the case, October 19, Makarem was arrested, detained for a day, and released.

On November 17, SMI agents arrested Bassam Zakia in Hama, according to human rights observers. Zakia had allegedly returned to the country from Jordan three months earlier, after an unspecified period abroad, in order to obtain a visa that would allow him to work in Saudi Arabia. Bassam had reportedly contacted the Syrian embassy in Jordan and obtained a visit permit. Once he was in Hama, the SMI called him to their office several times before finally arresting him. The reason for his detention and his whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

At year's end Muhammad Bakor and Sufian Bakor remained in detention. In January 2007, according to local human rights observers, the PSD in Hama arrested Muhammad Bakor and Sufian Bakor, sons of dissident Muhammad Bakor, an exile in Iraq.

On August 24, according to human rights observers, authorities released Kawthar Tayfore and Aisha Afandi, both Kurdish members of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Tayfore and Afandi had been held incommunicado, with no access to legal counsel, since November 2007.

A local human rights group reported that in December 2007, authorities detained Ghaleb Amer, a board member of the Arab Organization for Human Rights. He was released the next day along with four other individuals: Yousef Sayasneh, Muhammad Jabr Masalmeh, and Muhammad Zaki Huwiedi.

There were no new developments in the 2007 case of Nader Sanoufi.

On June 13, according to a local human rights group, authorities released Fa'ik al-Meir, a member of the Central Committee of the Syrian Democratic People's party. Al-Meir was detained in Tartous in 2006 for allegedly establishing ties with Lebanese March 14 forces and sentenced to 18 months in prison in December 2007.

There were also numerous reports from human rights organizations that security services arrested citizens who were apparently not involved in political activities. The security

services provided no information on the reasons for the arrests and, in many cases, family and friends were unable to obtain information on the whereabouts of the detained at year's end.

On April 7, the PSD arrested Waleed Muhammad Ali Hussein, an art student, after summoning him several times to security offices in Hasakah, according to a local human rights group. The reason for his detention and his whereabouts remained unknown at year's end.

There were no new developments in the 2007 arrests of Muhammad Naama, a student at a medical college in Damascus, and Omar Muhammad Khalalo, or the 2006 arrests of Fahd Da'doush, Ahmet Muhammad Ibrahim, and Muhammad Sheikhmos Aali (also known as Sheikh Aali).

Amnesty

Unlike in the previous year, the president did not issue any amnesties; however, following tradition, authorities released sick prisoners who had completed three-quarters of their sentences.

The government rarely includes political prisoners in periodic presidential amnesties; however, on August 7, Arif Dalila received a presidential pardon and was released from prison. Dalila had been incarcerated since his arrest in 2001. Dalila, a well-known Syrian economist, had participated in the informal political reform discussions associated with the Damascus Spring movement of 2001. He was originally arrested in 2001 for criticizing government policy in both print and public remarks and sentenced to 10 years in prison by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) in 2002.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, courts were regularly subject to political influence. According to observers, approximately 95 percent of judges were Ba'athists or closely aligned to the Ba'ath Party and therefore not independent.

The judicial system is composed of civil and criminal courts under the Ministry of Justice and religious courts, which adjudicate matters of personal status such as divorce and inheritance. The Court of Cassation is the highest court of appeal. The Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) rules on the constitutionality of laws and decrees, hears special appeals regarding the validity of parliamentary elections, and tries the president if he is accused of criminal offenses; however, it does not hear appeals from the civil and criminal justice system. The SCC is composed of five members who are appointed by the president for renewable four-year terms.

Military courts have authority over crimes committed by soldiers or members of other military or police branches. If the charge against a soldier or member of the military or police branch is a misdemeanor, the sentence against the defendant is final. If the charge is a felony, the defendant has the right to appeal to the Military Chamber at the Court of Cassation. Military courts also have authority to try civilians in cases based on military law. Civilians have the right to appeal all sentences in a military court. A military prosecutor decides the venue for a civilian defendant. There were reports that the government operated military field courts in locations outside established courtrooms. Such courts reportedly observed fewer formal procedures than regular military courts. For example, in October 2007 the Military Field Court, located in an undisclosed location in Damascus, convicted and sentenced five criminals to public hanging in Aleppo.

The SSSC tries political and national security cases and operates under the provisions of the 1963 Emergency Law, which authorizes the prosecution of anyone "opposing the goals of the revolution," and creating "sectarian strife." Although the government stated

that the SSSC tried only persons who sought to use violence against the government, the majority of defendants before the SSSC were prosecuted for exercising their political rights.

Trial Procedures

Defendants before civil and criminal courts are entitled to legal representation of their choice; the courts appoint lawyers for indigents. Defendants are presumed innocent, and they are allowed to present evidence and to confront their accusers. Trials are public, except for those involving juveniles or sex offenses. Defendants can appeal verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation. Appeals are often difficult to win because the lower courts do not provide verbatim transcripts of cases, only summaries prepared by the presiding judges. There are no juries. Defendants and their attorneys have access to government-held evidence relevant to their cases. However, human rights lawyers noted that the prosecution case file, which defense lawyers were allowed to see, frequently did not include any evidence in politically charged cases.

The law extends the above rights to all citizens in criminal cases. However, a number of sections of family and criminal law are based on Shari'a (Islamic law) and do not treat men and women equally. Some personal status laws utilize Shari'a regardless of the religion of those involved in the case, although the number of Shari'a-based laws affecting non-Muslims decreased significantly after the 2006 passage of a Personal Status Law for Catholics.

The SSSC does not observe constitutional provisions safeguarding defendants' rights. Its verdicts are not subject to judicial appeal; however, the minister of interior may ratify, nullify, or alter an SSSC ruling, and the president must approve the verdict or may ask for a retrial. Charges against defendants before the SSSC were usually vague, and authorities sometimes prevented defendants' access to their lawyers before the trial. Under SSSC procedures, defendants and their lawyers are not present during the preliminary or investigative phase of the trial, during which the prosecutor presents evidence. Lawyers submitted written defense pleas rather than making oral presentations. Trials took place before three judges and usually remained closed to the public as well as to the defendants' families. Authorities did not permit human rights NGOs to visit the SSSC; however, local lawyers affiliated with local NGOs acted as defense counsel in some cases. Authorities granted SSSC access to diplomatic observers during the year.

For example, in February 2007 security authorities arrested dissident poet Dr. Mahmoud Hussein Sarem, who faced charges before the SSSC from a 2005 arrest. His case was referred to the military general prosecution. Sarem was subsequently sent to Adra prison, where he remained detained until his release on March 15. On October 1, a military judge cancelled the charges against Sarem in the military court; however, his SSSC case remained pending at year's end. Authorities did not present evidence that he used violence against the state.

Human rights organizations estimated that the SSSC tried hundreds of cases annually. The majority of cases during the year involved charges relating to membership in various banned political groups, including religious parties such as the MB, the Islamic Liberation Party, and Syrian Kurdish parties. During the year the SSSC sentenced more than 150 citizens to sentences ranging from three years' imprisonment to execution, which can be commuted to 12 years' imprisonment. For example, on May 5, the SSSC sentenced Ismail al-Sheikha to death for membership in the MB and then commuted his sentence to 12 years in prison.

On April 14, Mohamed Hilal Abu Hawa, detained since 2005, was sentenced to three years in prison for disclosing confidential information.

On April 18, Taiseer Nassan, a member of the Islamic Liberation Party, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for obstructing the goals of the Ba'ath Revolution and for forgery.

On May 5, the SSSC sentenced Ismail Al-Sheikha, from Aleppo, to death for belonging to the MB. The court commuted the sentence to 12 years of hard labor.

On May 12, the SSSC sentenced Muhammad Abdulhai Shalabi, from At-Tal, to 12 years in prison for his alleged membership in the MB. The sentence was commuted to eight years.

Membership in the MB is punishable by death, although in practice the sentences were usually commuted to 12 years in prison.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

The number of political prisoners and detainees remained difficult to determine due to a continuing lack of official government information. Authorities refused to divulge information regarding numbers or names of persons in detention on political or security-related charges. Various local human rights observers estimated that between 1,500 and 3,000 political prisoners, including accused Islamists, remained in detention. Authorities refused to divulge information regarding numbers or names of persons in detention on political or security-related charges.

Since 2006 the government has tried some new political detainees in criminal court, and once convicted on political or security related charges, they were treated like common prisoners. The government did not permit regular access to political prisoners or detainees by local or international humanitarian organizations. Human rights groups reported that many political prisoners serving long-term sentences remained in prison after the expiration of their sentences.

There also were Jordanian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian, and Western political prisoners and detainees. Estimates of foreign detainees were difficult to confirm because different branches of the security services, which maintained their own incarceration facilities, held significant numbers, and there was no centralized tracking system. Detainees were frequently held for extended periods of time without trial and without information provided to their families. Finally, estimates were difficult to confirm because the government did not verify publicly the number of detentions without charge, the release of detainees or amnestied prisoners, or the subsequent sentencing of detainees to prison. In 2005 a number of human rights organizations estimated that there were between 25 and 250 remaining Lebanese prisoners in the country. During the year various Lebanese media outlets reported the numbers to be between 91 and 175.

In November 2007 the French Press Agency reported that the government agreed to release an unspecified number of Jordanian prisoners after Jordanian King Abdullah II's visit to Damascus. Authorities released 18 Jordanians in 2007, but there were no known further releases. On November 24, the Jordan Times reported that Abdul Karim Shraideh, who heads the Jordanian Committee for Defending Prisoners and Missing People, said the number of Jordanians missing in Syria was approximately 256 persons.

In March a former prisoner held in al-Hasakah Province told a human rights group that he had met two Lebanese Christian priests who had been held there since 1990. According to the witness, Syrian intelligence forces arrested Suleiman Abu Khalil and Albert Sherfan at the monastery of Beit al-Qala'a in Beit Meri, Lebanon, during a raid involving Lebanese soldiers who had taken refuge there. No additional information was available at year's end.

Former prisoners were subjected to a so-called rights ban, which lasts from the day of sentencing until seven years after the expiration of the sentence in the case of felony and three years in the case of misdemeanor convictions. In practice restrictions sometimes continued beyond that period. Persons subjected to this ban were not allowed to vote, run for office, or work in the public sector; they also were often denied passports.

On April 23, the First Military Criminal Court in Damascus sentenced Kamal Labwani to

an additional three years in jail for illegal conversations with fellow prisoners. In May 2007 the criminal court convicted Labwani of encouraging a foreign power to invade Syria and sentenced him to life in prison, commuted to 12 years. In 2005 authorities arrested Labwani upon his arrival in Damascus following a three-month trip abroad.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The law provides for an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters; however, in practice the courts are neither independent nor impartial. According to observers, approximately 95 percent of judges are either Ba'athists or closely aligned to the Ba'ath Party and therefore not independent.

Property Restitution

According to the law, a municipality may appropriate property for the public good. The municipality usually compensated individuals; however, many reported that the restitution was not fair. While individuals have the legal right to sue the municipality for more compensation, only a few win such cases.

Security forces routinely seized property and personal items of arrested and detained individuals, such as computers and mobile telephones. According to local human rights contacts, the phenomenon was too common to track or record specific cases. Security forces did not appropriate, confiscate, or catalogue these materials in accordance with the law, and although detained individuals theoretically had the right to retrieve them after release, many items remained missing.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions; however, the Emergency Law authorizes security services to enter homes and conduct searches without warrants if broadly defined security matters are involved. The security services selectively monitored telephone conversations and fax transmissions. The government opened mail addressed to both citizens and foreign residents. The government routinely monitored Internet communications, including e-mail, and either blocked or monitored access to some Web sites.

The government and the Ba'ath Party monitored and attempted to restrict some citizens' visits to foreign embassies and participation in cultural activities. There were reports during the year that invitees to diplomatic functions received phone calls from the security services instructing them not to attend.

The government did not permit new political parties or license politically based NGOs. In practice, however, the government tolerated some illegal political parties, such as the Communist Union Movement. Additionally, there were illegal parties, such as the Communist Action Party, the People's Party, and the Arab Social Union, that suffered harassment but not automatic arrest for membership. The government forbids membership in Islamist parties, and members of Islamist parties were subjected to immediate arrest and execution.

The government detained relatives of detainees and fugitives to obtain a confession or surrender, respectively, and harassed and intimidated the families of activists and political prisoners. There were unconfirmed reports that security personnel forced prisoners to watch relatives being tortured to extract confessions.

On March 6, a prison officer inappropriately touched the wife of Walid al-Bunni, a prisoner of conscience and signatory to the Damascus Declaration, while she was visiting her husband in Adra prison. According to local human rights observers, she immediately lodged a complaint with the supervising officer, who refused to hear her case.

On July 31, security forces detained the wives of three imprisoned Islamist suspects in

the village al-'Otayba, outside of Damascus, according to HRW. HRW identified the women as Usra al-Husein, wife of Jihad Diab; Raw'a al-Kilani, wife of Ziad al Kilani, detained by the SAFI in 2004; and Bayan Saleh 'Ali, wife of Ahmad Saleh 'Ali, arrested in 2005 and held in Sednaya prison on charges of membership in an association "created to change the economic and social structure of the state" and for issuing calls that weaken national sentiment and incited racial or sectarian tensions. No charges were brought against the women, and their whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press; however, the government significantly restricted these rights in practice, relying when necessary on emergency law provisions that suspend such rights and supersede constitutional practices. The government strictly controlled the dissemination of information and prohibited criticism of the government and discussion of sectarian issues including religious and ethnic minority rights. Authorities detained and abused journalists, writers, and other individuals for expressions of opinion that violated these restrictions, leading them to practice self-censorship. The government also attempted to impede criticism through monitoring of political meetings and informer networks.

Emergency law and penal code articles dealing with crimes against state security allow the government broad discretion to determine what constitutes illegal expression. The Emergency Law prohibits publication of "false information" that opposes "the goals of the revolution." Penal code articles prohibit acts or speech inciting confessionism.

On March 3, security forces reportedly detained Ammar Rashed, Saleh al-Ali, and Tayseer Omar, professors at the Shari'a College at the University of Damascus, for their public criticism of government corruption and for advocating freedom of expression. All three men were released on March 5.

On May 25, authorities reportedly cancelled a lecture on freedom of the press that journalist Mazen Darwish was to deliver, despite the Ministry of Culture's prior approval. Security forces also briefly detained Darwish in January for allegedly defaming state institutions. Darwish was sentenced to 10 days, which was later commuted to five days.

In December 2007, according to Arraee.org, an opposition Web site established by the Syrian Peoples' Democratic Party, authorities arrested Tayseer Kafa after his colleagues at the school where he worked submitted a report to authorities alleging that he criticized the government during a conversation with them. He was released on January 24.

The media were heavily influenced by the government, and the government or the Ba'ath Party owned most newspaper publishing houses. A number of quasi-independent periodicals, usually owned and operated by figures with government connections, were published during the year, including the National Progressive Front's (NPF) Communist party newspaper *The People's Voice*; the NPF's Socialist Union party's newspaper *The Unionist*; and privately owned newspapers *The Nation* (Al-Watan), *The Economy* (Al-Iktissad), and *Al-Khabar*, the latter two of which were sometimes critical of the government's economic policies and performance. The government prohibited all Kurdish-language publications, although there were credible reports that such publications were available in the country. The Ministry of Information continued to deny permission to publish *Al-Ousboua Al-Iktissadi*, a business weekly; and *Al-Riyada Wa Al-Shabab*, a new magazine for young sports fans.

The print and electronic media were critical at times of the Ba'ath Party and government performance. They reported openly on a range of social and economic issues, such as corruption in the energy and communications sectors. The media covered some Israeli-Palestinian developments factually, but others were reported selectively to support official views. For example, local media described Israeli actions in occupied

Palestinian territory as "aggression," "state terrorism," and "Israeli massacres," while describing Palestinian actions as "resistance."

While the government or the Ba'ath Party owned and operated some radio and most television companies, examples of privately owned stations included Al-Medina radio station and Ad-Douni and Al-Rai television stations. The Ministry of Information closely monitored radio and television news and entertainment programs to ensure adherence to government policies. The government did not interfere with broadcasts from abroad. Satellite dishes were widely used and available.

As in previous years government forces detained, arrested, and harassed journalists and other writers for works deemed critical of the state. Harassment included banning from the country, firing for association with international organizations, and failing to respond to requests for journalists' accreditation. The government also arrested journalists and others who wrote in Kurdish or in favor of greater Kurdish rights.

On March 13, according to a local human rights group, the SMI detained activist Adnan Hamdan, director of the Syrian Center for Freedom of Media and Expression. He was released on March 15.

On June 11, PSD authorities in Qamishli arrested writer Khaled Jamil Muhammad, according to a local human rights group. During his detention, authorities ordered Muhammad to ask his family to bring his passport, a copy of his latest book, and the texts of delivered lectures to the authorities. At year's end there was no information as to whether authorities still had these items in their custody. Muhammad remained detained at year's end.

On June 20, according to human rights observers, authorities detained Sudanese journalist Hashem Othman, editor of the journal Fada'at Dawleyeh, which was published in Syria for three years, for no known reason. Othman was released on June 21 and traveled to Khartoum, Sudan, on the same day.

On March 13, authorities reportedly released Kurdish poet Muhammad Iso, held incommunicado since his arrest in 2006. The alleged reason for his arrest was his Kurdish-language poetry and for allegedly encouraging sectarian strife.

In November a newspaper journalist was relieved of his editorial responsibilities at a local news daily for meeting with international media organizations. The name of the journalist and news outlet were withheld to protect the individual in question.

Also in November an independent private journalist was fired after criticizing the government in his editorial positions. The name of the journalist and news outlet were withheld to protect the individual in question.

The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance (MCNG) continued to censor domestic and foreign publications prior to circulation or importation and stopped circulation when content was judged to be critical or sensitive. Publication or distribution of any material deemed by security officials as threatening or embarrassing to the government was prohibited. Censorship usually was greater for materials in Arabic. Journalists also practiced self-censorship.

In February the MOI briefly halted distribution of three journals for criticizing government policies: Al-Hal, a monthly review; Al-Iktissad wa Mujtamma (Economy and Society); and Ad-Dabbour, a satirical weekly. The MOI stopped distribution of Al-Hal again in August, and at year's end the ban remained in place. After September 30, the government prevented the circulation of the Saudi-owned and London-based newspaper Al-Hayat. The government then blocked the Al-Hayat Web site several weeks later. The government also continued the 2007 decision to cease distribution of Al-Sarq Al-Awsat, a Saudi-owned, London-based newspaper. At year's end both remained unavailable.

In mid-year the moderate online news Web site DamasPost was closed down for several weeks. No specific reason was cited. In April Syria Life, an independent online news site, was closed by authorities. Again, no specific reason was given. However, its owner and editor said that he could "no longer work under these circumstances."

In 2007 the government shut down Sham Channel, owned by parliamentarian Akram al-Jindi. No reason for the closure was given. Sham Channel moved its operations to Egypt and was broadcasting into Syria at year's end.

The law prohibits the publication of "inaccurate" information, particularly if it "causes public unrest, disturbs international relations, violates the dignity of the state or national unity, affects the morale of the armed forces, or inflicts harm on the national economy and the safety of the monetary system." Persons found guilty of publishing such information are subject to prison terms ranging from one to three years and fines ranging from 500,000 to 1 million Syrian pounds (\$10,000 to \$20,000). The government used these laws during the year to suppress criticism. The law also imposes strict punishments for reporters who do not reveal their government sources in response to government requests.

Internet Freedom

The government relied on its press and publications laws, the penal code, and the Emergency Law to censor access to the Internet. The Internet was widely available in both dial-up and high-speed wireless connections. Web cafes continued to proliferate throughout the major cities. The government monitored Internet usage and in some instances blocked access to Internet sites or Web-based e-mail that contained or transmitted information deemed politically sensitive.

According to an international human rights group, all three of the country's Internet service providers regularly blocked access to a variety of Web sites. The government restricted access to Web sites associated with Kurdish opposition groups and both the MB and Syrian MB. Other electronic media that the government restricted during the year included Amazon.com, the social-networking site Facebook, YouTube, online pan-Arabic newspapers such as Asharqal-Awsat, the online phone service Skype, and online news services such as LevantNews.com. The proreform Web site All4syria.org has remained blocked since 2004.

In April authorities blocked the Web site SyriaNews.com for 10 days, according to a local human rights group.

On May 10, the SSSC sentenced Tareq Bayasi to six years in prison for publishing online comments critical of the government. The sentence was subsequently commuted to three years. According to local human rights observers, in July 2007 the SMI in Tartous summoned Bayasi, son of former political prisoner Omar Bayasi regarding comments he had made in an Internet discussion forum. The authorities detained him, transferred him to Damascus, and held him incommunicado for months. The SMI had arrested Baysi previously in June 2007 for insulting security services online.

On August 15, according to the Web site Elaph.com, authorities shut down the Web site Nazaha.com (Integrity) and detained its publisher, Abdullah Ali Suleiman, for 13 days. Founded in 2005, Nazaha.com was regularly subjected to Web-based attacks. In February 2007 hackers destroyed the site's archives.

On October 16, security agents arrested Habib Saleh for "spreading lies and undermining the state." Previously Saleh, an Elaph.com contributor, was in prison from May to September for publishing articles critical of the government on the Internet. He was arrested in 2001 and 2005 on similar charges. He had one preliminary hearing on December 1 in the Damascus Second Criminal Court. At year's end there were no further developments in his case.

There were few developments in the case of Karim 'Arbaji, detained by the Mantaqa branch of the SMI in June 2007 allegedly for moderating Akhawia.net, a popular online social and political forum for youth. According to various human rights organizations, 'Arbaji was being held at the Sednaya military prison in preparation for a June 8 trial before the SSSC. However, the SSSC did not meet in June, and a new trial date was not set. There were no further developments in this case by year's end.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Teachers generally were not permitted to express ideas contrary to government policy. Authorities permitted slightly more freedom of expression at the university level; however, the government imposed restrictions on the ability of public universities to associate with foreign cultural centers. Universities gave Ba'ath Party members preferential admissions treatment.

On March 3, according to a local human rights organization report, security forces detained Ammar Rashed, Saleh al-Ali, and Tayseer Omar, professors at the Shari'a College at the University of Damascus, for their public criticism of corruption and for advocating freedom of expression. All three men remained detained at year's end.

The MCNG censored films and exercised the right of approval over films shown at cultural centers operated by foreign embassies.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for the right of assembly; however, Emergency Law provisions superseded this right, and the government did not respect it in practice. MOI permission is needed for demonstrations or any gathering of more than three persons. During the year HRW reported that the government routinely prohibited or interrupted meetings of human rights and civil society activists. The government or the Ba'ath Party organized most public demonstrations.

The government required political forums and discussion groups to obtain prior approval to hold lectures and seminars and to submit lists of all attendees. However, several domestic human rights and civil society groups held meetings without registering with the government or obtaining prior approval. In many instances the government took steps to disrupt such gatherings or prevent them from occurring. For instance, on December 31, local police broke up a peaceful demonstration by a group of independent journalists protesting violence in Gaza. The journalists held a sit-in at the Journalists' Federation in Damascus and had requested permission from the Ministries of Interior and Information. The president of the federation, however, asked the government to break up the sit-in because it was not authorized by the federation itself.

Demonstrations occurred during the year, including some permitted or organized by the government.

For example, on January 21 and February 23, demonstrations against Israeli actions in Gaza and the West Bank took place without government interference in the Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp in the suburbs of Damascus.

On March 3 and 5, the government approved a march to protest the siege of Gaza in Damascus and Homs, respectively.

On March 6, according to a local human rights organization, authorities broke up a gathering of Kurdish families waiting in front of the SSSC to attend the hearing of five Kurdish activists. The SSSC had changed the court date without notifying family members. Authorities arrested dozens of individuals but released them within a few

hours.

On March 8, security forces fired warning shots and used tear gas to disrupt a celebration of Women's International Day in Ein al-Arab, according to human rights observers.

On April 17, police prevented approximately 400 students from making a Damascus University sponsored trip to the coast. Police ordered the students, who had gathered in front of the faculty of medicine, back into the school.

On April 19, the Syrian Committee for supporting Syrian Prisoners in Israeli Prisons organized a candle-light demonstration without government interference in front of the International Committee of the Red Cross offices in Damascus.

On May 15, quasi-government organizations sponsored a number of large rallies in major cities to protest the 60th anniversary of the founding of Israel.

On August 24, local human rights observers reported that an estimated 2,000 security and military personnel prevented a large group of demonstrators from gathering in front of the home of Mashaal Tammo, head of the Kurdish Future Movement Party. The demonstrators were protesting the government's August 15 detention of Tammo.

On October 30, an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 persons gathered in a Damascus square without government interference to protest the alleged October 26 U. S. military raid on Abu Kamal, a town on the Syria-Iraq border. Observers stated government employees were allowed to leave their offices, and a number of high-school and university classes were dismissed to ensure a large crowd.

On November 2, a coalition of Kurdish political opposition parties, including the Yeketi Party, organized a protest against Decree 49, a new law that curtails already limited property rights along the country's borders. The protest was to take place in front of the parliament building in Damascus, but as Kurdish activists gathered at a nearby staging point and began moving toward the parliament building, they were set upon by military intelligence and the police's Special Forces Unit. In all, 192 persons were arrested and released approximately 12 hours later. While the use of force was restrained, police tasered one individual in the throat.

At a December 3 event to welcome Lebanese Change and Reform Bloc leader Michel Aoun, approximately 3,000-5,000 students, parents, and journalists gathered in the Christian area of Damascus's old city with government approval. Observers stated the government pulled students out of school to ensure a good turnout.

From December 27 until the end of the year, the government actively encouraged numerous large peaceful protests against Israeli actions in Gaza. As was often the case with other protests during the year, the government frequently closed schools and released civil servants from work in an effort to increase the number of participants.

At year's end the government had not filed charges against the perpetrators of the 2006 demonstrations that destroyed the Norwegian embassy and heavily damaged the building housing the Danish, Chilean, and Swedish embassies. The embassies received some financial compensation from the government, but not enough to cover the actual cost of damages, according to diplomatic sources.

Freedom of Association

The constitution permits private associations but also grants the government the right to limit their activities. In practice the government restricted freedom of association, requiring prior registration and approval for private associations. The government often denied requests for registration or failed to act on them, presumably on political grounds. None of the approximately 14 local human rights organizations operated with a

license during the year. By year's end no license had been issued to an independent association of journalists reporting for regional Arab media, according to press reports. The government continued to block the six-year effort by journalists to form the association.

In addition, the government did not permit the establishment of independent political parties. In recent years citizens have sought to establish political parties but have not received licenses from the government. In practice, however, the government tolerated some political parties, such as the Communist Union Movement. Additionally, there are illegal parties, such as the Communist Action Party, the People's Party, and the Arab Social Union, that suffer harassment but not automatic arrest for membership. The government forbids membership in Islamist parties, and members of Islamist parties were subjected to immediate arrest and execution.

The government granted registration to some groups not engaged in political or other activities deemed sensitive. However, the government restricted the activities of associations and their members, and the executive boards of professional associations were not independent.

On March 18, according to a human rights organization, the SSSC sentenced Taiseer Naasan, who allegedly belonged to the Islamic Liberation Party, to 12 years in prison for belonging to an organization "created to change the economic or social structure of the state," opposing the objectives of the revolution, and forgery. On the same day, five other individuals – Hilal Hameed, Adel Ahmed Hajj, Jumaa Hussein Shehada, Yasir Hameed Saleh, and Muhammad al-Gallway – were sentenced to prison terms of seven to 12 years for their alleged membership in an organization "created to change the economic or social structure of the state." The men had been in detention since 2005.

On November 2, the Court of Cassation overturned an August 20 ruling by the second criminal court of Damascus that had rejected Michel Kilo's and Mahmoud Issa's request for early release. Kilo and Issa were arrested in 2006 and sentenced in May 2007 to three years in prison for "weakening national sentiment." Before Kilo and Issa were released, however, the prosecutor appealed the decision. On December 15, the Court of Cassation in a plenary appeal session ruled against Kilo and Issa's early release, requiring them to serve their full sentences.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice; however, it imposed some restrictions. The government discouraged public proselytism and monitored groups it considered to practice militant Islam. Human rights organizations reported that alleged Islamist prisoners and detainees were subject to torture and mistreatment in custody. The government continued its 1964 ban of Jehovah's Witnesses; however, they continued to practice their religion privately.

There is no official state religion; however, the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. Sunni Muslims constituted approximately 74 percent of the population. Other Muslim groups, including Alawi, Ismailis, and Shi'a, constituted an estimated 13 percent of the population. The Druze accounted for an estimated 3 percent of the population, while various Christian denominations accounted for the remaining 10 percent.

All religions and religious orders must register with the government, which monitored fundraising and required permits for all meetings by religious groups, except for worship. The constitution stipulates the separation of religious institutions and the state; however, the government routinely intervened in and controlled religious groups up to and including the grand mufti, who is appointed by the government. Religious groups tended to avoid any involvement in internal political affairs.

The government generally refrained from involvement in strictly religious issues.

However, a local human rights group stated that in February, in the northeastern province of Deir Ezzor, the SMI arrested a number of citizens for their opposition to Shiite proselytism in the area, especially in the town of Khatlah. The human rights group stated that the detainees were affiliated with moderate Sufiism. Three of the detained were identified as Tareq al-Hasan (civil engineer), Ahmad To'mah (dentist), and Ahmad al-Rumh (teacher and speaker at the Mus'ab Ibn Umair' Mosque in Deir Ezzor). The government cited national security as the reason for barring Jewish citizens from government employment, serving in the armed forces, and maintaining contact with Israel. Jews also were the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards noted their religion. Jewish citizens had to obtain permission from the security services before traveling abroad and faced excessive government scrutiny when applying for licenses, deeds, or other official documents. The government enforced a law against exporting historical and cultural treasures to prohibit the Jewish community from sending historical Torahs abroad.

All public schools are overseen by the government and are nonsectarian; however, Christian and Druze minorities operated a number of private schools that followed the state curriculum. There was mandatory religious instruction in schools with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religion courses were divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the government permitted the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), and Chaldean as "liturgical languages."

Muslims and Christians are subject to their respective religious laws on marriage and divorce. In 2006 a new Personal Status Law for Catholics went into effect, giving Catholics their own laws for adoption, inheritance, and guardianship. Previously, Catholics were subject to some Shari'a-based laws. Orthodox and other Christians remained subject to Shari'a in matters pertaining to adoption, inheritance, and guardianship. In matters pertaining to marriage and divorce, however, Orthodox and other Christians were to follow the laws of their respective churches. Regardless of religion, however, child custody laws for all children remained based on Shari'a.

Although the law does not prohibit proselytizing, in practice the government discouraged such activity, deeming it a threat to relations among religious groups. Foreign missionaries were present but operated discreetly.

The government considered militant Islam a threat and monitored its adherents. The government also monitored and controlled sermons and dictated that mosques (except those which are major tourist sites) remain closed outside of prayer time.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There was little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities. Some Islamic education textbooks stated that Christians and Jews resident in Islamist states should pay jiziah (a special tax).

Societal conventions as well as religious and theological proscriptions made conversions relatively rare, especially from Islam to Christianity. In many cases societal pressure forced those who undertook such conversions to relocate within the country or leave the country altogether to practice their religion openly.

There were no reported acts of physical violence against, or harassment of, Jewish persons, an estimated 100 of whom lived in the country, according to the Israeli Web site Haaretz.com. The government condoned anti-Semitism in state-owned radio and television programming, newspapers, and other mass media. Anti-Israel material was widespread, some of which carried anti-Semitic overtones.

On February 11, Syrian Satellite TV in Damascus aired "Circle of Events," a live talk show hosted by Nidal Qabalan. In his opening comments he made reference to "Nazi Zionists." One of the guests on the show, Hasan Junyeh, a professor of international law, stated that Israel did not have a democratic government, but a "Fascist Zionist regime."

On March 3, an editorial appearing in Damascus Syria Times argued that only a concerted effort by nations in the region could halt the "neo-Nazi Israeli genocide."

On March 9, Damascus Syria Times published an on-line article that criticized United States support of "Israeli neo-Nazis."

On March 9, Al-Thawra published an Internet article that accused the Western media of not paying attention to "the Zionist holocaust in Gaza."

On April 11, Al-Thawra published an article on the Internet that stated the crimes of Israel were "worse than the Nazi and Fascist crimes."

On May 17, in reaction to the U. S. president's speech before the Knesset, Tishrin published an article accusing both major U. S. political parties of being committed to the "religious edicts of Zionist rabbis" and that these edicts were more "racist, brutal, and terrorist than the Nazi pronouncements."

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2008 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The constitution provides for freedom of movement "within the territories of the state unless restricted by a judicial decision or by the implementation of laws." While citizens are ostensibly free to travel internationally, the government limited freedom of movement in practice by requiring citizens to apply for exit visas.

The government maintained security checkpoints, primarily in military and other restricted areas. There were few police checkpoints on main roads or in populated areas. The security services used checkpoints to conduct searches without warrants for smuggled goods, weapons, narcotics, and subversive literature.

During the year the government increased the use of travel bans to prevent more than 100 critics of the regime, human rights activists, political reformers, and civil society leaders from leaving the country. The government usually applied travel bans without any explanation for their basis or duration, even when individuals needed to travel for health reasons. In some cases citizens learned of the ban against their travel only after being prevented from departing the country.

Individuals whom the government banned from traveling internationally during the year included a naturalized American citizen of Syrian descent; Mustafa Haied, prohibited from leaving the country for alleged security reasons; Abdulhafeez Hafez, whose place of work (a library) was also raided by security forces; lawyer, former cabinet minister, and Democratic Arab Socialist Union deputy general secretary Muhammad Abdul-Majeed Manjounah, who reportedly planned to travel to Yemen to attend a Pan-Arab conference; Radeef Moustapha, chairman of the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights in Syria, who planned to travel to France to attend a training workshop; writer and journalist Khaled Smeisima; Dr. Hassan Abbas, a translator and professor; Mazen Darwish, head of the Syrian Center for Media and the Freedom of Expression; internationally acclaimed film director Muhammed Malas, who planned to travel to Paris and Rome on film-related business; Ma'rouf Mulla Ahmed, senior member of the Kurdish Yekiti Party; Abdul Satter Qattan, a human rights activist and former prisoner of conscience; Rajaa An-Nasser, secretary of the Arab Democratic Socialist Union party; and Muhanad al-Hasani, chairman of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. There were no updates on travel bans instituted in previous years.

During the year authorities also reportedly imposed heavy fines on more than 10 women from neighboring Gulf states before they could return to their home countries. Human rights observers believed the fines evinced corrupt government officials' attempts at extortion.

Travel to Israel is illegal, and the government restricted travel near the Golan Heights.

Women over the age of 18 have the legal right to travel without the permission of male relatives; however, a husband or a father may file a request with the MOI to prohibit his wife or minor dependents' departure from the country.

The government refused to recognize the citizenship of, or grant identity documents to, approximately 300,000 persons of Kurdish descent. Lack of citizenship or identity documents restricted their travel to and from the country. In his inauguration speech in July 2007, the president stated again that the government would try to resolve the issue of stateless Kurds; however, at year's end there had been no progress. Syrian emigrants who did not complete mandatory military service could pay a fee to avoid conscription while visiting the country. Persons of Syrian origin who were born in a foreign country but were able to demonstrate service in the army of the country of birth were exempted from military service without payment.

Until September 2007, as has been long-standing practice, citizens of Arab League countries were able to enter the country without a visa for a stay of up to three months, a period that could be renewed. On September 10, 2007, the government, citing the ongoing Iraqi refugee crisis, required all Iraqis to obtain a visa before entry. The government postponed implementation of this new policy until October 1. At year's end Iraqis needed a visa to enter the country; however, the extent to which this policy was being enforced at the border and the exact visa requirements remained unclear.

Residency permits required proof of employment and a fixed address in the country. Officials continued to assert publicly that nonpermanent resident males between the ages of 18 and 30 could be denied entry for a number of reasons, including traveling alone, student or recent graduate status, residence in a country other than their own, and "suspicious" travel abroad.

The constitution prohibits forced exile, and there were no reports of forced exile during the year.

The law provides for the prosecution of any person who attempts to seek refuge in another country to escape a penalty in Syria. Persons who have unsuccessfully sought asylum in other countries and who have past connections with the MB have been prosecuted upon their return to Syria. The government routinely arrested both dissidents and former citizens with no known political affiliation who tried to return to the country after years or even decades in exile.

On January 16, security services arrested Izzideen Muhammad Hussein, a Syrian and German citizen, upon his arrival at Damascus International Airport and held him for three days. No reason for his arrest was given.

On February 2, the PSD reportedly arrested Faisal Ahmad al-Kurdi at Damascus International Airport upon his arrival from Germany where he lived. Before traveling, the report stated, al-Kurdi sought and received assurances from the Syrian embassy in Berlin that he was not wanted by any Syrian security branch, and al-Kurdi had completed his required military service. He was reportedly held for several days and then released.

On March 9, the SMI in Aleppo arrested Abdul Rahman al-Khamis a few weeks after his return from Saudi Arabia, where he had lived for the last 25 years, according to a local human rights group. Authorities reportedly gave no reason for the arrest and released al-Khamis on April 27.

On August 8, authorities reportedly arrested Syrian-Czech citizen Na'eem Nasla upon his arrival at Aleppo airport from the Czech Republic where he lived and worked. He was transferred to the SMI Palestine Branch for interrogation and released on August 11.

On October 9, authorities reportedly arrested Fuad Hussein, a British national of Palestinian descent, at the Syrian-Jordanian border, according to human rights observers. Hussein was traveling to Damascus with his wife to visit her relatives. Hussein, an engineer, left Britain three years ago to live in Jordan. He suffers from a number of health conditions, including high blood pressure and diabetes. There was no further information on his status or confirmation on his nationality at year's end.

Protection of Refugees

The government is not a party to either the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 protocol. It generally cooperated with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in assisting internally displaced persons, refugees, stateless persons, and asylum seekers and respected UNHCR's eligibility determinations regarding asylum seekers. Generally, the government provided some protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened. One notable exception to this was the detention and alleged forced return of several Iranian Ahvazis who were recognized refugees.

The Ahvazi Centre for Human Rights and other sources reported that the government arrested and returned seven Ahvazis to Iranian authorities during the year. These include Danish citizen Saied Hammadi, arrested on March 5 at Damascus International Airport, and Masouma Al-Kaabi, wife of Habib Jaber, a refugee in Denmark, and their five children, who were arrested in Damascus on September 28.

UNRWA reported that there were approximately 450,000 registered Palestinian refugees in the country during the year. The General Authority of Palestinian Arab Refugees in Syria, the government agency established to coordinate assistance and protection to refugees, continued to provide assistance to Palestinian refugees during the year. Palestinian refugees with Syrian travel documents generally reported little difficulty traveling in and out of the country. The government refused to permit the full integration of these Palestinians into Syrian society. At year's end there were approximately 300 Palestinian refugees from Iraq registered at al-Hol, while another group of over 900 Iraqi Palestinians remained stranded between the Iraq-Syria border at the al-Tanf crossing. Other sources have reported that security forces deported some Palestinian refugees (coming from Iraq) from Damascus, where they sometimes tried to blend into the larger Palestinian community or pass themselves off as Iraqis, to the camp at al-Tanf.

On October 9, according to Lebanese media outlets Al-Liwaa and Naharnet.com, security agents killed Palestinian refugee Abu Ibrahim in the unofficial Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk. Abu Ibrahim (which was the individual's alias) was married to Wafaa al-Absi, the daughter of Shaker al-Absi, a leader of Fatah al-Islam.

As of November more than 219,000 Iraqi refugees registered with the UNHCR, and most received legal and material assistance from the UNHCR and other international and nongovernmental humanitarian organizations. On November 17, the government and UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding that stipulates for UNHCR to support the efforts of the government in providing medical services to Iraqi refugees until the end of 2008. No new memorandum was signed by year's end. The government estimated in September that approximately 1.2 million displaced Iraqis lived in the country with valid visas. It is not known how many Iraqis are in the country without visas.

In October, approximately 400 Iraqi Christians, fleeing violent attacks aimed at the Christian community in Mosul, Iraq, crossed into northern Syria as refugees. According to its Web site UNHCR has been closely monitoring the situation in order to ensure these refugees are given proper assistance upon arrival in Syria. AT year's end, the UNHCR has registered or is in the process of registering around 45 families from Mosul (20 in Aleppo and the rest in Damascus) and has begun assessing them for emergency grants and food assistance.

The government generally continued to honor UNHCR's request that states maintain some temporary protection for all Iraqi asylum seekers and persons whose applications have been rejected. The government recognized refugees whose cases had been suspended by resettlement countries during the year. However, UNHCR received unconfirmed reports that the government deported some Iraqis during the year.

UNHCR does not promote voluntary repatriation to Iraq; however, given that some families are returning, UNHCR provided counseling and assistance to 68 returning families. According to UNHCR figures, during the year 8,180 persons from Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Algeria, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Iran were recognized as refugees or had asylum cases pending.

There are no direct provisions in the law giving refugees the right to work. However, according to UNRWA, the rules for employment of citizens were applicable to Palestinian refugees provided that they have been living in the country for at least ten years. Obtaining a work permit is a lengthy and complicated process; refugees were rarely granted a permit. In reality many refugees found daily labor in the informal sector mainly as guards, construction workers, street vendors, and in other manual labor jobs. There were reports of refugees, particularly Iraqi girls and women, who worked in the country as prostitutes, but no reliable statistics were available.

Most public schools were unable to accommodate fully the large number of children of Iraqi refugees. The government allowed Iraqi children to attend schools, and according to a UNHCR estimate, more than 49,000 Iraqi children were enrolled in public schools during the 2007/2008 academic year. Many Iraqi children were still not attending school for multiple reasons including overcrowded schools, difficulties with the curriculum, and previous psychological trauma of the parents and children.

Stateless Persons

Citizenship is derived from the father, not place of birth or birth mother. Following the 1962 census, approximately 120,000 Syrian Kurds lost their citizenship, which the government has never restored. As a result, those who lost their nationality, including their children, remained severely disadvantaged in participating in civil life and in receiving government services including health and education, as well as employment open only to citizens. Stateless Kurds had limited access to university education. UNHCR and Refugees International estimated there were approximately 300,000 stateless Kurds.

Despite the president's repeated promises to work to resolve the issue of the Kurds, the latest in his July 2007 inauguration speech, no progress was made during the year.

3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution requires that the president be elected by referendum, and the parliament selects a presidential candidate at the discretion of the regional Ba'ath Party leadership. A presidential candidate is then approved by a majority of votes in a popular referendum. Although citizens vote for the president and MPs, in practice they did not have the right to change their government because elections were neither free nor fair.

Elections and Political Participation

No general elections took place during the year on the parliamentary, presidential, or local levels. However, on November 9, the Damascus Chamber of Commerce (DCC) held elections. Eight DCC officials, who ran together on a single slate, were re-elected. Another incumbent won election as an independent. Voters elected in three new members, two of whom ran together and one who ran as an independent. Eligible voters for DCC elections must own a properly government-registered business, be registered with the DCC, and have paid in full all DCC dues. No foreign national business owners, with the exception of Palestinians who have Syrian residency documents, are eligible to vote in these elections. For the DCC election, 7,150 out of 30,000 members were eligible

to vote; 2,513 actually voted. DCC conducts elections on an open list system for the twelve available seats: candidates can run together as a slate or independently. There are no restrictions on how many candidates can appear on a single slate. Voters may choose to vote for a whole slate, selected individuals on a slate, as well as independents.

In 2007 presidential, parliamentary, and local elections occurred. International election monitors were not allowed to enter the country to observe any of the elections. International and local human rights advocates judged all three elections as neither free nor fair and asserted that they served to reassert the primacy and political monopoly of power wielded by President al-Asad and the Ba'ath Party apparatus.

In May 2007 an unopposed referendum confirmed Bashar al-Asad as president for a second seven-year term. Although some opposition groups estimated voter turnout at significantly less than 50 percent, government statistics declared al-Asad had won 98 percent of the vote with voter turnout officially reported at 96 percent. Outside observers uniformly dismissed the voter statistics as fraudulent and not representative of observed participation. Citizens were not formally required by law to vote; however, voters received a stamp on their voter card, which authorities sometimes requested when providing services.

The president appoints the vice presidents, prime minister, deputy prime ministers, and Council of Ministers and has the discretion to change these appointments. The president and his senior aides, particularly those in the military and security services, made most political and economic decisions with a very limited degree of public accountability.

The president and the Ba'ath Party suppressed political opposition. The constitution provides that the Ba'ath Party is the ruling party and ensures it has a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers' and women's groups. The Ba'ath Party and nine other smaller satellite political parties comprise the NPF, originally established in 1971. The NPF represented the only framework for legal political party participation for citizens; however, the Ba'ath Party dominated it, and the one-party character of the political system remained.

The Ba'ath Party dominated the 250-member parliament, or People's Council. Parliamentarians can criticize policies and modify draft laws; however, the executive branch retains ultimate control over the legislative process. During parliamentary and local elections in August 2007, NPF candidates won an overwhelming majority of offices in elections observers characterized as neither free nor fair. Some carefully vetted independents were permitted to run and win seats at both levels.

Women and minorities, with the exception of the Jewish population and stateless Kurds, participated in the political system without restriction. During the year, a female vice president and two female cabinet ministers were in office. Thirty of the 250 MPs were women.

The government did not provide information on the ethnic or religious composition of parliament or the cabinet. According to human rights observers, ethnic and religious minorities claimed they had no genuine representation in the government.

In 2004 the government banned all political activities by the 12 Syrian Kurdish parties, although enforcement has varied. The Syrian MB has remained banned in the country since 1963.

Government Corruption and Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption; however, corruption and impunity remained serious problems. It is rare for the highest-level officials to be exposed to corruption charges. In nearly all cases, such charges were used by the regime as a political tool to attack its perceived enemies or rivals.

At year's end the government had dismissed approximately 300 public employees on charges of corruption and similar abuses.

There are no laws providing for public access to government information. There are no public financial disclosure laws for public officials.

4. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There were no legal domestic human rights groups, but approximately 14 human rights groups operated illegally in the country. During the year there were reports of government harassment of domestic human rights activists, including regular, close surveillance and the imposition of travel bans on them as they sought to attend workshops and conferences outside the country.

The government stated that it responds in writing to all inquiries from NGOs regarding human rights issues, including the cases of individual detainees and prisoners, through an interagency governmental committee attached to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. However, NGOs reported that they rarely receive responses from the Ministry. The government normally responded to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by claiming that the case was still under investigation, that the prisoner in question violated national security laws, or, if the case was in criminal court, that the country has an independent judiciary and the executive cannot interfere.

In general the government remained highly suspicious of international human rights NGOs and typically did not allow them into the country; however, in June and July 2007 the Swiss NGO Geneva Institute for Human Rights offered human rights training for police officers in the country. The NGO worked closely with and eventually received the sponsorship of the MOI. Neither HRW nor AI visited the country during the year.

In past years the government had never allowed an international NGO to set up aid and development operations in the country. By year's end, according to the UNHCR, the government had signed memoranda of understanding with 10 international humanitarian NGOs (Première Urgence, the Danish Refugee Council, International Medical Corps, the Qatari Red Crescent, the Institut Européen de Coopération et de Développement, the Turkish Blue Crescent, Enfants du Monde Droits de l'Homme, HELP, International Rescue Committee, and the Islamic Relief France), officially authorizing them to begin work in the country. At year's end three of the 10 had begun operating: Première Urgence, the Danish Refugee Council, and International Medical Corps.

As a matter of policy, the government has denied in the past to international human rights groups that it commits human rights abuses.

On February 14, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres visited the country and met with President Asad. Guterres stated that he received assurances from the president that Iraqi refugees would not be sent back against their will.

From April 7 to 10, UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd attended meetings with First Lady Asma al-Asad, the prime minister, the deputy minister of foreign affairs, and the minister of social affairs and labor to discuss UNRWA's growing microfinance program, its Neirab rehousing project in Aleppo, its reform efforts, and the overall situation of Palestine refugees in the country. She returned for the October 14 launch of UNRWA's "Violence-Free Schools" campaign and the opening of new school buildings in Homs and Khan Eshieh camps. The General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees supported her visit and cooperated in the Agency's campaign. As in past years, UNRWA reported having a "highly productive" working relationship with the Syrian government.

On June 9, 23 members and observers from the UNRWA Advisory Commission visited a Damascus refugee training center and a number of projects in the Yarmouk Camp. In

addition, the commission held a meeting on June 10 and 11 under Syria's chairmanship. UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd attended.

5. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution provides for equal rights and equal opportunity for all citizens, and discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, or social status is prohibited; however, the government did not enforce the law effectively. For example, membership in the Ba'ath Party or close familial relations with a prominent party member or powerful government official helped economic, social, or educational advancement. Party or government connections paved the way for entrance into better elementary and secondary schools, access to lucrative employment, and greater power within the government, the military, and the security services. Certain prominent positions, such as that of provincial governor, were reserved solely for Ba'ath Party members. There was governmental and societal discrimination against stateless Kurds and Jews.

Women

Rape is a felony; however, there are no laws against spousal rape. According to the law, "the punishment for a man who rapes a woman (other than his wife) is at least 15 years in prison." However, if the individual who commits the crime agrees to marry the victim, he faces no punishment. The victim's family sometimes agrees to this arrangement to avoid the social scandal and stigma attached to rape. If the victim is too young for marriage, the rapist receives a longer prison sentence. No statistics were kept on spousal rape because it is not a crime under the law.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, and violence against women occurred during the year. A 2006 study reported that as many as one in four women surveyed had been victims of violence. The vast majority of domestic violence and sexual assault cases likely went unreported, as some victims were reluctant to seek assistance outside the family. Observers reported that when some abused women tried to file a police report, the police did not respond aggressively, if at all, to their claims. Women reported incidents at police stations of sexual harassment, verbal abuse, hair pulling, and slapping by police officers when attempting to file police reports, particularly at the Criminal Security branch at Bab Musallah in Damascus.

Victims of domestic violence have the legal right to seek redress in court, but few did so because of the social stigma attached to such action. The Syrian Women's Federation offered counseling services to battered wives to remedy individual family problems. The Syrian Family Planning Association also provided counseling. Some private groups, including the Family Planning Association, organized seminars on violence against women. There was believed to be at least one private shelter specifically designated for battered women who fled from their husbands.

The law specifically provides for reduced sentences in "honor" crimes; however, the government began to discuss changing the law. In October the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministries of Justice and Religious Endowments, convened a national forum to discuss the revocation of laws mitigating punishment for honor killings, and parliamentarians in attendance reportedly voiced support for the repeal.

No official statistics were kept on honor crimes, and when cases were reported, full names were rarely given. Advocacy groups did not release full names in order to protect victims. However, there were numerous press and anecdotal reports of honor crimes throughout the year.

In late December 2007 or early January 2008, Muhammad Saleem Kefaya slit the throat of his sister, Yasmina Kefaya, and then immediately turned himself into the police, claiming that he had killed her to "wash away" the family's dishonor. Authorities had previously arrested Muhammad and Yasmina for theft and prostitution, respectively. There were no new developments on this case at year's end.

A women's advocacy Web site reported on January 5 that 22-year-old Eman Watta was killed by her brother at their home near Idlib, in northwestern Syria. Watta's shame was that her husband divorced her and returned her to her parents' home because he suspected her of being disloyal. Watta's brother surrendered himself to police. At year's end there was no further information as to whether police had actually charged and imprisoned the individual.

On February 28, a 23-year-old man named Haitham reportedly attempted to kill his 20-year-old sister Widad for having a second marriage without a legal divorce from her first husband. Haitham shot at his sister but hit and critically injured her second husband instead. There were no further developments in the case at year's end.

In May, in Latakia, according to the Web site of the International Campaign Against Honor Killings, a local court sentenced an unidentified male to 15 years' imprisonment for the murder by shooting of his sister. The court made its decision based on a coroner's report stating that the victim's hymen was intact. The defendant claimed to have been told that his sister was concealing a pregnancy.

On May 10, 14-year-old Zeina Daadoush was killed by her brother because of her purported relationship with a 16-year-old male youth.

In September a man reportedly shot and killed his two sisters, Safanah and Joumana, in Ragga for dishonoring their family. The sisters had left home in 2007 without telling their family. The family filed a missing persons report with the police, which eventually led to the detention of the two sisters. Police released the two sisters to family members after the family signed a statement forswearing violent punishment. Eight months after their return, their brother killed them both at home and then surrendered to police. There were no further developments in the case at year's end.

On September 15, a local women's advocacy Web site reported that in the town of Idlib, 17-year-old Dardaa was killed by her father as a result of her alleged involvement with a married man. The married man reportedly lured Dardaa to Damascus with the prospect of marriage. After a short time, he returned her to her family, never having married her. At year's end there were no further developments in this case.

There were no new developments in the January 2007 case of the honor killing of 16-year-old Zahra al-Ezzo by her brother.

The law prohibits prostitution, but it was not strictly enforced. During the year there was evidence that Iraqi women residing in the country, including minors, were increasingly resorting to prostitution in order to survive. Police placed criminal liability in nearly all the cases on the person in prostitution, not others involved. Anecdotal evidence also suggested that the country was a destination for sex tourism for men from other countries in the region.

The UNHCR observed that there was a growing practice of muta'a, a temporary pleasure marriage conducted by some Shiite clerics. The length of these marriages are predetermined at the outset and become null and void once the agreed-upon term has passed. They can last as little as one day and primarily serve individuals seeking to legitimize patronizing prostitutes. However, the majority of Shiite clerics viewed the practice as suspect and did not conduct such marriages.

The law prohibits sexual harassment and specifies different punishments depending on whether the victim is a minor or an adult. Sexual harassment was rarely reported.

The constitution provides for equality between men and women and equal pay for equal work. Moreover, the government sought to overcome traditional discriminatory attitudes toward women and encouraged women's education by ensuring equal access to educational institutions, including universities. The Commission for Family Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labor all share responsibilities

in ensuring legal rights of women.

The government has not changed personal status, retirement, or social security laws that discriminate against women. Under criminal law, if a man and woman separately commit the same criminal act of adultery, the woman's punishment is double that of the man's. Also, for Muslims personal status law is based on the government's interpretation and application of Shari'a, which discriminates against women.

Husbands and wives can claim adultery as grounds for divorce; however, criminal law discriminates against women in this regard. A man can be accused of adultery only if his actions occur in the home that he shares with his wife; a woman can be accused of adultery regardless of venue. The court accepts any evidence a man presents when claiming adultery; if a woman attempts to file for divorce based on adultery, her husband must admit to the crime, or there must be a third witness to the act. During the year there were no reported cases where a woman successfully filed for divorce based on adultery.

A divorced woman might not be entitled to alimony in some cases, particularly if she gave up her right to it in order to persuade her husband to agree to the divorce. In addition, under the Personal Status Law modified in 2003, a divorced mother loses the right to physical custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13 and of her daughters at age 15. Guardianship, or control over exercise of the legal rights of the children, always goes to the paternal side of the family after the age of 13 and 15, respectively.

Inheritance for all citizens except Catholics is based on the government's interpretation of Shari'a. Accordingly, Muslim women usually were granted half of the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities, however, male heirs must provide financial support to the female relatives who inherit less. If they do not, females have the right to sue. During the year, however, there were reports that in some regions of the country custom prevailed over the law, and women were denied any inheritance whatsoever.

For example, Turkish Weekly reported on October 18 that local communities in Deir al-Zur, a rural region in the northeastern region, denied women their legal inheritance. This report was based on a study conducted during the year by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. According to the article, family and community members threatened and intimidated women into giving up pursuit of their lawful inheritance. In some cases women gave up their rights voluntarily.

Polygamy is legal but was practiced only by a small number of Muslims.

A husband, or any male relative, may request that his wife and his wife's children's travel abroad be prohibited. While official statistics were not available, foreign embassies reported a number of such incidents during the year. Women participated actively in public life and were represented in most professions, including the armed forces. Women were not impeded from owning or managing land or other real property. During the year women constituted approximately 13 percent of judges, 18 percent of lawyers, 65 percent of teachers below university level, 27 percent of university professors, and 49 percent of university graduates. In addition, women accounted for 30 MPs, one cabinet minister, and one vice president. The president promoted a former cabinet minister to the position of political and media advisor to the president; she maintained ministerial rank.

Children

The government provided free public education to citizen children from primary school through university. Education is compulsory for all children, male and female, between the ages of six and 12. Noncitizen children could also attend public schools for free but required prior permission from the Ministry of Education. According to a 2005 joint study by the UN Development Program and the State Planning Commission, 49.6 percent of students through the secondary level were female. Nevertheless, societal pressure for early marriage and childbearing interfered with girls' educational progress, particularly

in rural areas, where the dropout rates for female students remained high.

In general Palestinians and other noncitizens, including stateless Kurds, can send their children to school and universities; however, stateless Kurds are ineligible to receive a degree documenting their academic achievement.

The legal age for marriage is 18 for males and 17 for females. However, a male 15 years of age or older and a female 13 years of age or older may be married if both are deemed by a judge to be willing parties to the marriage and "physically mature" and with consent by the father or grandfather. While underage marriage has declined considerably in the past decades, it was still common in the country. It occurred in all communities but tended to be more prevalent in rural and lesser-developed regions.

The law provides for severe penalties for those found guilty of the most serious abuses against children. Although there were cases of child abuse, there was no societal pattern of abuse against children.

Human rights organizations reported multiple cases where security services detained minors and placed them in adult prisons.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits trafficking in persons; however, the government does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and did not make significant efforts to do so during the year. Syria was a destination and transit country for women trafficked from South and Southeast Asia and Africa for the purpose of domestic servitude and from Eastern Europe and Iraq for sexual exploitation. There were no statistics available on the scope and type of trafficking that exists.

There were reports by NGOs and the press indicating that Iraqi women and girls may be subjected to forced commercial sexual exploitation, some by Iraqi criminal networks in the country. No reliable statistics were available regarding the number of Iraqi refugees working as prostitutes. Credible sources reported that police detained and either released or deported back to Iraq approximately six to 10 Iraqi girls and 50 to 70 women each month for prostitution. In many cases where women or girls were returned to Iraq, they were frequently re trafficked back into Syria. Police placed criminal liability in nearly all on the female, not the traffickers.

A 2003 International Organization for Migration (IOM) study also indicated that some individuals brought into the country to work as domestic workers suffered conditions that constituted involuntary servitude, including physical and sexual abuse, threats of deportation or other legal consequences, denial or delayed payment of wages, withholding of passports, and restriction of movement. The IOM study documented cases in which manpower agencies in the country that hired foreign domestic workers lured some victims through fraudulent or deceptive offers of employment, despite the fact that such manpower agencies are banned.

The penal code stipulates that whoever incarcerates another person is subjected to a prison sentence of six months to two years, including hard labor if the incarceration lasts for more than one month or includes torture. The law also states that any foreigner who tries to enter the country with false documentation and anyone who may have aided that foreigner is subject to imprisonment of three months to one year and a fine of 500 to 2,000 pounds (\$10-\$40). However, these laws were not enforced for antitrafficking purposes in practice during the year.

The government did not provide victims of trafficking with shelter or other rehabilitative services, and some minor victims were reportedly housed in juvenile detention facilities.

In August Oasis, a women's shelter in Damascus, opened its doors under the supervision of the Association for Women's Role Development, a local organization sponsored by

First Lady Asma al-Asad.

The UNHCR operated several safe houses in Damascus for women deemed "at risk." They provided financial assistance to more than 20,000 female victims at all age levels, 2,116 of whom represented single female households.

On December 31, the first shelter for victims of trafficking in the country opened in cooperation between the IOM, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MSAL), and local NGOs. MSAL provided the premises for the shelter, which provided victims a temporary safe haven, psychosocial support, life skills development, and return and reintegration assistance. It also provided direct livelihood assistance to potential vulnerable groups of Iraqi women and children and other nationalities.

In addition, a local Christian convent operated a women's shelter and a daily hot line, and it also offered free legal counsel.

The government also does not regulate illegal employment agencies that bring in and, in some cases, facilitate victims' exploitation. The governments of Sri Lanka, Indonesia, East Timor, and the Philippines banned their citizens from taking employment as domestic workers in the country due to the absence of formal mechanisms to regulate such employment. Despite public statements by officials of their intent to pass legislation to regulate private manpower agencies, which operated illegally in the country, no progress on the matter was made public.

See also the State Department's [2008 Trafficking in Persons Report](#).

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities and seeks to integrate them into the public sector work force; however, implementation remained inconsistent. The law protects persons with disabilities from being discriminated against when it comes to education, access to health, or provision of other state services. Government regulations reserve 4 percent of government and public-sector jobs for persons with disabilities. There are no laws that mandate access to public buildings for persons with disabilities. MSAL is responsible for assisting persons with disabilities and worked through dedicated charities or organizations to provide assistance, often to promote self-sufficiency through vocational training.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The government generally permitted national and ethnic minorities to conduct traditional, religious, and cultural activities; however, the government's attitude toward the Kurdish minority remained a significant exception.

Security services arrested hundreds of Kurdish citizens during the year, and the SSSC prosecuted them, in most cases on charges of seeking to annex part of Syria to another country.

On February 17, security forces reportedly arrested two Kurdish activists and PYD supporters, Jehan Muhammad Ali and Hanifa Habo, after the two attended a demonstration in Aleppo on the anniversary of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan's arrest. Both men remained detained at year's end.

On February 20, security services reportedly arrested Kurdish citizen Jaker Khwen Mala Ahmad for his participation in the Yekiti party. He was released on February 25 without being charged.

On March 4, authorities arrested Kurdish citizen Nalin Jamal Sarik, who had participated in a PYD-sponsored gathering in Qamishli.

On April 22, authorities reportedly arrested four Kurds in Ifreen, including Muhammad Rasho, Bakara Muslim, and Saema Ismael. There were no further developments in this case at year's end.

On March 20, according to a local human rights group, authorities arrested Aras al-Yosef and Bawer Abdulrazaq Oso, both Kurds and university students. Al-Yosef and Oso were released on March 21 and 23, respectively.

On May 5, a security patrol reportedly arrested two Kurds, Bahrouz Sarif Yousef and Hussein Biro Darwish, in Damascus. A human rights organization's report alleged the reason for their detention was their public stance on Kurdish issues. Yousef was released in July; there were no further developments in Darwish's case at year's end.

On October 26, security forces reportedly arrested two leaders of the Kurdish Azadi Party, Saadun Mahmoud Sheykho and Muhammed Said Hussein al-Omar, and detained them in Ra's al-Ayn, a city on the Turkish border in northeastern Syria. At year's end their whereabouts remained unknown.

On November 2, Hervin Osse, Hasan Saleh, Fouad Aleko, and Abdul Hakim Bashar were among more than 191 Kurds whom security forces arrested in connection with an attempted demonstration in front of the parliament building in Damascus. The protesters intended a peaceful sit-in, but they were rounded up by police before reaching the parliament. Nearly all were released the same evening.

On March 5, authorities released Kurdish political activist Marouf Mella Ahmad. Mella, a leading figure in the Yeketi Party, was detained in August 2007.

According to a human rights group, during the year authorities released from detention 36 Kurdish youth held since November 2007. All the individuals were reportedly from Ein al-Arab, a small city on the Syria-Turkey border.

There were no further developments in the 2007 case of Muhammad Khalil Abo Zaid.

The trial of 49 Kurds connected to the 2005 protest following Kurdish Sheikh Mashook al-Khaznawi's kidnapping and death continued at year's end with no notable developments, despite the government's announcement that they were granted amnesty in 2006. The most recent trial appearance took place on March 13, at which time the trial was postponed until August 5. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

Although the government contended that there was no discrimination against the Kurdish population, it placed limits on the use and teaching of the Kurdish language. It also restricted the publication of books and other materials written in Kurdish, Kurdish cultural expression, and at times, the celebration of Kurdish festivals.

For example, in February security forces reportedly arrested 71-year-old Kurdish singer Ali Tajo. There were conflicting stories surrounding his disappearance. One Kurdish human rights organization claimed that a Kurdish television program in Iraq had scheduled Ali Tajo to participate in a folkloric production and that he was arrested at the Syria-Iraq border. A second Kurdish group stated that Tajo had entertained a group of Kurdish singers from Iraqi Kurdistan in his Aleppo home. Afterwards, local police raided Tajo's home and took him in for interrogation before eventually handing him over to security forces in Damascus. There was no further information on this case at year's end.

On November 11, according to human rights observers, the governor of Hassakeh and the chairman of the city council approved the invitation of the Narine Kurdish Folkloric troupe to participate in the closing ceremony of Al-Khabour Festival for Young Writers. On the eve of the performance, however, the troupe was informed they were prohibited from presenting their show. The Baath Party branch in Hassakeh allegedly issued the ban.

On March 13, security forces reportedly arrested four Kurdish brothers, Joma'a, Ahmad, Muhammad, and Bahman Hamdo, three of whom worked as tailors producing traditional Kurdish clothing. At year's end their whereabouts were unknown.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS. However, there was a belief among human rights activists that the extent of the problem was widely underreported.

The law criminalizes homosexuality.

6. Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

While the constitution provides for the right of association and to form unions, in practice workers were not free to establish unions independent of the government. Foreign workers, according to a 2008 International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) survey, may join the union representing their profession but may not stand for election to union offices. The ITUC report also stated that while the law does not prohibit labor strikes, they are severely restricted by threat of punishment and fines. All unions belonged to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), which was dominated by Ba'ath Party members and was part of the government's bureaucratic structure. The GFTU advised the government on legislation, organized workers, and formulated rules for various member unions, effectively controlling nearly all aspects of union activity. Union elections were generally free of direct, overt GFTU interference; however, successful campaigns usually required membership in the Ba'ath Party. The GFTU president was a senior member of the Ba'ath Party, and he and his deputy could attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. According to the government-published 2007 Statistical Abstract, there were 204 trade unions filling the ranks of the GFTU with a collective membership of 808,419 workers. This represents less than one third of the total labor force. Additionally, in 2007 there were 5,622 agricultural cooperatives with 994,820 members; 101 passenger transport cooperatives with 38,269 members; and 24 transport services cooperatives with 9,561 members.

By the end of the year, there were no reports that any individual union, the GFTU, or any cooperatives had exercised their right to collective bargaining. Additionally, there were no reports of strikes at the end of the year.

The law does not prohibit strikes; however, previous government crackdowns, including fines and prison sentences, deterred workers from striking. Forced labor was imposed on individuals who caused "prejudice to the general production plan."

On February 26, security authorities in Qamishli reportedly arrested Kurdish unionist Jan Ahmad Rasool for critical comments made during a speech at a February 24 union meeting. Rasool was elected as an "independent" to a leadership role in the local Foodstuff and Tourism Union in 2007.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides for the right to bargain collectively; however, this right does not exist in practice as the unions were effectively led by Ba'ath Party officials closely tied to the government. Government representatives were part of the bargaining process in the public sector. Public sector unions did not normally bargain collectively on wage issues, but union representatives participated with representatives of employers from the government-affiliated Chambers of Industry and Commerce and the supervising ministry in establishing minimum wages, hours, and conditions of employment in the private sector. Workers served on the boards of directors of public enterprises, and union representatives were included on the boards.

The law provides for collective bargaining in the private sector, although past repression by the government dissuaded most workers from exercising this right.

Unions have the right to litigate disputes over work contracts and other workers' interests with employers and are able to ask for binding arbitration. In practice labor and management representatives settled most disputes without resort to legal remedies or arbitration. Management has the right to request arbitration, but that right seldom was exercised. Arbitration authority is vested in the Ministry of Justice's Administrative Petition Court. In practice this court did little more than certify agreements and had almost no role in arbitrating disputes, since such disputes did not occur with any regularity.

There were no reports of antiunion discrimination. Since the unions were part of the government's bureaucratic structure, the law protects union members from such discrimination.

There were no unions in the seven free trade zones (FTZs). Firms in the zones were exempt from the laws and regulations governing hiring and firing, although they were required to observe some provisions on health, safety, hours, and sick and annual leave. Ninety percent of the workers in the FTZs were citizens.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law does not prohibit all forms of forced or compulsory labor and the problem existed. The governments of Sri Lanka and the Philippines banned their citizens from taking employment as domestic workers in the country because of abuses and the lack of a mechanism to protect the rights of their citizens.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The labor law provides for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace, and independent information and audits regarding government enforcement were not available.

The private-sector minimum age for employment is 15 years for most types of nonagricultural labor and 18 years for heavy work. Working hours for youths of legal age are set at six hours per day. According to the law, youths are not allowed to work during night shifts, weekends, or on official holidays. In all cases parental permission is required for children under the age of 16 to work. The majority of children under age 16 who worked did so for their parents in the agricultural sector without remuneration. While the law prohibits children from working at night, it applies only to children who work for a salary. Those who work in family businesses and who are technically not paid a salary – a common occurrence – do not fall under the law. Children under age 15 are prohibited by law from working in mines, at petroleum sites, or in other dangerous areas. Children are not allowed to lift, carry, or drag heavy objects.

According to a February 2007 report by the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, the total number of citizen children who performed "tough jobs in unhealthy working conditions" was more than 600,000. Also, there was evidence that children engaged in some of the worst forms of child labor during the year, including forced labor and prostitution. The government, however, did little to address the problem. In 2006 the minister of social affairs and labor stated that most children who worked did so seasonally and for limited amounts of time.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs monitored employment conditions for persons under the age of 18; however, there were too few inspectors to ensure compliance with the laws. The Labor Inspection Department performed unannounced spot checks of employers on a daily basis to enforce the law, but the scope of these checks was unknown.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The minimum wage was 6,110 pounds (\$131.40) per month, plus benefits, including compensation for meals, uniforms, and transportation. The minimum wage did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family; however, private-sector companies usually paid much higher wages than the minimum. Also, many workers in both the public- and private-sectors took additional jobs or were supported by their extended families.

The labor and social affairs minister was responsible for enforcing minimum wage.

The public sector work week was 35 hours; the private sector's was 48 hours. Workers were guaranteed one 30-minute lunch break per day at minimum, although anecdotal evidence suggested that many workers enjoyed longer lunch breaks and short, informal breaks during the day. Premium pay exists for overtime worked, and a prohibition on excessive compulsory overtime exists in several sectors.

Officials from the Ministries of Health and Labor were designated to inspect work sites for compliance with health and safety standards; however, such inspections were sporadic, apart from those conducted in hotels and other facilities that catered to foreigners. The enforcement of labor laws in rural areas was more lax than in urban areas, where there were a larger number of inspectors. Workers may lodge complaints about health and safety conditions with special committees established to adjudicate such cases. Workers have the right to remove themselves from hazardous conditions without risking loss of employment. There is no legal framework governing relations between domestic workers and their employers, and the government did not educate employers or workers on the rights of domestic workers. The law provides protection for foreign workers who reside legally in the country but not for the unknown number of illegal workers in the country.
