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country summary

Syria

Syria's poor human rights situation deteriorated further in 2007, as the government imposed harsh sentences on a number of political and human rights activists. Emergency rule, imposed in 1963, remains in effect. President Bashar al-Assad was endorsed for a second term in May 2007 with 97 percent of the vote and parliamentary elections held in April 2007 delivered no reforms.

The Supreme State Security Court, an exceptional court with almost no procedural guarantees, sentenced over 100 people, mostly Islamists, to long prison terms. Syrian Kurds, the country's largest ethnic minority, continue to protest their treatment as second-class citizens. Iraqi refugees arrived in Syria at the rate of about 2,000 per day until October 2007, when Syria introduced strict entry and visa controls directed at stopping the refugee flow.

Political Activists on Trial

On May 10, 2007, a Damascus criminal court sentenced Dr. Kamal al-Labwani, a physician and founder of the Democratic Liberal Gathering, to 12 years in prison with hard labor for "communicating with a foreign country and inciting it to initiate aggression against Syria" after he called for peaceful democratic change in Syria during a visit to the United States and Europe in the fall of 2005.

Also in May a Damascus criminal court imposed harsh sentences on four activists arrested in 2006 for signing a petition calling for improved relations between Lebanon and Syria. The court sentenced prominent writer and political activist Michel Kilo and political activist Mahmud `Issa each to three years in prison. Khalil Hussain, a member of the Kurdish Future movement, and Sulaiman Shummar, a member of the unauthorized Worker's Revolutionary Party and a leader of the National Democratic Gathering, were tried in absentia and each sentenced to 10 years in prison.

At this writing, Fatih Jamus, a member of the Communist Action Party, was on trial for calling for peaceful reform in Syria during a trip to Europe in 2006. Faeq al-Mir, another communist activist who heads the Syrian People's Democratic Party, faces charges in connection with a visit he made to Lebanon following the 2005 assassination of Lebanese communist leader Georges Hawi.

Dr. `Arif Dalila, a prominent economics professor and a proponent of political liberalization, continues to serve a 10-year prison term imposed in July 2002 for his nonviolent criticism of government policies. He is suffering from heart problems and diabetes.

Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and "Disappearances"

Syria's multiple security services continue to detain people arbitrarily and frequently refuse to disclose their whereabouts for months—in effect forcibly disappearing them. For instance, Military Intelligence detained Ali al-Barazi, a Damascus-based translator, in July 2007, and refused to disclose his whereabouts for three months.

Torture remains a serious problem in Syria, especially during interrogation. Syrian human rights groups documented a number of cases in 2007 including the torture of 10 men detained in Hasake in April.

The Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional court not constrained by the usual rules of criminal procedure, sentenced over 100 people in 2007, most of whom had Islamist leanings. The SSSC sentenced a group of seven young men in June 2007 to prison terms ranging between five and seven years because of their involvement in developing a pro-democracy youth discussion group online. Some of the group members said that the authorities had extracted "confessions" from them under torture.

As in previous years, the government in 2007 again failed to acknowledge security force involvement in the "disappearances" of an estimated 17,000 persons since the 1970s, the vast majority of whom remain unaccounted for and many of whom are believed to have been killed. The "disappeared" are mostly Muslim Brotherhood

members and other Syrian activists detained by the government in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians detained in Syria or abducted from Lebanon by Syrian forces or Lebanese and Palestinian militias.

Hundreds and possibly thousands of political prisoners remain in detention in Syria. The authorities continue to refuse to divulge information regarding numbers or names of people in detention on political or security-related charges.

Human Rights Defenders

Human rights activists continue to be targets of government harassment and arrest. On April 24, 2007, a Damascus criminal court sentenced prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni to five years in prison in connection with his statement that a man had died in a Syrian jail because of the inhumane conditions under which authorities had held him.

The government continues to prevent activists from traveling abroad and in 2007 expanded its list of those banned from leaving the country. While the exact number of activists banned from traveling is unknown, it is estimated to be in the hundreds. On August 12, 2007, State Security officials denied Riad Seif, a former opposition member of the Syrian parliament and a leader of the Damascus Declaration movement, permission to travel abroad to receive urgent medical care. Also among those banned from traveling in 2007 was Naser Al-Ghrazali, director of the Damascus Centre for Theoretical Study and Civil Rights and a media official in the Arab Committee for Human Rights.

All Syrian human rights group remain unlicensed, as Syrian officials consistently deny their requests for registration.

Discrimination and Repression against Kurds

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

Kurds. Syrian authorities also suppress the use of the Kurdish language in schools and suppress other expressions of Kurdish identity.

Despite a general presidential pardon for those involved in the March 2004 clashes between Kurdish demonstrators and security forces in the northeastern city of Qamishli, an estimated 49 Kurds still face trials before the military court in Damascus on charges of inciting disturbances and damaging public property. Kurdish political leaders are subject to frequent harassment and arrests. Syrian state security officials detained Ma`rouf Mulla Ahmed, a leading member of the Syrian Kurdish Yekiti Party, at the Syrian-Lebanese border in August 2007. At this writing, he remained in incommunicado detention.

Discrimination against Women

Syria's constitution guarantees gender equality, and many women are active in public life, but personal status laws as well as the penal code contain provisions that discriminate against women and girls. The penal code allows a judge to suspend punishment for a rapist if the rapist chooses to marry his victim, and provides leniency for so-called "honor" crimes. In January 2007, a Syrian human rights group reported that Zahra al-`Azu, age 16, was killed by her brother to protect the family's "honor" after a man had kidnapped her.

In May 2007, Syria submitted its initial report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and its delegation announced that Syria would take steps to amend laws that discriminate against women.

Situation of Refugees Fleeing Iraq

An estimated 1.4 million Iraqis are now living in Syria. While Syria continues to provide Iraqi refugees with access to public hospitals and schools, Syrian attitudes and policies towards these refugees hardened in 2007 with the implementation of increasingly restrictive visa and entry requirements. Iraqis are also banned from working, but many work illegally. Syrian authorities have forcibly returned a number of Iraqis to Iraq, but maintain that these Iraqis committed criminal acts.

Syria continues to refuse entry to Palestinians fleeing Iraq. In May 2006 Syria closed its border to Iraqi Palestinians and, at this writing, several hundred remained at makeshift camps in the no-man's-land between Iraqi and Syrian border checkpoints.

Key International Actors

Syria's relationship with the US and European countries remains strained over Syria's role in Iraq and Lebanon and its ties to Iran. While Syria remains isolated and under sanctions from the US, Damascus received high level visits by Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy chief, in March 2007, and US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in April 2007.

The EU and the US have issued a number of public statements condemning the ongoing harassment and arrests of human rights activists. However, these condemnatory statements have had little impact on Syrian authorities.

The Association Agreement between Syria and the European Union, initialed in October 2004, remains suspended at the final approval stage as European countries remain divided over how to engage with Syria.

The UN Security Council continues to pressure Syria to cooperate with the ongoing international investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. On May 30, 2007, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1757, which agreed to the establishment of a tribunal under Chapter VII. In his July 2007 interim report, Serge Brammertz, the head of the UN International Independent Investigation Committee, wrote that Syria's cooperation "remained generally satisfactory."

Iran continues to be Syria's main regional ally, and the two countries increased their cooperation in military and economic spheres. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visited Damascus in August 2007, following restoration of diplomatic ties in 2006, to discuss border security and Iraqi refugees. Saudi Arabia and Syria exchanged sharp criticism over regional roles, highlighting tensions between the two countries.