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SYRIA

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Head of state: Bashar al-Assad
Head of government: Muhammad Naji al-'Otri
Death penalty: retentionist
International Criminal Court: signed

Freedom of expression and association continued to be severely restricted. Scores of people were arrested and hundreds remained imprisoned for political reasons, including prisoners of conscience and others sentenced after unfair trials. Discriminatory legislation and practices remained in force against women and the Kurdish minority. Torture and ill-treatment in detention continued to be reported and carried out with impunity. Human rights defenders continued to face arrest, harassment and restrictions on their freedom of movement.

Background

The state of emergency imposed in 1962 remained in force. A UN investigation continued to indicate high-level Syrian involvement in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, which Syria denied.

Syria hosted more than 200,000 Lebanese refugees who fled to the country during the July/August conflict, as well as some 500,000 Iraqi refugees displaced by the continuing conflict in Iraq. There were also some 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria and tens of thousands of Syrians remained displaced due to Israel's continuing occupation of the Golan.

A European Union-funded human rights centre was closed down in March, shortly after opening. The Association Agreement between Syria and the European Union, initialled in October 2004 and containing a human rights clause, remained frozen for a further year at the final approval stage. Syria's relations with the USA remained strained.

Releases

Five of the remaining prisoners from the pro-reform movement referred to as the "Damascus Spring" - Riad Seif and Ma'mun al-Homsi, both former parliamentary deputies, Walid al-Bunni, Habib 'Issa and Fawaz Tello - were freed on 18 January, seven months before the expiry of their five-year sentences.

Imprisonment for political reasons

Scores of people were arrested during 2006 for political reasons, including tens of prisoners of conscience. Hundreds of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, remained imprisoned. Scores faced trial before the Supreme State

Security Court (SSSC), Criminal Court or Military Court, all of which failed to respect international standards for fair trials.

- In April, Riad Drar al-Hamood was sentenced by the SSSC to five years' imprisonment on charges of belonging to a "secret organization", "publishing false news" and "inciting sectarian strife". A member of the Committees for Revival of Civil Society, an unauthorized network of people engaging in human rights-related and political discussion, he was arrested in June 2005 after making a speech at the funeral of the prominent Kurdish Islamic scholar, Sheikh Muhammad Ma'shuq al-Khiznawi, who had been abducted and killed. The charge of "inciting sectarian strife" was commonly used against human rights defenders and activists seeking to promote the rights of Syrian Kurds.
- Ten of the scores of signatories to the "Beirut-Damascus Declaration" that sought normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon were arrested between 14 and 18 May. Human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, writer Michel Kilo and Mahmoud 'Issa - who was rearrested in October after being released on bail in September with former prisoner of conscience Khalil Hussein and Suleyman Shummar - remained detained at the end of the year. The five men faced multiple charges including one common charge of insulting the President, government officials or public servants.
- There were increased concerns for the health of Dr 'Aref Dalilah, aged 63. He was said to have suffered a stroke in mid-2006 and continued to suffer from diabetes and high blood pressure. He remained imprisoned in a small, isolated cell serving the 10-year sentence imposed on him for his involvement in the 2001 pro-reform movement referred to as the "Damascus Spring".
- The trial of former "Damascus Spring" prisoner Kamal al-Labwani, who was arrested in November 2005 on his return to Syria after several months in Europe and the USA during which he peacefully called for democratic reform, continued before the Criminal Court. He was charged with "encouraging foreign aggression against Syria", an offence punishable by life imprisonment. In November he was badly beaten by a criminal prisoner, reportedly at the instigation of the authorities.
- Eight young men remained detained incommunicado at the end of 2006 after being arrested between January and March, apparently in connection with their involvement in developing a political discussion group. They were reportedly tortured during their interrogation. They were being tried by the SSSC. Seven of the men were charged with "subjecting Syria to the risk of hostile acts", and all eight with "publishing false news that may offend the dignity of the State".
- In August former "Damascus Spring" prisoner of conscience Habib Saleh was sentenced by the military court in Homs to three years' imprisonment for "weakening nationalist sentiments" and "spreading false news". The charges related to articles critical of the Syrian authorities that he had published on the Internet.
- Scores of individuals were facing trial for their alleged following of the "Islamist trend". On 14 November the SSSC sentenced 11 men from al-'Otaybe who were arrested in April 2004 to prison terms of six to nine years for membership of a Salafi organization. Some 23 young men from Qatana remained detained following their arrests in July 2004. Members of both groups were reportedly tortured and ill-treated during long periods of incommunicado detention.
- On 20 December, Kurdish activist and secretary of the outlawed Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party, Muhi al-Din Sheikh Aali, was reportedly arrested by Military Intelligence, in Aleppo, northern Syria. At the end of the year he remained in incommunicado detention at an unknown location.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression remained strictly controlled.

- Seventeen state employees working in various government ministries were dismissed without explanation but apparently on account of their links to the "Beirut-Damascus Declaration". The dismissals were ordered by Prime Minister Muhammad Naji al-'Otri on 14 June.
- Upon his release in September after serving a six-month sentence imposed by the Military Court for "insulting the President", "harming the dignity of the State" and "inciting sectarian strife", writer Muhammad Ghanem was also reportedly suspended from his employment in the Education Directorate in al-Raqqa.
- Dozens of Syrian Internet news sites were reportedly blocked during 2006, including www.syriaview.net, www.thisissyria.net, www.kurdroj.com, www.shril.info and www.arrae.com.

Torture and ill-treatment

Torture and ill-treatment in custody continued to be reported, and allegations of such ill-treatment were not investigated.

- It was reported in April that Muhammad Shaher Haysa died in custody in Damascus as a result of torture and ill-treatment he was subjected to while detained for six months. He was reportedly arrested on suspicion of involvement in

the Jund al-Sham organization.

- 'Ali Sayed al-Shihabi, a former prisoner of conscience for nine years, remained detained at the end of the year following his arrest in August, apparently in relation to articles he had written for the Internet. While held at the Investigation Branch in Damascus he was beaten with sticks on his feet and hands.
- In October, Muhammad Haydar Zammar, a German national of Syrian origin held in secret, incommunicado detention since December 2001 and reportedly tortured, was brought before the SSSC on charges including membership of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood for which, if convicted, he could face the death penalty.

Violence and discrimination against women

At least 10 women were reportedly killed by close male relatives for alleged reasons of "honour". Perpetrators continued to enjoy near impunity for the crimes on account of inadequate investigations and of provisions in the Penal Code that allow for reduced sentences for killing a female member of the family who is allegedly committing "adultery" or having other "sexual relations". Women's rights activists worked to end discriminatory legislation including in the areas of marriage, divorce, the family, inheritance and nationality, and to achieve greater protection against domestic and other forms of violence.

- In a village near Sweida in July, a teenage woman with learning difficulties was reportedly killed by her brother, following her rape by a relative. A trial was ongoing at the end of the year.
- In March a young woman was reportedly forced to marry the man who had raped her and thereby absolve him of any crime, in accordance with article 508 of the Penal Code.

Discrimination against Kurds

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

- Some 75 Kurds were reportedly released in September following their arrests in March for peacefully celebrating Nowruz (the lunar New Year) in Aleppo. The celebration was violently broken up by the security forces.
- Four teachers were reportedly detained for one month from 4 August for teaching the Kurdish language.

Human rights defenders

Several unauthorized human rights organizations continued to be active, although their members were at risk of arrest, harassment and travel bans.

- Dr 'Ammar Qurabi, media spokesman of the National Organization for Human Rights, was detained for four days in March at Palestine Branch of Military Intelligence in Damascus, then released without charge.
- On 11 July the offices of the Human Rights Association of Syria were attacked, with windows broken and animal faeces smeared on the walls.
- On 27 July Muhannad al-Hasani, head of the Syrian Human Rights Organization, was prevented from travelling to a meeting on organizational systems in Jordan, by order of the security services. In October he was prevented from travelling to Morocco to attend the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Forum.
- In November, Nizar Ristnawi, a founding member of the Arab Organization for Human Rights-Syria, was sentenced by the SSSC to four years' imprisonment for "spreading false news" and "insulting the President". The charges and sentence appeared to be based on his work promoting human rights and democracy. Nizar Ristnawi was arrested in April 2005 and detained incommunicado until August 2005.

UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

In May the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention determined that the detention of five individuals deported to Syria was arbitrary, given "the gravity of the violation of the right to a fair trial". Muhammad Fa'iq Mustafa was deported from Bulgaria in November 2002 and sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment by the Field Military Court, before being released in

November 2005. Ahmet Muhammad Ibrahim was deported from Turkey in March 2005, reportedly tortured, then released in January 2006. Nabil al-Marabh, who was deported to Syria from the USA in January 2004, was sentenced in March by the SSSC to five years' imprisonment for "subjecting Syria to the risk of hostile acts". Both 'Abd al-Rahman al-Musa, who was deported from the USA in January 2005, and Muhammad Osama Sayes, who was deported from the UK in May 2005, were sentenced to death by the SSSC in June for affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood. The sentences were immediately commuted to 12 years' imprisonment.

Death penalty

The death penalty remained in force for a wide range of offences, but the authorities disclosed little information about its use. At least seven individuals were sentenced to death under Law 49 of 1980 for affiliation with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood organization, then had the sentences commuted to 12 years' imprisonment.

Impunity/enforced disappearances

There was increased discussion within civil society over the issue of combating past impunity, particularly with regard to mass human rights abuses committed since the late 1970s. The fate of more than 17,000 people, mostly Islamists, who "disappeared" after they were detained in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians who were detained in Syria or abducted from Lebanon by Syrian forces or Lebanese and Palestinian militias, remained unknown.

AI country reports/visits

Visit

In January AI visited Syria for the first time since 1997, and met government officials, lawyers and others, including detainees' families.

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