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Despite the existence of some institutions of democratic government, the political system places virtually absolute authority in the hands of the President. Former President Hafiz Al-Asad died on June 10, 2000, after 30 years in power. Immediately following Al-Asad's death, the Parliament amended the Constitution, reducing the mandatory minimum age of the President from 40 to 34 years old, which allowed his son Bashar Al-Asad legally to be eligible for nomination by the ruling Ba'th party. On July 10, 2000, Bashar was elected by referendum in which he ran unopposed and received 97.29 percent of the vote. Key decisions regarding foreign policy, national security, internal politics, and the economy are made by the President, with counsel from his ministers, high-ranking members of the ruling Ba'th Party, and a relatively small circle of security advisers. Although the Parliament is elected every 4 years, the Ba'th Party is ensured a majority. The Parliament may not initiate laws but only assesses and at times modifies those proposed by the executive branch. In general all three branches of government are influenced to varying degrees by leaders of the Ba'th Party, whose primacy in state institutions is mandated by the Constitution. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but security courts are subject to political influence. The regular courts generally display independence, although political connections and bribery may influence verdicts.

The powerful role of the security services in government, which extends beyond strictly security matters, stems in part from the state of emergency that has been in place almost continuously since 1963. The Government justifies martial law because of the state of war with Israel and past threats from terrorist groups. Syrian Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence are military agencies, while General Security, State Security, and Political Security come under the purview of the Ministry of Interior. The branches of the security services operate independently of each other and outside the legal system. Their members commit serious human rights abuses.

The population of the country is approximately 17 million. The economy is based on commerce, agriculture, oil production, and government services. There is a generally inefficient public sector, a private sector, and a mixed public/private sector. The still-dominant state role in the economy, a complex bureaucracy, overarching security concerns, endemic corruption, currency restrictions, a lack of modern financial services and communications, and a weak legal system hamper economic growth. The Government has sought to promote the private sector through investment incentives, exchange rate consolidation, and deregulation, especially with regard to financial transactions governing imports and exports. However, in recent years, diminished foreign aid, drought, fluctuating prices for oil and agricultural commodities, and regional recession have hurt the economy. Uncertainty about the Middle East peace process and sporadic tension over Iraq has diminished investor confidence in the region. After 4 years of negative economic growth, Syria's economy is estimated to have grown by 1.5 to 2 percent during the year. A high population growth rate of nearly 3 percent continued to erode economic gains. Wage and benefits increases generally have not kept pace with cost of living increases, although inflation has been minimal in recent years. The gap between the rich and poor remained significant, with many public sector workers relying on second jobs to make ends meet.

The human rights situation remained poor, and the Government continues to restrict or deny fundamental rights, although there were improvements in a few areas. The Ba'th Party dominates the political system, as provided for by the Constitution, and citizens do not have the right to change their government. The Government uses its vast powers so effectively that there is no organized political opposition, and there have been very few antigovernment manifestations. Although the Government released prominent political prisoner Nizar Nayyuf in May after 10 years in prison, it immediately placed him under house arrest. The Government subsequently allowed him to travel overseas for medical treatment but issued an arrest warrant against him in September while he was still abroad. Beginning in August, the Government also arrested 10 prominent human rights leaders, including two independent Members of Parliament and former longtime political prisoner Riad al-Turk. The Jordanian press reported in January the release from Syrian jail of six Jordanian prisoners of Palestinian origin, who had been imprisoned for membership in Palestinian organizations. Continuing serious abuses include the use of torture in detention; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; prolonged detention without trial; fundamentally unfair trials in the security courts; an inefficient judiciary that suffers from corruption and, at times, political influence; and infringement on privacy rights.

The Government also significantly restricts freedom of speech and of the press. Although new amendments to

the Press Law permitted government-approved private individuals and organizations to publish their own newspapers, the same amendments also stipulated imprisonment and stiff financial penalties as part of broad, vague provisions prohibiting the publication of "inaccurate" information. Freedom of assembly does not exist under the law and the Government restricts freedom of association. The Government does not officially allow independent domestic human rights groups to exist; however, it allowed periodic meetings of unlicensed civil society forums throughout the year. The Government places some limits on freedom of religion and limits freedom of movement. Violence and societal discrimination against women are problems. The Government discriminates against the stateless Kurdish minority, suppresses worker rights, and tolerates child labor in some instances.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of political killings or other killings committed by government forces during the year.

In November 2000, security forces killed four Bedouins during the Government's intervention in armed clashes between Bedouin shepherds and Druze residents of Suwayda Province (see Sections 1.c. and 5). In October 1999, government forces moved against a residential compound and boat dock owned by then-President Asad's brother, Rifat Al-Asad. A number of Rifat's supporters, including military guards, were sequestered in the compound, and the clash resulted in an unconfirmed number of deaths, including among government forces. The Government reportedly claimed that the clash was the consequence of enforcing "legal measures" that were taken against Rifat and his supporters because of "violations of civil and military laws."

There were reports in 1999 of the corporal punishment of army recruits that led to injury or death (see Section 1.c.).

There were no credible reports of deaths in detention during the year; however, such deaths have occurred in the past. Previous deaths in detention have not been investigated by the Government, and the number and identities of prisoners who died in prisons since the 1980's remain unknown.

b. Disappearance

There were no new confirmed reports of politically motivated disappearances during the year. Because security forces often do not provide detainees' families with information regarding their welfare or location, many persons who disappeared in past years are believed to be in longterm detention or to have died while in detention; it appears that the number of new disappearances declined in recent years, although this circumstance may be due to the Government's success in deterring opposition political activity rather than a loosening of the criteria for detention (see Section 1.d.).

Despite inquiries by international human rights organizations and foreign governments, the Government offered little new information regarding the welfare and whereabouts of persons who have been held incommunicado for years or about whom no more is known other than the approximate date of their detention. The Government claims that it has released all Palestinians and Jordanian and Lebanese citizens who reportedly were abducted from Lebanon during and after Lebanon's civil war; however, the Government's claim is disputed by Lebanese NGO's, Amnesty International, and other international NGO's, as well as some family members of those who allegedly remain in Syrian prisons (see Section 1.d.).

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

Despite the existence of constitutional provisions and several Penal Code penalties for abusers, there was credible evidence that security forces continued to use torture, although to a lesser extent than in previous years. Former prisoners and detainees report that torture methods include administering electrical shocks; pulling out fingernails; forcing objects into the rectum; beating, sometimes while the victim is suspended from the ceiling; hyperextending the spine; and using a chair that bends backwards to asphyxiate the victim or fracture the victim's spine. In September Amnesty International published a report claiming that authorities at Tadmur Prison regularly torture prisoners, or force prisoners to torture one another. Although torture occurs in prisons, torture is most likely to occur while detainees are being held at one of the many detention centers run by the various security services throughout the country, and particularly while the authorities are attempting to extract a confession or information regarding an alleged crime or alleged accomplices.

The Government has denied that it uses torture and claims that it would prosecute anyone believed guilty of using excessive force or physical abuse. Past victims of torture have identified the officials who beat them, up to the level of brigadier general. If allegations of excessive force or physical abuse are to be made in court, the plaintiff is required to initiate his own civil suit against the alleged abuser. Courts do not order medical examinations for defendants who claim that they were tortured (see Section 1.e.).

In 2000 Syria apprehended Raed Hijazi, accused of a terrorist plot targeting American and Israeli tourists in Jordan during the millennium celebrations and rendered him to Jordan to stand trial. According to media accounts of the trial, doctors for both the defense and the prosecution testified that Hijazi's body showed signs of having been beaten, but witnesses, including Hijazi, made contradictory and inconclusive claims regarding whether the alleged abuse occurred while he was in Jordanian or Syrian custody. The Jordanian court has rejected the allegations that Hijazi's confession was coerced.

The Government reportedly tortured some of the Islamist prisoners who were detained during the large-scale arrests in late 1999 and early 2000 (see Sections 1.d. and 2.c.).

On January 30, unknown assailants attacked and beat novelist Nabil Sulayman outside his apartment in Latakia, in what some observers believe was a message from the Government to civil society advocates to moderate their pressure for reform (see Section 2.a.).

In November 2000, 200 persons were injured during clashes in Suwayda province involving Druze residents, Bedouin shepherds, and security forces (see Sections 1.a. and 5).

Prison conditions vary but generally are poor and do not meet international standards for health and sanitation. Facilities for political or national security prisoners generally are worse than those for common criminals. The notorious Tadmur Prison in Palmyra, where many political and national security prisoners have been kept, is widely considered to have the worst conditions. There were unconfirmed press reports in September that the Government closed the civilian wing of Tadmur Prison, and unconfirmed press reports earlier in the year that the Government moved approximately 500 to 600 political prisoners from Tadmur Prison to Sayadnaya Prison in preparation for Tadmur's eventual closing.

At some prisons, authorities allow visitation, but in other prisons, security officials demand bribes from family members who wish to visit incarcerated relatives. Overcrowding and the denial of sufficient nourishment occur at several prisons. According to Human Rights Watch, prisoners and detainees are held without adequate medical care, and some prisoners with significant health problems reportedly are denied medical treatment. Some former detainees have reported that the Government prohibits reading materials, even the Koran, for political prisoners.

There were credible reports in 2000 that minors were held in adult facilities for 6 months and were not allowed visits from family members. There are separate detention facilities for women and children (see Section 1.d.).

The Government does not permit independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions. In June the Government allowed a German diplomat to visit Hussein Dawud, a Syrian member of the Kurdish Popular Union Party imprisoned in Sayadnaya Prison, after rumors of Dawud's death by torture were published. The diplomat confirmed Dawud's presence and saw no signs of torture.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

Arbitrary arrest and detention are significant problems. The Emergency Law, which authorizes the Government to conduct preventive arrests, overrides Penal Code provisions against arbitrary arrest and detention, including the need to obtain warrants. Officials contend that the Emergency Law is applied only in narrowly defined cases, and in January the regional press reported that the Information Minister claimed that the authorities had frozen "martial law," and the Interior Ministry claimed that the Government had made no arbitrary arrests since April 2000. Nonetheless, in cases involving political or national security offenses, arrests often are carried out in secret, and suspects may be detained incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and are denied the right to a judicial determination regarding the pretrial detention. Some of these practices are prohibited by the state of emergency, but the authorities are not held to these strictures. Additionally, those suspected of political or national security offenses also may be arrested and prosecuted under ambiguous and broad articles of the Penal Code, and subsequently tried in either the criminal or security courts.

The Government detains relatives of detainees or of fugitives in order to obtain confessions or the fugitive's surrender (see Section 1.f.). The Government also threatens families or friends of detainees, at times with the threat of expulsion, to ensure their silence, to force them to publicly disavow their relatives, or to force detainees into compliance.

Defendants in civil and criminal trials have the right to bail hearings and the possible release from detention on their own recognizance. There is no bail option for those accused of state security offenses. Unlike defendants in regular criminal and civil cases, security detainees do not have access to lawyers prior to or during questioning.

Detainees have no legal redress for false arrest. Security forces often do not provide detainees' families with information regarding their welfare or location while in detention. Consequently many persons who have disappeared in past years are believed to be in long-term detention without charge or possibly to have died in

detention (see Section 1.b.). Many detainees brought to trial have been held incommunicado for years, and their trials often have been unfair (see Section 1.e.). There were reliable reports that the Government did not notify foreign governments when their citizens were arrested or detained.

Pretrial detention may be lengthy, even in cases not involving political or national security offenses. The criminal justice system is backlogged. Many criminal suspects are held in pretrial detention for months and may have their trials extended for additional months. Lengthy pretrial detention and drawn-out court proceedings are caused by a shortage of available courts and the absence of legal provisions for a speedy trial or plea bargaining (see Section 1.e.).

On May 6 the Government released prominent political prisoner Nizar Nayyuf, who had been imprisoned since 1992 on a 10-year sentence after being convicted for founding an unlawful organization, disseminating false information, and undermining the Government. Human rights organizations noted that authorities placed him under house arrest immediately following his release. In June the Government allowed Nayyuf to leave the country for medical treatment. According to public statements by his lawyer, in September Nayyuf was summoned to appear before an investigating court to respond to a complaint against him filed by Ba'th party lawyers for "inciting confessionalism, attempting to illegally change the Constitution, and publishing false reports abroad." Nayyuf was still out of the country when the summons was issued and had not returned to the country by year's end. The French free press organization Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontières--RSF) claimed that the Government harassed and intimidated members of Nayyuf's family following the issuance of the summons. The Government reportedly fired two members of his immediate family from their jobs. The municipality threatened to expel members of Nayyuf's family if they did not publicly disavow his statements (see Section 4).

On August 9, the Government arrested independent Member of Parliament Ma'mun Humsi during his hunger strike protesting official corruption, the excessive powers of the security forces, and the continuation of the Emergency Law. In a departure from previous practice, the Interior Ministry issued a statement justifying Humsi's arrest under Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security (see Section 3).

On September 1, the Government detained prominent political activist and prior longtime detainee Riad al-Turk for violations of Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security, after al-Turk made derogatory public comments about late President Hafiz al-Asad.

On September 6, the Government detained independent Member of Parliament Riad Seif shortly after Seif resumed the activities of his unlicensed political discussion forum. The principal charge against both Humsi and Seif was attempting illegally to change the Constitution (see Section 3).

Later in September, the Government detained seven additional prominent human rights activists who had issued statements in support of Humsi, Seif, and al-Turk (see Section 4). The Government reportedly charged the seven activists under Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security (see Section 2.a.). Although all of the detainees reportedly were arrested for Penal Code violations, only Humsi and Seif are being tried in criminal court, with the other cases reportedly to be tried in the Supreme State Security Court (see Section 1.e.). Their trial has been open to foreign observers and the press.

The Government reportedly had released most of the hundreds of Turkomen detained without charge in 1996; however, the group's leaders reportedly remained in detention.

There were reports of large-scale arrests of Syrian and Palestinian Islamists between late December 1999 and February 2000. Hundreds of persons allegedly were arrested in the cities of Damascus, Hama, Aleppo, and Homs. Most of those arrested reportedly were released after signing an agreement not to participate in political activities; however, some may remain in detention. There were no known reports that the Government arrested Islamists on political charges during the year.

There were reliable reports that security forces arrested several minors on unspecified political charges in 2000. The minors reportedly were held in adult facilities for 6 months, had no access to legal counsel, and were not allowed visits from family members. There were no reports of the arrests of minors on political charges during the year.

In December 2000, the Government detained an individual for several months without charge for forwarding via e-mail an allegedly lewd political cartoon (see Section 1.f.).

According to a credible report, in March Syrian intelligence officials in Lebanon arrested three Syrian Druze men who had converted to Christianity, possibly on suspicion of membership in Jehovah's Witnesses (see Section 2.c.).

The Jordanian press reported in January the release from Syrian jails of six Jordanian prisoners of Palestinian origin, who had been imprisoned for membership in Palestinian organizations. There were unconfirmed reports that a large number of Jordanian prisoners were released between May and July 2000. However, according to Amnesty International, only three of the Jordanians released in 2000 had been held for political reasons.

There were unconfirmed regional press reports that approximately 500 political detainees were moved from Tadmur Prison to Saydnaya Prison in late July and early August in preparation for the eventual closing of Tadmur (see Section 1.c.). The Government also closed the Mazzah prison in November 2000, which reportedly held numerous political prisoners and detainees.

In May 2000, there were media reports that Communist Action Party leaders Aslan 'Abd Al-Karim and Fateh Jamous and oppositionist Randa Ayoubi were released from prison. In August 2000, Sheikh Hashim Minqara, a leader of the Islamic Tawheed Movement who was arrested in Lebanon in 1985, reportedly was released.

In November 2000, the Government declared an amnesty for 600 political prisoners and detainees and a general pardon for some nonpolitical prisoners. The amnesty was covered in the media and reportedly was the first time that the Government acknowledged that it held persons for political reasons. There were credible but unconfirmed reports that the 600 detainees, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Salvation Party, the Communist Action Party, and some Kurds, had all been released by the end of 2000.

In December 2000, the Government transferred 54 Lebanese political prisoners and detainees from Syrian to Lebanese custody (see Section 1.e.).

A prisoner amnesty announced in July 1999 is believed to have benefited some political prisoners and detainees. While the total number of those released is unknown, Amnesty International identified six prisoners held for political reasons who were released. Unconfirmed reports suggest that as many as 600 prisoners were released. Some former prisoners reportedly were required to sign loyalty oaths or admissions of guilt as a condition of their release. Most of those arrested during crackdowns in the 1980's, in response to violent attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood, have been released; however, some may remain in prolonged detention without charge. Some union and professional association officials detained in 1980 may remain in detention (see Sections 2.b. and 6.a.).

The number of remaining political detainees is unknown. In June 2000, prior to the November 2000 prison amnesty, Amnesty International estimated that there were approximately 1,500 political detainees in the country; many of the detainees reportedly are suspected supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the pro-Iraqi wing of the Ba'th party. There also are Jordanian, Lebanese, and Palestinian political detainees. Estimates of detainees are difficult to confirm because the Government does not verify publicly the number of detentions without charge, the release of detainees or amnestied prisoners, or whether detainees subsequently are sentenced to prison (see Section 1.e.).

In October 1998, the Jordanian Government requested that the Syrian Government account for 429 named Jordanian nationals, 239 of whom Jordan claims have been missing since they entered Syria, and 190 of whom Jordan claims are imprisoned in Syria. By year's end there had been no published official response.

Former prisoners are subject to a so-called "rights ban," which begins from the day of sentencing and lasts until 7 years after the expiration of the sentence, in the case of felony convictions. Persons subject to this ban are not allowed to vote, run for office, or work in the public sector; they often also are denied passports.

The Government has exiled citizens in the past, although the practice is prohibited by the Constitution. The Government refuses to reissue the passports of citizens who fled the country in the 1980's; such citizens consequently are unable to return to the country.

There were no known instances of forced exile during the year.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the two exceptional courts dealing with cases of alleged national security violations are not independent of executive branch control. The regular court system generally displays considerable independence in civil cases, although political connections and bribery at times influence verdicts.

The judicial system is composed of the civil and criminal courts, military courts, security courts, and religious courts, which adjudicate matters of personal status such as divorce and inheritance (see Section 5). The Court of Cassation is the highest court of appeal. The Supreme Constitutional Court is empowered to rule on the constitutionality of laws and decrees; it does not hear appeals.

Civil and criminal courts are organized under the Ministry of Justice. Defendants before these courts are entitled to the legal representation of their choice; the courts appoint lawyers for indigents. Defendants are presumed innocent; they are allowed to present evidence and to confront their accusers. Trials are public, except for those involving juveniles or sex offenses. Defendants may appeal their verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation. Such appeals are difficult to win because the courts do not provide verbatim transcripts of cases—only summaries prepared by the presiding judges. There are no

juries.

Military courts have the authority to try civilians as well as military personnel. The venue for a civilian defendant is decided by a military prosecutor. There were continuing reports that the Government operates military field courts in locations outside established courtrooms. Such courts reportedly observe fewer of the formal procedures of regular military courts.

The two security courts are the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), which tries political and national security cases, and the Economic Security Court (ESC), which tries cases involving financial crimes. Both courts operate under the state of emergency, not ordinary law, and do not observe constitutional provisions safeguarding defendants' rights.

Charges against defendants in the SSSC often are vague. Many defendants appear to be tried for exercising normal political rights, such as free speech. For example, the Emergency Law authorizes the prosecution of anyone "opposing the goals of the revolution," "shaking the confidence of the masses in the aims of the revolution," or attempting to "change the economic or social structure of the State." Nonetheless the Government contends that the SSSC tries only persons who have sought to use violence against the State.

Under SSSC procedures, defendants are not present during the preliminary or investigative phase of the trial, during which the prosecutor presents evidence. Trials usually are closed to the public. Lawyers are not ensured access to their clients before the trial and are excluded from the court during their client's initial interrogation by the prosecutor. Lawyers submit written defense pleas rather than oral presentations. The State's case often is based on confessions, and defendants have not been allowed to argue in court that their confessions were coerced. There is no known instance in which the court ordered a medical examination for a defendant who claimed that he was tortured. The SSSC reportedly has acquitted some defendants, but the Government does not provide any statistics regarding the conviction rate. Defendants do not have the right to appeal verdicts, but sentences are reviewed by the Minister of Interior, who may ratify, nullify, or alter them. The President also may intervene in the review process.

Accurate information regarding the number of cases heard by the SSSC is difficult to obtain, although hundreds of cases are believed to pass through the court annually. Many reportedly involved charges relating to membership in various banned political groups, including the Party of Communist Action and the pro-Iraqi wing of the Ba'th Party. Sentences as long as 15 years have been imposed in the past. The Government permitted delegates from Amnesty International to attend a session of the SSSC in 1997; however there have been no visits by human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) since then (see Section 4).

The trials of independent Members of Parliament Mamun Humsi and Riyadh Seif began on October 30 and 31, respectively. The trials were held in a criminal court and, for the first time, were open to diplomats and the regional press. The eight other activists who were arrested during the year still were awaiting trial before the SSSC at year's end (see Sections 1.d., 2.a., and 3).

The ESC tries persons for alleged violations of foreign exchange laws and other economic crimes. The prosecution of economic crimes is not applied uniformly, and some government officials or businesspersons with close connections to the Government likely have violated the country's strict economic laws without prosecution. Like the SSSC, the ESC does not ensure due process for defendants. Defendants are not provided adequate access to lawyers to prepare their defenses, and the State's case usually is based on confessions. Verdicts may be influenced by high-ranking government officials. Those convicted of the most serious economic crimes do not have the right of appeal, but those convicted of lesser crimes may appeal to the Court of Cassation. A significant prisoner amnesty for individuals convicted of economic crimes was announced in July 1999. This amnesty may have benefited thousands of persons. In May 2000, late-President Hafiz Al-Asad amended the Economic Penal Code to allow defendants in economic courts to be released on bail. The bail provision does not extend to those accused of forgery, counterfeiting, or auto theft; however, the amendment is intended to provide relief for those accused of other economic crimes, many of whom have been in pretrial detention for long periods of time. These amendments to the Economic Penal Code also limit the categories of cases that can be tried in the ESC. In November the Government approved a general pardon for nonpolitical prisoners and a reduction of sentences by one-third for persons convicted of economic crimes, with a provision to commute sentences entirely for persons who return embezzled funds to investors within 1 year of the law's effective date.

Prisoner amnesties in July 1999 and November 2000 are believed to have benefited some political prisoners and detainees. The Government also transferred 54 Lebanese political prisoners and detainees from Syrian to Lebanese custody in December (see Section 1.d.).

The Government has released virtually all of those arrested at the time late-President Asad took power in 1970. However, at least two persons arrested during that period may remain in prison, despite the expiration of one of the prisoners' sentences.

The Government in the past denied that it held political prisoners, arguing that, although the aims of some prisoners may be political, their activities, including subversion, were criminal. The official media reported that

the 600 beneficiaries of the November 2000 amnesty were political prisoners and detainees; this reportedly was the first time that the Government acknowledged that it held persons for political reasons. Nonetheless, the Emergency Law and the Penal Code are so broad and vague, and the Government's power so sweeping, that many persons were convicted and are in prison for the mere expression of political opposition to the Government. The Government's August and September detentions of 10 prominent civil society and human rights activists for "crimes of state security" illustrated the Penal Code's broad scope and represented a retreat from recent modest attempts at political liberalization (see Sections 1.d. and 2.a.).

The exact number of political prisoners is unknown. Unconfirmed regional press reports estimated the total number of political prisoners at between 400 and 600. In April a domestic human rights organization estimated the number to be "nearly 800," including approximately 130 belonging to the Islamic Liberation Party, 250 members and activists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, 150 members of the pro-Iraq wing of the Ba'th Party, and 14 Communists.

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

Although laws prohibit such actions, the Emergency Law authorizes the security services to enter homes and conduct searches without warrants if security matters, very broadly defined, are involved. The security services selectively monitor telephone conversations and fax transmissions. The Government sometimes opens mail destined for both citizens and foreign residents. It also prevents the delivery of human rights materials. In August 1999, authorities repealed a 5-year ban on entry of Jordanian newspapers (also see Section 2.a.).

The Government continued its practice of threatening or detaining the relatives of detainees or of fugitives in order to obtain confessions, minimize outside interference, or prompt the fugitive's surrender (see Section 1.d.). There have been reports that security personnel force prisoners to watch relatives being tortured in order to extract confessions. According to Amnesty International, security forces also detain family members of suspected oppositionists (see Section 1.d.).

Security checkpoints continued, although primarily in military and other restricted areas. There are few police checkpoints on main roads and in populated areas. Generally the security services set up checkpoints to search for smuggled goods, weapons, narcotics, and subversive literature. The searches take place without warrants. In the past, the Government and the Ba'th Party monitored and attempted to restrict some citizens' visits to foreign embassies and cultural centers.

In December 2000, the Government detained an individual for forwarding via e-mail an allegedly lewd political cartoon. One of the recipients of the e-mail had forwarded it to the authorities. The individual was held for several months without charge, then released.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for right to express opinions freely in speech and in writing, but the Government restricts these rights significantly in practice. The Government strictly controls the dissemination of information and permits no written or oral criticism of the President, the President's family, the Ba'th Party, the military, or the legitimacy of the Government. The Government also does not permit sectarian issues to be raised. Detention and beatings for individual expressions of opinion that violate these unwritten rules at times occur, although not as frequently as in the past. The Government also threatens activists to attempt to control their behavior. On January 30, novelist Nabil Sulayman was attacked outside his apartment in Latakia. According to Sulayman's daughter, two men assaulted him from behind and beat him severely before Sulayman's neighbors drove them off. Sulayman suffered a serious head wound that led to his hospitalization, although he subsequently recovered. Some observers believe the attack was a message from the Government to civil society advocates to moderate their pressure for reform. The attack came just a day after Information Minister Adnan Um'ran publicly criticized civil society advocates.

In a speech in February, the President explicitly criticized civil society advocates as elites "from outside" who wrongly claim to speak for the majority and said that openness would only be tolerated as long as it "does not threaten the stability of the homeland or the course of development." During the year, the Government required all social, political, and cultural forums and clubs to obtain advance official approval for meetings, to obtain approval for lecturers and lecture topics, and to submit lists of all attendees (see Section 2.b.).

In January the regional press reported on a "Group of 1,000" intellectuals that issued a statement calling for more comprehensive reforms than those demanded by a group of 99 Syrian intellectuals in September 2000. The group's statement called for lifting martial law, ending the state of emergency that has been in effect since 1963, releasing political prisoners, and expanding civil liberties in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. The Government did not take action immediately against any of the individuals who signed the petition; however, in September it detained seven prominent human rights figures, reportedly charging them under articles in the Penal Code dealing with crimes against state security. The seven individuals, who included intellectual Aref Dalilah, had issued statements in support of three other activists whom the

Government recently had detained (see Section 1.d.). A number of those detained were signatories of the January petition. In December 2000, a local human rights organization published an open letter in a Lebanese newspaper calling for the closure of the notorious Tadmur Prison.

The Emergency Law and Penal Code articles dealing with crimes against state security allow the Government broad discretion in determining what constitutes illegal expression. The Emergency Law prohibits the publication of "false information," which opposes "the goals of the revolution" (see Section 1.e.). Penal Code articles prohibit "attempting to illegally change the Constitution," "preventing authorities from executing their responsibilities," and "acts or speech inciting confessionalism." In August the Government amended the Press Law to permit the reestablishment of publications that were circulated prior to 1963 and established a framework in which the National Front Parties, as well as other approved private individuals and organizations, would be permitted to publish their own newspapers. However, the same amendments also stipulated imprisonment and stiff financial penalties as part of broad, vague provisions prohibiting 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 1 to 3 years and fines ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000 (500,000 to 1 million Syrian pounds). The amendments also imposed strict punishments on reporters who do not reveal their government sources in response to government requests. Critics claimed that the amendment would increase self-censorship by journalists, and that it strengthened, rather than relaxed restrictions on the press.

In the past, the Government imprisoned journalists for failing to observe press restrictions. In May 1999, a defamation case filed against a journalist was reported widely in the press. The case was believed to be the first in which a journalist was tried for what he had published; the court acquitted him. State security services are known to threaten local journalists, including with the removal of credentials, for articles printed outside the country. There were reports that journalists temporarily lost their credentials in 2000 after they allegedly reported on issues deemed sensitive by the military.

The Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance censor the domestic and imported foreign press. They usually prevent the publication or distribution of any material deemed threatening or embarrassing by the security services to high levels of the Government. Censorship usually is stricter for materials in Arabic. Commonly censored subjects include: The Government's human rights record; Islamic fundamentalism; allegations of official involvement in drug trafficking; aspects of the Government's role in Lebanon; graphic descriptions of sexual activity; material unfavorable to the Arab cause in the Middle East conflict; and material that is offensive to any of the country's religious groups. In addition most journalists and writers practice self-censorship to avoid provoking a negative government reaction.

The recent proliferation of private publications that began in 2000, continued during the year. In January the Government permitted publication of the National Progressive Front's (NPF) Communist Party newspaper, *The People's Voice*. It became the first private paper distributed openly since 1963. In February the Government permitted publication of the NPF's Union Socialist Party's private newspaper, *The Unionist*. Also in February, the Government permitted the publication of a private satirical weekly newspaper, *The Lamplighter*, which criticized politically nonsensitive instances of government waste and corruption. In June the Government permitted the publication of the private weekly newspaper *The Economist*, which was critical of the performance of government organs.

In his July 2000 inaugural speech, President Bashar Al-Asad emphasized the principle of media transparency. Since July 2000, both the print and electronic media at times have been critical of Ba'th Party and government performance and have reported openly on a range of social and economic issues. While this relaxation of censorship did not extend to domestic politics or foreign policy issues, it was a notable departure from past practice. Damascus-based correspondents for regional Arab media also were able to file reports on internal political issues, such as rumored governmental changes, new political discussion groups, and the possible introduction of new parties to the Ba'th Party-dominated National Progressive Front.

The media continued to broaden somewhat their reporting on regional developments, including the Middle East peace process. The media covered some peace process events factually, but other events were reported selectively to buttress official views. The government-controlled press increased its coverage of official corruption and governmental inefficiency. A few privately owned newspapers published during the year; foreign-owned, foreign-published newspapers continued to circulate relatively freely. In August 1999, authorities repealed a 5-year ban on entry of Jordanian newspapers (see Section 1.f.).

The Government or the Ba'th Party owns and operates the radio and television companies and the newspaper publishing houses. The Ministry of Information closely monitors radio and television news programs to ensure adherence to the government line. The Government does not interfere with broadcasts from abroad. Satellite dishes have proliferated throughout all regions and in neighborhoods of all social and economic categories, and in January the Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade authorized private sector importers to import satellite receivers and visual intercommunication systems.

Cellular telephone service was introduced early in 2000, although its prohibitive cost severely limits the number of subscribers. Internet access and access to e-mail is limited but growing, with efforts underway to provide

greater Internet access, especially to universities and businesses. The Government blocks access to selected Internet sites that contain information deemed politically sensitive or pornographic in nature. The Government also periodically blocks access to servers that provide free e-mail services. In December 2000, the Government detained an individual for several months without charge for forwarding via e-mail an allegedly lewd political cartoon (see Section 1.f.). In 1999 and in September 2000, telephone service to the offices and residences of several foreign diplomats was disrupted, allegedly because the lines had been used to access Internet providers outside the country. Telephone service in 1999 was restored in response to diplomatic protest by the affected embassies; however, diplomats and citizens continue to experience regular disruptions of telephone service. The Ministry of Culture and National Guidance censors fiction and nonfiction works, including films. It also determines which films may or may not be shown at the cultural centers operated by foreign embassies. The Government prohibits the publication of books and other materials in Kurdish; however, there are credible reports that Kurdish language materials are available in the country (see Section 5).

The Government restricts academic freedom. Public school teachers are not permitted to express ideas contrary to government policy, although authorities allow somewhat greater freedom of expression at the university level.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of assembly does not exist under the law. Citizens may not hold demonstrations unless they obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior. Most public demonstrations are organized by the Government or the Ba'th Party. The Government selectively permits some demonstrations, usually based on political reasons. The Government applies the restrictions on public assembly in Palestinian refugee camps, where controlled demonstrations have been allowed.

During the year, as in 2000, there were numerous demonstrations, most of which were permitted or organized by the Government, and some of which were directed against diplomatic missions and international agencies in reaction to the Israeli Government's use of force against Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

In November 2000, there were large demonstrations in Suwayda province following violent clashes between Bedouin shepherds and Druze residents of the province (see Sections 1.a., 1.c., and 5).

The Government restricts freedom of association. It required private associations to register with authorities and denied several such requests during the year, presumably on political grounds. The Government usually grants registration to groups not engaged in political or other activities deemed sensitive. Despite these restrictions, several domestic human rights and civil society groups held meetings during the year without registering with the Government or obtaining prior approval for the meetings. The Government required political forums and discussion groups to obtain prior approval to hold lectures and seminars and to submit lists of all attendees. The authorities do not allow the establishment of independent political parties (see Section 3).

On January 30, novelist Nabil Sulayman was attacked and beaten outside his apartment in Latakia, in what some observers believe was a message from the Government to civil society advocates to moderate their pressure for reform (see Section 2.a.).

In August and September that Government arrested 10 human rights activists who had called for the expansion of civil liberties (see Sections 2.a. and 1.d.).

In 1980 the Government dissolved, and then reconstituted under its control, the executive boards of professional associations after some members staged a national strike and advocated an end to the state of emergency. The associations have not been independent since that time and generally are led by members of the Ba'th Party, although nonparty members may serve on their executive boards. It is not known whether any persons detained in 1980 crackdowns on union and professional association officials remain in detention (see Sections 1.d. and 6.a.).

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, it imposes restrictions in some areas. The only advantage given to a particular religion by the Constitution is the requirement that the President be a Muslim. There is no official state religion; Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of the population.

All religions and orders must register with the Government, which monitors fund raising and requires permits for all meetings by religious groups, except for worship. Recognized religious groups receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes and taxes on official vehicles. There is a strict de facto separation of religious institutions and the state. Religious groups tend to avoid any involvement in internal political affairs. The Government in turn generally refrains from becoming involved in strictly religious issues.

The Government considers militant Islam a threat and follows closely the practice of its adherents. The Government has allowed many new mosques to be built; however, sermons are monitored and controlled, and mosques are closed between prayers.

There were large-scale arrests of Syrian and Palestinian Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Salvation Party in late 1999 and early 2000. Some of the Islamist prisoners reportedly were tortured in detention. A number of these prisoners reportedly were released during 2000 (see Sections 1.c. and 1.d.).

Although the law does not prohibit proselytizing, the Government discourages such activity in practice, particularly when it is deemed a threat to the generally good relations among religious groups. Foreign missionary groups are present but operate discreetly. The Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses as a politically motivated Zionist organization in 1964.

According to a credible report, three Syrian Druze men who had converted to Christianity were arrested in March by Syrian intelligence officials in Lebanon, possibly on suspicion of membership in Jehovah's Witnesses. They reportedly were transferred to prison in Syria, held for 2 months, and then released after signing papers stating that they would cease attending their church and cease contact with their pastor.

Officially all schools are government run and nonsectarian, although some schools are run in practice by Christian, Druze, and Jewish minorities. There is mandatory religious instruction in schools, with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religion courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim, Druze, and Christian students. Jews have a separate primary school, which offers religious instruction in Judaism, in addition to traditional subjects. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the Government permits the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), and Chaldean in some schools on the basis that these are "liturgical languages."

Religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws on marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance (see Section 5).

Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind. However, in the case of Alawis, religion can be a contributing factor in determining career opportunities. For example, members of the President's Alawi sect hold a predominant position in the security services and military, well out of proportion to their percentage of the population, estimated at 12 percent (see Section 3).

For primarily political rather than religious reasons, Jews generally are barred from government employment and do not have military service obligations. Jews also are the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

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

The Government limits freedom of movement. The Government restricts travel near the Golan Heights. Travel to Israel is illegal. In November 1999, the Government eased many of its travel restrictions, which made it easier for most citizens to travel abroad. In December 2000, the Government lifted the ban on travel to Iraq. Exit visas generally no longer are required for women, men over 50 years old, and citizens living abroad. Individuals have been denied permission to travel abroad on political grounds, although government officials deny that this practice occurs. The authorities may prosecute any person found attempting to emigrate or to travel abroad illegally, or who has been deported from another country, or who is suspected of having visited Israel. Women over the age of 18 have the legal right to travel without the permission of male relatives. However, a husband may file a request with the Ministry of Interior to prohibit his wife's departure from the country (see Section 5). The Government's use of police checkpoints has been reduced (see Section 1.f.).

The Government has refused to recognize the citizenship of or to grant identity documents to some persons of Kurdish descent. Their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricts them from traveling to and from the country (see Section 5).

In July 2000, the Government announced that emigres who did not complete mandatory military service may pay a fee to avoid being conscripted while visiting the country.

As of June 391,651 Palestinian refugees were registered with the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the country. In general Palestinian refugees no longer report unusual difficulties travelling in and out of the country, as was the case in the past. The Government restricts entry by Palestinians who are not resident in the country.

Citizens of Arab League countries may enter the country without a visa for stay of up to 3 months, a period that is renewable on application to government authorities. Residency permits require demonstration of employment and a fixed address in Syria.

The law does not provide for the granting of refugee or asylum status in accordance with the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. The Government cooperates on a case-by-case basis with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. The Government provides first asylum but is selective about extending protection to refugees; 2,935 persons sought asylum during the year. Although the Government denied that it forcibly repatriated persons with a valid claim to refugee status, in 1998 it apparently forcibly repatriated Iraqi, Somali, Algerian, and Libyan refugees. As of September, there were 3,271 non-Palestinian refugees in the country, all of whom were receiving assistance from the UNHCR, including 1,597 refugees of Iraqi origin.

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

Although citizens ostensibly vote for the President and Members of Parliament, they do not have the right to change their government. The late President Hafiz Al-Asad was confirmed by unopposed referenda five times after taking power in 1970. His son, Bashar Al-Asad, also was confirmed by an unopposed referendum in July 2000. The Government is headed by a Cabinet, which the President has the discretion to change. Political opposition to the President is not tolerated. The President and his senior aides, particularly those in the military and security services, ultimately make most basic decisions in political and economic life, with a very limited degree of public accountability. Moreover the Constitution mandates that the Ba'th Party is the ruling party and is ensured a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers' and women's groups. Six smaller political parties are permitted to exist and, along with the Ba'th Party, make up the National Progressive Front (NPF), a grouping of parties that represents the sole framework of legal political party participation for citizens. While created ostensibly to give the appearance of a multiparty system, the NPF is dominated by the Ba'th Party and does not change the essentially one-party character of the political system. Non-Ba'th Party members of the NPF exist as political parties largely in name only and conform strictly to Ba'th Party and government policies. There were reports in 2000 that the Government was considering legislation to expand the NPF to include new parties and several parties previously banned; however, there were no developments during the year.

The Ba'th Party dominates the Parliament, which is known as the People's Council. Although parliamentarians may criticize policies and modify draft laws, the executive branch retains ultimate control over the legislative process. The Government has allowed independent non-NPF candidates to run for a limited allotment of seats in the 250-member People's Council. The current allotment of non-NPF deputies is 83, ensuring a permanent absolute majority for the Ba'th Party-dominated NPF. Elections for the 250 seats in the People's Council last took place in 1998.

In August and September, the Government arrested independent Members of Parliament Ma'mun Humsi and Riad Seif on charges of attempting to illegally change the Constitution (see Section 1.d.).

Persons convicted by the State Security Court may be deprived of their political rights after they are released from prison. Such restrictions include a prohibition against engaging in political activity, the denial of passports, and a bar on accepting government jobs and some other forms of employment. The duration of such restrictions is 7 years after expiration of the sentence in the case of felony convictions; however, in practice, the restrictions may continue beyond that period. The Government contends that this practice is mandated by the Penal Code; it has been in effect since 1949.

Women and minorities, with the exception of the Jewish population and stateless Kurds (see Section 5), participate in the political system without restriction. Nonetheless, the percentage of women and minorities in government and politics does not correspond to their percentage of the population. There were 2 female cabinet ministers and 26 female Members of Parliament.

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

The Government does not allow domestic human rights groups to exist legally. One or two human rights groups once operated legally but subsequently were banned by the Government. However, several domestic human rights organizations and civil society groups met during the year.

In February Human Rights Watch (HRW) criticized the Government for restricting civil society groups from meeting. HRW claimed that such groups had grown in popularity in the preceding months, but that on February 18 the Government informed many leaders of such groups that their meetings could not be held without government permission.

The Government has met only twice with international human rights organizations: Human Rights Watch in 1995 and Amnesty International in 1997.

As a matter of policy, the Government in its dealings with international groups denies that it commits human rights abuses. It has not permitted representatives of international organizations to visit prisons. The

Government states that it now responds in writing to all inquiries from NGO's regarding human rights issues, including the cases of individual detainees and prisoners, through an interagency governmental committee established expressly for that purpose. The Government usually responds to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by claiming that the prisoner in question has violated national security laws.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution provides for equal rights and equal opportunity for all citizens. In practice membership in the Ba'th Party or close familial relations with a prominent party member or powerful government official can be important for economic, social, or educational advancement. Party or government connections can pave 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, are reserved solely for Ba'th Party members. Apart from some discrimination against Jews and stateless Kurds, there are no apparent patterns of systematic government discrimination based on race, sex, religion, disability, language, or social status. However, there are varying degrees of societal discrimination in each of these areas.

Women

Violence against women occurs, but there are no reliable statistics regarding the prevalence of domestic violence or sexual assault. The vast majority of cases likely are unreported, and victims generally are reluctant to seek assistance outside the family. One preliminary academic study suggested that domestic violence is the largest single reason for divorces, and that such abuse is more prevalent among the less-educated and persons who live in rural areas. Battered women have the legal right to seek redress in court, but few do so because of the social stigma attached to such action. The Syrian Women's Federation offers services to battered wives to remedy individual family problems. The Syrian Family Planning Association also attempts to deal with this problem. Some private groups, including the Family Planning Association, have organized seminars on violence against women, which were reported by the government press. There are a few private, nonofficial, specifically designated shelters or safe havens for battered women who seek to flee their husbands.

Rape is a felony; however, there are no laws against spousal rape.

Prostitution is prohibited by law, and it is not a widespread problem.

The law specifically provides for reduced sentences in "honor" crimes (a euphemism that refers to violent assaults with intent to murder against a female by a male for alleged sexual misconduct). Instances of honor crimes are rare and happen primarily in rural areas in which Bedouin customs prevail.

The Constitution provides for equality between men and women and equal pay for equal work. Moreover the Government has sought to overcome traditional discriminatory attitudes toward women and encourages women's education. However, the Government has not yet changed personal status, retirement, and social security laws that discriminate against women. In addition some secular laws discriminate against women. For example, under criminal law, the punishment for adultery for a woman is twice that as for the same crime committed by a man.

Christians, Muslims, and other religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws on marriage, divorce, and inheritance (see Section 2.c.). For Muslims personal status law on divorce is based on Shari'a (Islamic law), and some of its provisions discriminate against women. For example, husbands may claim adultery as grounds for divorce, but wives face more difficulty in presenting the same argument. If a woman requests a divorce from her husband, she may not be entitled to child support in some instances. In addition under the law, a woman loses the right to custody of boys when they reach age 9 and girls at age 12.

Inheritance for Muslims also is based on Shari'a. Accordingly Muslim women usually are granted half of the inheritance share of male heirs. However, Shari'a mandates that male heirs provide financial support to the female relatives who inherit less. For example, a brother who inherits an unmarried sister's share from their parents' estate is obligated to provide for the sister's well being. If the brother fails to do so, she has the right to sue.

Polygyny is legal but is practiced only by a small minority of Muslim men.

A husband may request that his wife's travel abroad be prohibited (see Section 2.d.). Women generally are barred from travelling abroad with their children unless they are able to prove that the father has granted permission for the children to travel.

The law prohibits sexual harassment and specifies different punishments depending on whether the victim is a minor or an adult. Sexual harassment does not appear to be a significant problem.

Women participate actively in public life and are represented in most professions, including the military. Women are not impeded from owning or managing land or other real property. Women constitute approximately 7 percent of judges, 10 percent of lawyers, 57 percent of teachers below university level, and 20 percent of university professors.

Children

There is no legal discrimination between boys and girls in education or in health care. Education is compulsory for all children, male or female, between the ages of 6 and 12. According to the Syrian Women's Union, about 46 percent of the total number of students through the secondary level are female. Nevertheless, societal pressure for early marriage and childbearing interferes with girls' educational progress, particularly in rural areas, in which the dropout rates for female students remain high.

The Government provides medical care for children until the age of 18.

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

Child prostitution is a rare problem, mainly involving orphans.

An estimated 10 percent of children under the age of 18 participate in the labor force (see Section 6.d.).

The law emphasizes the need to protect children, and the Government has organized seminars regarding the subject of child welfare.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities and seeks to integrate them into the public sector work force. However, implementation is inconsistent. Regulations reserving 4 percent of government and public sector jobs for persons with disabilities are not implemented rigorously. Persons with disabilities may not legally challenge alleged instances of discrimination. There are no laws that mandate access to public buildings for persons with disabilities.

Religious Minorities

Although there is significant religious tolerance, religion or ethnic affiliation can be a contributing factor in determining career opportunities. For example, members of the President's Alawi sect hold a predominant position in the security services and military, well out of proportion to their percentage of the population, despite the fact that government policy officially disavows sectarianism.

There generally is little societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities, including Jews. However, in October 2000, a group of Palestinians threw bricks, stones, and Molotov cocktails at a synagogue in Damascus, apparently in reaction to the Israeli Government's use of force against Palestinians in the occupied territories. No one was injured in the attack; however, the synagogue was damaged slightly and was closed for approximately 1 month. The Government took immediate steps to ensure that the Jewish community would be protected from further attacks, including arresting the perpetrators and posting guards around synagogues and the Jewish quarter of Damascus.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The Government generally permits national and ethnic minorities to conduct traditional, religious, and cultural activities; however, the Government's attitude toward the Kurdish minority is a significant exception to this policy. Although the Government contends that there is no discrimination against the Kurdish population, it places limits on the use and teaching of the Kurdish language. It also restricts the publication of books and other materials written in Kurdish (see Section 2.a.), Kurdish cultural expression, and, at times, the celebration of Kurdish festivals. The Government tacitly accepts the importation and distribution of Kurdish language materials, particularly in the northeast region in which most of the Kurds in the country reside. Some members of the Kurdish community have been tried by the Supreme State Security Court for expressing support for greater Kurdish autonomy or independence. Although the Asad Government stopped the previous practice of stripping Kurds in Syria of their Syrian nationality (some 120,000 lost Syrian nationality under this program in the 1960's), it never restored their nationality. As a result, those who had lost their nationality, and their children, have been unable to obtain Syrian nationality and passports, or even identification cards and birth certificates. Without Syrian nationality, these stateless Kurds, who according to UNHCR estimates number about 200,000, are unable to own land, are not permitted to practice as doctors or engineers or be employed by the Government, are ineligible for admission to public hospitals, have no right to vote, and cannot travel to and from the country. They also encounter difficulties in enrolling their children in school, and in some cases,

in registering their marriages.

In November 2000, there were violent clashes in Suwayda province, reportedly stemming from a longstanding dispute between Bedouin shepherds and Druze residents over grazing and property rights. The Government deployed 5,000 army troops and sealed off the area with military checkpoints, temporarily preventing nonresidents from entering the Suwayda province. A number of Druze, Bedouin, and security force personnel were killed and injured during the clashes. There were large demonstrations following the deaths (see Section 2.b.).

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

Although the Constitution provides for this right, workers are not free to establish unions independent of the Government. All unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), which is dominated by the Ba'th Party and is in fact a part of the State's bureaucratic structure. The GFTU is an information channel between political decisionmakers and workers. The GFTU transmits instructions downward to the unions and workers but also conveys information to decision makers about worker conditions and needs. The GFTU provides the Government with opinions regarding legislation, organizes workers, and formulates rules for various member unions. The GFTU president is a senior member of the Ba'th Party. He and his deputy may attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. The GFTU controls nearly all aspects of union activity.

The law does not prohibit strikes, except in the agricultural sector; however, previous government crackdowns on strikers deter workers from striking. In 1980 the security forces arrested many union and professional association officials who planned a national strike. Some of them are believed to remain in detention, either without trial or after being tried by the State Security Court (see Sections 1.d. and 2.b.). There were no strikes during the year.

The GFTU is affiliated with the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions.

In 1992 Syria's eligibility for tariff preferences under the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences was suspended because the Government failed to afford internationally recognized worker rights to workers.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The right to organize and bargain collectively does not exist in any meaningful sense. Government representatives are part of the bargaining process in the public sector. In the public sector, unions do not normally bargain collectively on wage issues, but there is some evidence that union representatives participate with representatives of employers and the supervising ministry in establishing minimum wages, hours, and conditions of employment. Workers serve on the boards of directors of public enterprises, and union representatives always are included on the boards.

The law provides for collective bargaining in the private sector, but any such agreement between labor and management must be ratified by the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, who has effective veto power. The Committee of Experts of the International Labor Organization (ILO) has long noted the Government's refusal to abolish the Minister's power over collective contracts.

Unions have the right to litigate disputes over work contracts and other workers' interests with employers and may ask for binding arbitration. In practice labor and management representatives settle most disputes without resort to legal remedies or arbitration. Management has the right to request arbitration, but this right seldom is exercised. Arbitration usually occurs when a worker initiates a dispute over wages or severance pay.

Since the unions are part of the Government's bureaucratic structure, they are protected by law from antiunion discrimination. There were no reports of antiunion discrimination.

There are no unions in the seven free trade zones. Firms in the zones are exempt from the laws and regulations governing hiring and firing, although they must observe some provisions on health, safety, hours, and sick and annual leave.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

There is no law prohibiting forced or compulsory labor, including that performed by children. There were no reports of forced or bonded labor by children, or forced labor involving foreign workers or domestic servants. Forced labor has been imposed as a punishment for some convicted prisoners.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The Labor Law provides for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace; however, the Government tolerates child labor in some instances. Independent information and audits regarding government enforcement are not available. In December 2000, the Parliament approved legislation that raises the private sector minimum age for employment from 12 to 15 years for most types of nonagricultural labor, and from 16 to

18 years for heavy work. In all cases, parental permission is required for children under the age of 16. The law prohibits children from working at night. However, the law applies only to children who work for a salary. Those who work in family businesses and are not technically paid a salary—a common phenomenon—do not fall under the law. Working hours for youths of legal age to work do not differ from those established for adults. Children under the age of 16 are prohibited by law from working in mines, at petroleum sites, or in other dangerous fields. Children are not allowed to lift, carry, or drag heavy objects. The exploitation of children for begging purposes also is prohibited. The Government claims that the expansion of the private sector has led to more young children working.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs monitors employment conditions for persons under the age of 18, but it does not have enough inspectors to ensure compliance with the laws. The Ministry has the authority to specify the industries in which children 15 and 16 years of age may work.

The Labor Inspection Department performs unannounced spot checks of employers on a daily basis to enforce the law; however, the scope of these checks is unknown. The majority of children under age 16 who are working do so for their parents in the agricultural sector without remuneration. The ILO reported in 1998 that 10.5 percent of children under the age of 18 participate in the labor force, which amounts to 4.7 percent of the total work force. The Government has not yet ratified ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labor.

The law does not prohibit forced or bonded labor by children (see Section 6.c.); however, such practices are not known to occur.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The Minister of Labor and Social Affairs is responsible for enforcing minimum wage levels in the public and private sectors. In August 2000, the Government increased public sector minimum wages by 25 percent to \$57 (2,664 Syrian pounds) per month, plus other compensation (for example, meals, uniforms, and transportation). In October 2000, the Government increased private sector minimum wages by 25 percent to \$53 (2,425 Syrian pounds) per month in urban areas and \$49 (2,237 Syrian pounds) in rural areas. These wages do not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. As a result, many workers in both the public and private sectors take additional jobs or are supported by their extended families.

The statutory workweek for administrative staff is 6 days of 6 hours each, and laborers work 6 days a week of 8 hours each. In some cases a 9-hour workday is permitted. The laws mandate one 24-hour rest day per week. Rules and regulations severely limit the ability of an employer to dismiss employees without cause. Even if a person is absent from work without notice for a long period, the employer must follow a lengthy procedure of trying to find the person and notify him, including through newspaper notices, before he is able to take any action against the employee. Dismissed employees have the right of appeal to a committee of representatives from the union, management, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and the appropriate municipality. Such committees usually find in favor of the employee. Dismissed employees are entitled to 80 percent of salary benefits while the dispute is under consideration. No additional back wages are awarded should the employer be found at fault, nor are wage penalties imposed in cases in which the employer is not found at fault. The law does not protect temporary workers who are not subject to regulations on minimum wages. Small private firms and businesses employ such workers to avoid the costs associated with hiring permanent employees.

The law mandates safety in all sectors, and managers are expected to implement them fully. In practice there is little enforcement without worker complaints, which occur infrequently despite government efforts to post notices regarding safety rights and regulations. Large companies, such as oil field contractors, employ safety engineers.

The ILO noted in 1998 that a provision in the Labor Code allowing employers to keep workers at the workplace for as many as 11 hours a day might lead to abuse. However, there have been no reports of such abuses. Officials from the Ministries of Health and Labor are designated to inspect work sites for compliance with health and safety standards; however, such inspections appear to be sporadic, apart from those conducted in hotels and other facilities that cater to foreigners. The enforcement of labor laws in rural areas also is more lax than it is in urban areas, where inspectors are concentrated. 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.

The law provides protection for foreign workers who reside legally in the country; however, it does not provide protection for the thousands of foreigners working in the country illegally.

f. Trafficking in Persons

There are no laws that specifically prohibit trafficking in persons; however, there were no reports that persons were trafficked to, from, or within the country. Standard labor laws could be applied in the event of allegations of trafficking.

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