

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

|                                    |                                   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>                  | <b>197</b>                        |
| Land:                              | Syrien                            |
| Kilde:                             | Freedom House                     |
| Titel:                             | Freedom in the World 2010 – Syria |
| Udgivet:                           | 3. maj 2010                       |
| Optaget på<br>baggrundsmaterialet: | 24. juni 2010                     |

Last Updated: Thursday, 24 June 2010, 07:34 GMT

[unhcr.org](#) | [Partners](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#)[Home](#) [Syrian Arab Republic](#)

Search

Text size [A](#) [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)[Email this document](#)[Printable version](#)Enter a word or phrase [Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

Regions

[Africa](#)[Americas](#)[Asia](#)[Europe](#)[Oceania](#)

Countries

[Syrian Arab Republic](#) 

Categories

[Country Information](#)[Legal Information](#)[Policy Documents](#)[Reference Documents](#)

Browse by

[A-Z Index](#)[Topics](#)[Publishers](#)[Document Types](#)

Resources

[Special Features](#)[Standards and Training](#)[Information Alerts](#)[Protection Starter Kit](#)[Library](#)[News](#)[Refworld Personalization](#)[External Links](#)

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Title</b>            | Freedom in the World 2010 - Syria                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Publisher</b>        | Freedom House                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Country</b>          | <a href="#">Syrian Arab Republic</a>                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Publication Date</b> | 3 May 2010                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Cite as</b>          | Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2010 - Syria</i> , 3 May 2010, available at: <a href="http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c0cead22.html">http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c0cead22.html</a> [accessed 24 June 2010] |

## Freedom in the World 2010 - Syria

**Capital:** Damascus**Population:** 19,900,000

Political Rights Score: 7 \*

Civil Liberties Score: 6 \*

Status: Not Free

### Overview

Freedoms of expression, association, and assembly remained tightly restricted throughout 2009, especially with regard to certain groups, such as the Kurdish minority. Syria's opposition in exile split during the year, ending an uneasy alliance between secularists and Islamists. On the international front, Syria and Lebanon exchanged ambassadors, and although the United States announced that it would send an ambassador to Damascus, none had been named by year's end.

The modern state of Syria was established by the French after World War I and gained formal independence in 1946. Democratic institutions functioned intermittently until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup and transformed Syria into a one-party state governed under emergency law. During the 1960s, power shifted from civilian ideologues to army officers, most of whom belonged to Syria's Alawite minority (adherents of an Islamic sect who make up 12 percent of the population). This trend culminated in General Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.

The regime cultivated a base of support that spanned sectarian and ethnic divisions, but relied on Alawite domination of the security establishment and the suppression of dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern city of Hama to crush a rebellion by the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, killing as many as 20,000 insurgents and civilians.

Bashar al-Assad took power after his father's death in 2000, pledging to liberalize Syria's politics and economy. The first six months of his presidency featured the release of political prisoners, the return of exiled dissidents, and open discussion of the country's problems. In February 2001, however, the regime abruptly halted this so-called Damascus Spring. Leading reformists were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others faced constant surveillance and intimidation by the secret police. Economic reform fell by the wayside, and Syria under Bashar al-Assad proved resistant to political change.

Reinvigorated by the toppling of Iraq's Baathist regime in 2003, Syria's secular and Islamist dissidents began cooperating and pushing for the release of political prisoners, the cancellation of the state of emergency, and the legalization of opposition parties. Syria's Kurdish minority erupted into eight days of rioting in March 2004. At least 30 people were killed as security forces suppressed the riots and made some 2,000 arrests.

Despite hints that sweeping political reforms would be drafted at a major Baath Party conference in 2005, no substantial measures were taken. In October 2005, representatives of all three segments of the opposition – the Islamists, the Kurds, and secular liberals – signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), which called for the country's leaders to step down and endorsed a broad set of liberal democratic principles.

In May 2006, exiled opposition leaders announced the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) to bring about regime change. Also that month, a number of Syrian political and human

rights activists signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for a change in Syrian-Lebanese relations and the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty. Many of the signatories were subsequently detained or sentenced to prison as part of a renewed crackdown that reversed the previous partial leniency on personal freedom.

In 2007, al-Assad won another term as president with 97.6 percent of the vote. In results that were similarly preordained by the electoral framework, the ruling Baath-dominated coalition won the majority of seats in that year's parliamentary and municipal polls. Meanwhile, supporters of the DDDNC formed governing bodies for their alliance and renewed their activities, prompting a government crackdown that extended into 2008.

In 2009, the NSF fell apart, largely because the Muslim Brotherhood, in deference to the Syrian government's support for the Palestinian militant group Hamas, suspended its opposition activities in the aftermath of Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip in January. One prominent secular NSF member, Bashar al-Sha'i, quit the opposition in April and returned to Syria after publicly apologizing to the government in July, and another DDDNC member, Michel Kilo, was released from prison at the end of his three-year sentence in May. Other leading human rights figures within Syria were jailed or faced new charges of "weakening national morale" or "spreading false information" during the year. Separately, al-Assad reshuffled his government in April, replacing five ministers and creating an environment ministry.

Syria's diplomatic isolation eased somewhat in 2009. High-ranking officials from the United States met with Syrian leaders for the first time since 2005, Washington pledged to return an ambassador to Damascus, and Saudi Arabian diplomats held talks with Syrian officials. However, the U.S. ambassador had not been named by year's end, the United States renewed existing sanctions on Syria, and progress on an Association Agreement with the European Union stalled.

#### Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Syria is not an electoral democracy. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by popular referendum for seven-year terms. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime, as are elections for the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council, whose members serve four-year terms and hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch.

The only legal political parties are the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners in the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF). Independent candidates, who are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime, are permitted to contest about a third of the People's Council seats, meaning two-thirds are reserved for the NPF.

Regime officials and their families benefit from a range of illicit economic activities. Syria is slowly opening itself economically by removing heavy tariffs and eliminating subsidies, but these limited reforms benefit a small minority at the expense of average citizens. Corruption is widespread, and bribery is often necessary to navigate the bureaucracy. Syria was ranked 126 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Vaguely worded articles of the penal code, the Emergency Law, and a 2001 Publications Law criminalize the publication of material that harms national unity, tarnishes the image of the state, or threatens the "goals of the revolution." Many journalists, writers, and intellectuals have been arrested under these laws. Apart from a handful of radio stations with non-news formats, all broadcast media are state owned. However, satellite dishes are common, giving most Syrians access to foreign broadcasts. More than a dozen privately owned newspapers and magazines have sprouted up in recent years, and criticism of government policy is tolerated, provided it is nuanced and does not criticize the president. The 2001 press law permits the authorities to arbitrarily deny or revoke publishing licenses and compels private print outlets to submit all material to government censors. It also imposes punishment on reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to government requests. Since the Kurdish protests in 2004, the government has cracked down on journalists calling for the expansion of Kurdish or regional rights; the information minister fired a newspaper editor in Homs in August 2009 for publishing a column about regional identity.

Though a ban on the Saudi-owned, pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* was lifted in 2009, journalists in Syria continued to face harassment and intimidation in the form of short jail terms, travel bans, and confiscations of their notes. The Damascus office of the Dubai-based television station Al-Mashreq was closed in July for security reasons; 15 employees were held for questioning. Ibrahim al-Jaban, a prominent television journalist known for touching on taboo subjects, was banned from Syrian television in August.

Syrians access the internet only through state-run servers, which block more than 160 sites associated with the opposition, Kurdish politics, Islamic organizations, human rights, and certain foreign news services, particularly those in Lebanon. Social-networking and video-sharing websites such as Facebook and YouTube are also blocked. E-mail correspondence is reportedly monitored by intelligence agencies, which often require internet cafe owners to

reportedly monitored by intelligence agencies, which often require internet cafe owners to monitor customers. In practice, internet users often find ways around these restrictions, and poor connections and high costs tend to hinder access more effectively than government regulations. The government has been more successful in fostering self-censorship through intimidation; a dozen cyberdissidents are currently imprisoned. In September 2009, blogger Karim Antoine Arabji, who had written about corruption, was sentenced to three years in prison after already serving nearly two years in pretrial detention.

Although the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion in Syria, and freedom of worship is generally respected. However, the government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim clergy. All nonworship meetings of religious groups require permits, and religious fundraising is closely scrutinized. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the security forces.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. Several private universities have recently been founded, and the extent of academic freedom within them varies. University professors have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent.

Freedom of assembly is closely circumscribed. Public demonstrations are illegal without official permission, which is typically granted only to progovernment groups. The security services intensified their ban on public and private gatherings in 2006, forbidding any group of five or more people from discussing political and economic topics. This rule has been enforced through surveillance and informant reports. Such activity by the intelligence services has ensured that a culture of self-censorship and fear prevails, and ordinary Syrians are unwilling to discuss politics under most circumstances.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. All nongovernmental organizations must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist or human rights groups. Leaders of unlicensed human rights groups have frequently been jailed for publicizing state abuses. Professional syndicates are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. Strikes in nonagricultural sectors are legal, but they rarely occur.

While the lower courts operate with some independence and generally safeguard defendants' rights, politically sensitive cases are usually tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional tribunal established under emergency law that denies the right to appeal, limits access to legal counsel, tries many cases behind closed doors, and routinely accepts confessions obtained through torture. SSSC judges are appointed by the executive branch, and only the president and interior minister may alter verdicts. The SSSC suspended its operations in late 2008 following riots in Syria's largest prison for political detainees, but reopened its docket in 2009.

The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining their family members. In 2009, police killed several civilians who were protesting the demolition of illegally constructed homes outside Damascus. The state of emergency in force since 1963 gives security agencies virtually unlimited authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Many of the estimated 2,500 to 3,000 political prisoners in Syria have never been tried. The majority are probably Islamists; those suspected of involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood or radical Islamist groups are regularly detained by the authorities. Possession of recordings or books by clerics whom the regime deems dangerous is often enough for arrest. After release from prison, political activists are often monitored and harassed by security services. The Syrian Human Rights Committee has reported that hundreds of government informants are rewarded for or coerced into writing reports on relatives, friends, and associates who are suspected of involvement in "antiregime" activities.

The Kurdish minority faces severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. The 2001 press law requires that owners and top editors of print publications be Arabs. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and are unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates, which in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and public-sector jobs. In 2009, the government made it more difficult to hire noncitizens, resulting in the dismissal of many Kurds. While one demonstration to demand more rights for the Kurdish community was allowed to take place in northern Syria, security forces stopped four demonstrations in February and March, detaining dozens of people and referring some to the judiciary for prosecution. Intelligence services generally monitor Kurdish leaders closely, sometimes excluding them and their families from public-sector employment. At least 15 such leaders are barred from leaving Syria.

Opposition figures, human rights activists, and relatives of exiled dissidents are similarly prevented from traveling abroad, and many ordinary Kurds lack the requisite documents to leave the country. Other Syrians are generally allowed greater freedom of movement, residence, and employment.

The government has appointed some women to senior positions, including one of the two vice

presidential posts. However, women remain underrepresented, holding 12.4 percent of the seats in the legislature. The government provides women with equal access to education, but many discriminatory laws remain in force. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women are generally barred from leaving the country with their children without proof of the father's permission. Violence against women is common, particularly in rural areas. The government imposed two-year minimum prison sentences for killings classified as "honor crimes" in 2009; previously there had been a maximum one-year sentence. State-run media estimate that there are 40 such killings each year, whereas women's rights groups put the figure at 200. Personal status law for Muslim women is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters; church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. A draft personal status law introduced in 2009 was subsequently withdrawn after women's rights activists criticized its content and Christians denounced it as an attempt to take authority away from their respective churches.

---

*\*Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved