



January 2011

country summary

Syria

There was no significant change in Syrian human rights policy and practice in 2010. Authorities continued to broadly violate the civil and political rights of citizens, arresting political and human rights activists, censoring websites, detaining bloggers, and imposing travel bans.

Emergency rule, imposed in 1963, remains in effect and Syria's multiple security agencies continue to detain people without arrest warrants, holding them incommunicado for lengthy periods. The Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), an exceptional court with almost no procedural guarantees, regularly sentences Kurdish activists and Islamists to long prison terms.

A positive development in 2010 was the adoption in January of a new comprehensive anti-trafficking law.

Arrest and Trial of Political Activists

Twelve leaders of the Damascus Declaration, a prominent gathering of opposition groups, finished serving 30-month prison terms imposed in October 2008 for "weakening national sentiment." All were released except writer Ali al-` Abdallah, who is facing new charges of "spreading false information" and "spoil[ing] Syria's relations with another country" because of articles he wrote while in prison. His trial is still pending at this writing.

In February border police detained Ragheda Sa`id Hasan, a former political prisoner who was a member of the Communist Action Party. Three days later unidentified individuals confiscated a copy of a manuscript she wrote about her past detention from her apartment, as well as other political publications. She remains in detention.

The SSSC sentenced dozens of Kurdish political activists to prison in 2010, including many members of the PYD political party, which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In April the SSSC sentenced four members of the Kurdish Yekiti Party—Yasha Wader, Dilghesh Mamo, Ahmad Darwish, and Nazmi Mohammad—to five years in prison on the charge of undertaking acts "to cut off part of Syrian land." Three other prominent Yekiti

members—Hassan Saleh, Muhammad Mustapha, and Ma`ruf Mulla Ahmad—face the same charges in their ongoing trial before the SSSC.

In June a military judge sentenced Mahmud Safo, a member of the Kurdish Left Party, to one year in prison for “inciting sectarian strife” and membership in an unlicensed organization.

Dr. Kamal al-Labwani, a physician and founder of the Democratic Liberal Gathering, who is serving a 15-year sentence for advocating peaceful reform, remains in prison.

Freedom of Expression and Civil Society Activism

Syria’s press law provides the government with sweeping control over publications. The government has extended this control to online outlets. Internet censorship of political websites is pervasive and includes popular websites such as Blogger (Google’s blogging engine), Facebook, and YouTube.

In December 2009 State Security detained Tal al-Mallohi, a 19-year-old student blogger, reportedly for a critical poem she wrote. At this writing the security services are holding her incommunicado and have not referred her to the judiciary.

In January blogger Karim `Arbaji was released by presidential pardon. The SSSC had sentenced him in 2009 to three years in prison for moderating a popular online youth forum, akhawia.net, which contained criticisms of the government.

In January security forces detained a journalist, Ali Taha, and a photographer, Ali Ahmad, who work for the satellite TV station Rotana, which mainly focuses on social life topics. They were released in February, without charge. In February security forces also released Ma`en `Akel, a journalist at the official newspaper *Thawra*, whom they had detained in November 2009 while he was investigating government corruption.

In March Military Intelligence in Aleppo detained `Abdel Hafez `Abdel Rahman, a board member of the unlicensed Kurdish human rights group MAF (“Right” in Kurdish), and along with another MAF board member, Nadera `Abdo. The security services released `Abdo and referred `Abdel Rahman to trial on charges of “undertaking acts to cut off part of Syrian land.” A military judge released him on bail on September 1. His trial is ongoing at this writing.

In April authorities released on bail Ahmad Mustafa Ben Mohammad (known as Pir Rostom), a Kurdish political activist and writer, whom they detained in November 2009 for articles he wrote online.

In June a criminal court sentenced Muhannad al-Hasani, a human rights lawyer and president of the Syrian Human Rights Organization (Swasiah), to three years in prison for “weakening national sentiment” and “spreading false or exaggerated information” in connection with his monitoring of the SSSC. In May al-Hasani won the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for his work as a human rights defender.

In July a military tribunal sentenced Haytham al-Maleh, an 80-year-old prominent human rights lawyer and former judge, to three years in prison for “weakening national sentiment” and “spreading false information that weakens the nation’s morale” after an opposition television station aired a phone interview with him in which he criticized Syrian authorities.

In June border security guards detained Kamal Sheikho, a member of Committees for the Defense of Democracy Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF). On August 23, security forces detained another CDF member, Isma`il `Abdi, a dual Syrian-German citizen who has lived in Germany since 1997 but was vacationing in Syria. A judge interrogated him in October on charges of “weakening national sentiment” and “membership in a prohibited group.”

The government continues to prevent activists from traveling abroad, including Radeef Mustapha, head of the Kurdish Human Rights Committee.

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

Arbitrary Detention, “Disappearances,” and Torture

Syria’s multiple security services continue to detain people without arrest warrants and frequently refuse to disclose their whereabouts for weeks and sometimes months, in effect forcibly disappearing them. The fate of Nabil Khlioui, detained in 2008 from the region of Deir al-Zawr because of suspected ties to Islamists, remains unknown. The authorities have also kept silent about the fate of at least 20 Kurds detained since 2008 on suspicion of ties to a separatist Kurdish movement.

Human Rights Watch received numerous reports of ill-treatment and torture by security agencies. The United Nations Committee against Torture said in May that it was “deeply concerned about numerous, ongoing, and consistent allegations concerning the routine use of torture by law enforcement and investigative officials.”

At least five detainees died in custody in 2010, with no serious investigations into the deaths by the authorities. In June security services returned the body of Muhammad Ali Rahman to his family. According to Syrian human rights activists, his corpse showed signs of torture. Syrian law provides Syrian security services with extensive immunity for acts of torture.

As in previous years, the government failed to acknowledge security force involvement in the “disappearance” of an estimated 17,000 persons, mostly Muslim Brotherhood members and other Syrian activists detained by the government in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians detained in Syria or abducted from Lebanon.

More than two years after security forces opened fire on rioting inmates in Sednaya prison, killing at least nine, the government has not released any information about the casualties. The authorities have not released Nizar Rastanawi, a prominent human rights activist who completed his four-year sentence in Sednaya on April 18, 2009, and there is no information about his well-being.

Discrimination and Repression against Kurds

Kurds, Syria’s largest non-Arab ethnic minority, remain subject to systematic discrimination, including arbitrary denial of citizenship to an estimated 300,000 Syria-born Kurds. Authorities suppress expressions of Kurdish identity and prohibit the teaching of Kurdish in schools.

In March 2010, security forces shot at Kurds celebrating the Kurdish New Year in the northern town of Raqqa to disperse them, killing at least one. In July a military court sentenced nine Kurds alleged to have participated in the celebrations in Raqqa to four months for “inciting sectarian strife.”

Women and Girls’ Rights

Syria’s constitution guarantees gender equality, and many women are active in public life, but personal status laws as well as the penal code contain provisions that discriminate

against women and girls. The nationality law of 1969 denies Syrian women married to foreign spouses the right to pass on their citizenship to their children or spouses.

In January the government issued a comprehensive anti-trafficking law, Legislative Decree No. 3, which provides new grounds for prosecuting trafficking and protecting victims, and outlines a minimum punishment of seven years.

Syria amended its penal code in 2009 to require a minimum two-year sentence for so-called “honor” crimes; at least 10 honor crimes were documented by Syrian women’s rights groups in 2010.

Migrant domestic workers, whose numbers have increased in Syria, reportedly face exploitation and abuse by employers. The government enacted two decrees regulating the work of recruiting agencies to better protect the workers, but enforcement mechanisms are still lacking.

Situation of Refugees Fleeing Iraq

Syria hosts more Iraqi refugees than any other country, with 210,000 registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the beginning of 2010; the actual numbers are likely much higher. Syria gives Iraqi refugees, registered or not, access to public hospitals and schools, but prohibits them from working.

In February UNHCR closed the al-Tanf refugee camp—which is situated in the no man’s land between Iraq and Syria and has hosted Palestinians from Iraq for nearly four years—and relocated the last of the refugees to the al-Hol camp inside Syria. However, a more permanent solution is still needed for the more than 600 Palestinians in al-Hol camp.

Key International Actors

The international community’s interactions with Syria have focused almost exclusively on its regional role. Key European Union and US officials have condemned the arrest and trials of prominent activists, but their interventions have had no impact on Syria’s actions. In July both US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton publicly criticized Syria’s detention and trial of Haytham al-Maleh, Muhanad al-Hasani, and Ali al-Abdallah. In September the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning Syria’s crackdown on human rights activists.