

## **SYRIA:**

### **European Parliament Should Condition EC Aid on Human Rights Improvements**

**Nineteen ninety-three marked the 30th year that Syria's fifteen million residents have been ruled under emergency law, imposed in March 1963 when the Arab Ba`th Socialist Party seized power. The reference by President Hafez al-Asad in a June 1991 speech to the need to "increase popular participation in political decision-making" had generated hope that an opening of Syria's political system might be in the offing. But, to date, anticipated reforms have not been realized. Political opposition in Syria is still not tolerated, independent institutions of civil society are not permitted to exist, and the print and broadcast media are completely controlled by the state. The Asad regime, which has ruled in authoritarian fashion since 1970, continues to merit the ignominious distinction of holding some of the world's longest-serving political prisoners, detained without charge or trial for over twenty years. One of these prisoners, Gen. Salah Jadid, died in August of this year, at sixty-nine years of age.**

**Despite the welcome mass releases over the last two years of thousands of Syria's security and political prisoners -- including 4,018 in three successive amnesties between December 1991 and December 1992 -- Middle East Watch estimates that some 4,000 remain incarcerated. Among them are individuals held for association with political groups not engaged in violence, and writers and other professionals held for peaceful expression and association. Fifteen human-rights activists from the Committees for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF), an independent human rights organization formed in Damascus in 1989 that is barred from working openly inside the country, are now part of this group of prisoners of conscience. The CDF members were arrested between December 1991 and March 1992.**

**Given the regime's apparent resolve to end its previous isolation from the West, and the numerous high-level meetings during the year between Syrian and European government officials, Middle East Watch recommends that the European Parliament continue -- as it has in the past -- to play a lead role in calling attention to human rights abuses in Syria. The European Community's pending Fourth Protocol on Financial and Technical Cooperation with Syria provides an opportunity for the Parliament not only to raise human rights concerns, but also to demand specific improvements in exchange for assent to this five-year assistance package.**

**Middle East Watch recommends that the European Parliament condition Fourth Protocol assistance -- with the sole exception of humanitarian aid that directly benefits the needy -- upon the Syrian government meeting four specific requirements. The government must:**

**1. Release all prisoners and detainees held for peaceful expression and association. Among this group are the fifteen human rights activists from the Committees for the Defense**

**of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF).**

**2. End the practice of torture.** As a practical matter, the means that facilitate torture-- particularly incommunicado detention--also must come to an end. Accordingly, all detainees must be provided with prompt access to family members and lawyers.

**3. Discontinue trials before the State Security Court.** The structure and proceedings of the security court violate international fair-trial standards, and therefore those tried and convicted by this court are subjected to flagrant denials of the right to liberty and due process. Those charged with violations of emergency-law provisions should be tried by a court that offers the essential guarantees of independence, impartiality and due process, including the right to appeal to a higher tribunal. Individuals already convicted and sentenced by the State Security Court should be released, or retried in a court that meets the international standards outlined above.

**4. End prolonged detention without charges or trial.** Those individuals held in detention should be charged within a reasonable period, or released.

If these four conditions are met, and the full aid package goes forward, the European Parliament should use the leverage of the five-year protocol to press for enhanced measures to improve human rights in Syria. Middle East Watch thus recommends that all Protocol aid of a non-humanitarian nature be provided one year at a time. Prior to the release of the next portion of the aid, the European Parliament should conduct a yearly human-rights review process, and issue a public report on Syria's continued compliance with the four items noted above, as well as the progress being made with respect to the following:

- o Lifting the 30-year state of emergency.
- o Permitting freedom of association for professional associations, political groups and parties that do not incite or practice violence, and other independent organizations.
- o Granting legal status to the independent Committees for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF), and allowing Syrian citizens to conduct independent human-rights monitoring.
- o Guaranteeing freedom of expression, including press and academic freedom, and instituting full guarantees of minority rights, including an end to discrimination against Syrian Kurds.
- o Permitting freedom of travel for all Syrians, irrespective of religion, ethnicity and political beliefs.

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## OVERVIEW: HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENTS IN 1993

When Syrian President Hafez al-Asad issued three amnesties between December 1991 and December 1992, covering 4,018 prisoners held on security grounds, hope was generated that all political detainees in Syria might soon be released. But prisoners of conscience not covered by the presidential pardons remained behind bars, and others were arrested under the emergency law, although in reduced numbers compared to previous years.

Middle East Watch estimates that currently some 4,000 Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian security and political prisoners languish in the country's jails and detention centers. Among them are many who were involved in groups implicated in anti-government violence during the armed insurrection of the Muslim Brotherhood between 1978 and 1980. However, hundreds of others were never implicated in acts of violence, and were held primarily for association with political opposition groups that did not engage in violence. Still others were detained for peaceful expression. These include human rights activists, independent writers, and dozens of lawyers, physicians and engineers arrested more than a decade ago for membership in professional organizations that had advocated democratic freedoms and an end to the state of emergency.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"The state of emergency gives sweeping powers to the martial law governor (the prime minister) and his deputy (the minister of interior) to restrict freedom of assembly and movement; to censor mail, other communications, broadcasts, and publications; to confiscate, suspend, and close organs of the media; and to requisition or confiscate property. The state of emergency also includes a long list of offenses "Against State Security" and those which "Constitute a General Danger" (Article 6)...One of the most serious consequences of the state of emergency is that citizens lack any right to appeal the decisions of the martial law governor, including decisions to imprison persons for an unspecified period of time. There is no right of habeas corpus, no pressure to bring a person to trial, and no limitation on detention...By vastly broadening the limits of political crimes, by allowing unlimited detention without trial, and by legalizing methods of summary judgment, the state of emergency has opened the way for an array of human rights abuses in Syria." Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (Human Rights Watch Books, Yale University Press: 1991), pp. 24-25.

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One of Syria's longest-serving political prisoners held without charge or trial, Gen. Salah Jadid, died in August at the age of sixty-nine. By many accounts, Jadid, a former army chief of staff, was the most powerful figure in Syria from 1966 until his arrest in 1970. Jadid's death--and the release earlier in the year of five former high-ranking government and Ba`th Party officials arrested in 1970 and 1971--left eight prisoners, all arrested between 1969 and 1972, incarcerated without trial. Another four men, all arrested in 1970, continue to be detained despite the expiration of their sentences in 1985.

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Despite the dramatic and encouraging reduction in the number of security and political prisoners over the last few years, developments this year demonstrated that independent political and human rights activity in Syria not only would not be tolerated, but also would be punished severely. The Supreme State Security Court began to hand down verdicts in trials of some 500 detainees accused of membership in outlawed political organizations. Most of the defendants have been held without charge since the 1980's. The legal proceedings, which started in June 1992, fell short of international fair-trial standards, and the majority of the sentences were harsh. The security court's decisions cannot be appealed to a higher tribunal. In a particularly disgraceful move, the security court in 1992 sentenced fourteen Syrian human rights activists to lengthy prison terms (four were released in a subsequent amnesty); this year, another five human rights monitors, all of them arrested in 1992, await judgment by the same court.

There were reports in 1993 of arrests of suspected political activists under the emergency law, incommunicado detention, and deaths in detention believed to have been caused by torture. Over 250 Kurds were arrested in cities and towns in the northeast and northwest, following the publication in October 1992 of materials calling for equal civil and cultural rights for Syrian Kurds. Some forty remain in detention. Six political prisoners are believed to have died under torture between October 1992 and January 1993. One of the victims, Shakour Ta`ban, was a lawyer in his fifties who has been arrested in connection with a communique issued in January 1991 in opposition to the Gulf War.

The regime continues to restrict freedom of expression and freedom of association. Members of Syria's minority Kurdish, Palestinian and Jewish communities remain subjected to arbitrary and discriminatory actions by the state.

### **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION RESTRICTED**

Freedom of expression continues to be a casualty of the long-standing state of emergency. In a June 1 report from Damascus, CDF noted that the Ministry of Information and the security apparatus continue to monitor and suppress independent thought. Manuscripts, articles and other works -- as well as Friday sermons in mosques -- must be authorized by the security apparatus. Syrian writers and

intellectuals have been interrogated for what they have said in interviews and at conferences and debates; many are blacklisted from travelling abroad. Special intelligence-service units at each university conduct surveillance of all activities, and a network of agents compile periodic reports about the content of lectures by professors.

Syria's media serve as state organs, and no independent publications are permitted to exist. Information Minister Muhammed Salman unabashedly admitted this year, in an interview published in the Jordanian daily *al-Dustur*, that the role of the Syrian media was to "express and explain the state's domestic development policy and Arab and foreign policy," and that the media had been "steadfastly practicing this policy" since 1970.

He added: "We express in our media the policy drawn up by our political leadership, away from sensationalism or competition, or any other heading that could be used as a cover to propagate policies or ideas that are like harmful weeds that have a deceptive appearance." Asked if the regime would consider allowing private newspapers and magazines in a step toward political openness, the information minister avoided a direct reply. Instead, he cited Syria's state of war with Israel as the reason for tight control of the media: "We are in a state of war with an enemy that occupies part of our national soil... *This requires immunizing citizens politically and culturally all the time through the official media*, as well as through the parties of the National Progressive Front, and the popular, professional and cultural organizations."<sup>2</sup>

### **FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION DENIED**

There continues to be no space in Syria for opposition political parties independent of the ruling Ba`th Party and the National Progressive Front (NPF), which the Ba`th dominates. Law No. 49 of July 1980, which banned the Muslim Brotherhood and made membership in the organization a capital offense, remains in effect. Muhammed al-Sayyed, the deputy leader of the Syrian Brotherhood, wrote in 1993 in the group's newsletter *al-Bayan* that a rapprochement with the regime was possible if, among other measures, Law No. 49 was repealed, a general amnesty was offered, and Syrians were permitted to "exercise their rights."

President Asad offered a defense of Syria's one-dimensional political landscape in a lengthy interview with his English-language biographer Patrick Seale, published in the London-based Arabic weekly *al-Wasat*. Asad maintained that the seven political parties that comprise the NPF are "deep-rooted movements" with "differences among them."<sup>3</sup> While this may be true, political activity outside the narrow band of the state-controlled NPF is not permitted, as indicated by the trials in 1992 and 1993 of suspected members of banned political groups before the Supreme State Security Court (see pages 7-8).

### **Syrian Human Rights Activists in Prison**

The Syrian government does not recognize the right of local human rights monitors to carry out

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Dustur*, May 10, 1993. Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> *Al-Wasat*, May 10-16, 1993.

**work inside the country. In 1992, the regime sent an unmistakably strong signal that human rights work by Syrians inside Syria would not be tolerated when the Supreme State Security Court tried seventeen members of the independent, four-year-old Committees for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF), founded in Damascus in December 1989.**

**They were charged with violations of the emergency law, a broadly worded statute that renders virtually any peaceful expression of anti-government views a punishable offense. Specific accusations against the human rights activists included membership in an illegal organization (CDF), and dissemination of false information and undermining the state, because they had distributed unlicensed leaflets critical of the government.<sup>4</sup>**

**The proceedings of the security court fell short of international fair-trial norms. Although the defendants were permitted legal counsel, they were not provided either adequate time or appropriate facilities for the preparation of their defense. They were not allowed to consult with their lawyers outside the courtroom. During the trial, the defendants were not allowed to examine, or have examined, the witnesses against them or to obtain the attendance and examination of witnesses on their behalf. Attempts by their lawyers to introduce evidence in their defense were rebuffed by the court.<sup>5</sup>**

**In March 1992, the court sentenced fourteen CDF members to prison terms ranging from three to ten years. Four of them, all with three-year sentences, were released in March and April, as part of a March 1992 amnesty of about 600 prisoners, but ten remained in prison as of this writing.<sup>6</sup> The trials of another five CDF members, all arrested in February and March 1992, began this year before the same court.<sup>7</sup>**

**On August 10, 1993, the fifteen imprisoned CDF members -- who were being held in Sednaya and Adra prisons near Damascus -- began a hunger strike to protest their continued detention. They fasted for seven to twelve days, depending on their state of health. In a letter that reached CDF representatives abroad, the men wrote that during twenty months of incarceration they had experienced only "torture, exceptional courts and neglect."**

**In remarks to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva on August 18, the Syrian government representative, Clovis Khouri, denied that the CDF members were on hunger strike; he accused**

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<sup>4</sup>For more information, *see* Middle East Watch, "Syria: Human Rights Workers on Trial," Volume 4, Issue 5, March 9, 1992.

<sup>5</sup>These due-process shortcomings were noted in a letter written to Syrian President Hafez al-Asad by Human Rights Watch, dated April 9, 1992. Human Rights Watch called upon President Asad to annul the security court judgments and release the CDF members.

<sup>6</sup>They are: writer Nizar Nayouf, ten-year sentence; lawyer Aktham Nouaïsseh, jurist Afif Mizher, and university lecturer Muhammed Ali Habib, nine-year sentences; Bassam al-Shaykh, eight-year sentence; and Thabet Murad, Jadi' Nawfal, Ya'qub Musa, Hassan Ali and Hussam Salama, five-year sentences.

<sup>7</sup>Their names are Ahmad Hasso, Salama George Kila, Ibrahim Habib, Najib Ata Layqa and Jihad Khazem. Hasso, a Kurd, and Kila, a Palestinian, are writers.

CDF, whose representative had addressed the Commission's Subcommittee on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities on August 16 and publicized the hunger strike, of making false claims. Khouri further denounced CDF by stating that the organization's name is "a cover-up of their crimes against the internal and external security of Syria." He said that CDF is an illegal organization in Syria that "works in a way that violates laws and regulations" and claimed that the political goal behind CDF's reports and publications was "to distort Syria's reputation abroad."

### **Continuing Control of the Legal Profession by the Regime**

Lawyers in Syria are denied freedom of association, which has compromised the independence of the legal profession. When the Bar Association began to criticize policies of the Asad regime in 1976, and became a major force advocating an end to the state of emergency and human rights abuses, repression followed, culminating in April 1980 with the mass arrest of lawyers and the dissolution of all professional associations.<sup>8</sup>

The Geneva-based Center for the Independence of Judges and Lawyers (CIJL) of the International Commission of Jurists has noted in its reports that the Syrian Bar Association is controlled by the ruling Ba`th Party. A 1981 law transformed the Bar Association into an arm of the party. Article 3 of the law stipulated that the lawyers' association must act "in conformity with the principles and resolutions of the Ba`th Arab Socialist Party." CIJL has reported that the activities of lawyers in Syria are under continual government surveillance; the Ba`th Party must be provided with advance notice of Bar Association meetings; and the only candidates nominated to run in bar elections are those from the National Progressive Front, which is dominated by the Ba`th Party.

### **STATE SECURITY COURT TRIALS**

The trials of over 500 detainees, which started in June 1992, continued this year before the Supreme State Security Court.<sup>9</sup> The defendants, almost all of whom had been arrested between 1980 and 1992, included suspected members or supporters of communist, Ba`thist, Nasserite, and Kurdish nationalist organizations, as well as five members of the Syrian human rights organization CDF who were arrested in February and March 1992.

All of the defendants faced charges of membership in organizations attempting to change the structures of the state or the foundations of the society through the use of violence; the dissemination of

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<sup>8</sup>An account of these developments is provided in Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime*, pp. 85-88.

<sup>9</sup>Decree Law No. 47 of March 1968 created state security courts to try cases involving violations of emergency-law regulations. The U.S. State Department said the following about the security court in its most recent human-rights report on Syria: "Persons charged with security or political offenses fall under the jurisdiction of the State Security Court, which is under military control. Such persons have no say in the selection of a lawyer, who is chosen by the court. Court sessions are generally closed, and no official channel exists for providing information on the trial or sentencing." *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1992*(Washington, D.C.: February 1993), p. 1090.

false information in order to undermine public confidence in the goals of the revolution; and opposition to Arab unity, socialism and other objectives of the revolution itemized in military decree No. 6 of 1965. Amnesty International reported that a small number of the 500 defendants stand accused of participation in violent incidents, but the majority had not advocated or participated in political violence but are prisoners of conscience "detained simply because they are suspected of membership of links with illegal political parties, distribution of leaflets and attending their meetings."<sup>10</sup>

### **Harsh Sentences: June 1993**

On June 24 and June 29, 1993, the security court handed down verdicts and sentences against thirty-four defendants, all accused of supporting the illegal Party for Communist Action (PCA). Harsh prison terms were imposed on twenty-two defendants. Twelve men were sentenced to fifteen years with hard labor, including two who had been detained for over ten years: thirty-nine-year-old Malik al-Asad and forty-year-old Rustum Ahmad Rustum, both identified as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. Another was Dr. Ayman Daghistani, detained since 1987, who was sentenced for reading the banned PCA newsletter *Red Flag*. "Fifteen years for reading one newspaper – what if he had read two newspapers?" Daghistani's lawyer was quoted by CDF as saying. "My client would have been better off being illiterate."

Ten other defendants received sentences of ten to thirteen years with hard labor; seven received lesser terms. All of those sentenced were also stripped of their civil rights, including the right to vote, travel abroad, and hold government jobs – penalties that continue after a sentence has been served. Amnesty International, whose observers sat in on some of the proceedings, found gross violations of fair-trial norms, including the court's failure to investigate complaints of torture, lack of full access by defense lawyers to the files of their clients, and the denial of private meetings between lawyers and their clients.<sup>11</sup>

### **LONG-TERM DETENTION WITHOUT CHARGE OR TRIAL**

Some of the longest-serving political prisoners in the world remain incarcerated in Syrian jails. Their advanced age, coupled with conditions of confinement and medical care, raise humanitarian and human rights concerns. In 1993, the government released five prisoners who had been held for over twenty-two years.<sup>12</sup> According to CDF, these releases left thirteen in detention who had been arrested between 1969 and 1972; nine of them were never tried,<sup>13</sup> and four (all arrested in 1970) have been held

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<sup>10</sup>Amnesty International, "Syria/Supreme State Security Court Trials: Amnesty International Calls for the Release of Prisoners of Conscience and Fair Hearings for Others," June 2, 1993, MDE 24/WU 01/93.

<sup>11</sup>Amnesty International, "Syria: Lengthy Sentences for Prisoners of Conscience After Unfair Trials," August 19, 1993, MDE 24/WU 02/93.

<sup>12</sup>Former minister Marwan Habash, former minister Muhammed Sa'ïd Talib, Jordanians Nasrawin al-Majali and Hakim al-Faiz, and Palestinian Hassan al-Khatib.

<sup>13</sup>Ahmad Swaidani, Muhammed `Id Ashshawi, Fawzi Rida, Abdel Hamid Muqdad, Dhafi Jouma'ni, Mustafa Rustum, Adel Naissa, Haditha Murad, and Salah Jadid.

beyond the expiry of their sentences in 1985.<sup>14</sup>

One of the prisoners never charged or tried was sixty-nine-year-old Gen. Salah Jadid, who died on August 19. He was a key figure in the 1963 coup and *de facto* head of the Ba`th Party at the time of his arrest in November 1970 following a bloodless coup led by his former colleague, then-Defense Minister Hafez al-Asad. Jadid had been held in al-Mezze military prison in Damascus. Human rights groups and Jadid loyalists called for an independent investigation of the circumstances of his death. CDF received information that ten members of Jadid's family were arrested after his death, including his grandsons Nidal Jadid and Salah Jadid.

Other long-term political detainees -- most of them arrested between 1980 and 1987 -- include engineers, doctors, dentists, veterinarians, lawyers, writers and journalists, detained for suspicion of membership in banned political parties or activities in professional associations that had advocated reform and an end to human right abuses.<sup>15</sup>

### **TORTURE AND DEATHS IN DETENTION**

The continuing practice of incommunicado detention in Syria -- coupled with the lack of independent mechanisms for investigating suspicious deaths in detention -- render conclusive documentation of torture extremely difficult. At least two human rights activists arrested in December 1991 -- lawyer Aktham Nu`aissa and jurist `Afif Mezher -- were tortured while in detention.<sup>16</sup> They reportedly had been subjected to a form of torture known as *al-shabah* (the phantom): the victim is suspended by the feet or arms in the air, with the hands bound behind the back, and then may be whipped with wire cables or shocked with electricity. Nu`aissa and Mezher had been beaten so severely that they were unable to walk unassisted at their trial before the security court two months later.<sup>17</sup>

The U.S. State Department, in its report on human rights conditions in Syria in 1992, published this year, stated that Syrian authorities "continued to employ widespread and systematic torture, primarily during arrest and interrogation in criminal as well as in political or security-related cases, and often in specially equipped torture chambers." Torture methods included "the application of electrical shocks to sensitive parts of the body, beatings (sometimes when the victim is bent over and suspended from the ceiling in a tire), and extracting fingernails and toenails." The State Department added that there were "no indications that the Government has ever investigated or punished those alleged to have committed physical abuse."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Khalil Brayez, arrested in 1970 in Lebanon and sentenced to fifteen years in prison; and Mahmud Fayyadh, Jalal el-Din Mirhij and Mustafa Fallah, all tried in 1971 and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment.

<sup>15</sup>For additional information, see Middle East Watch, *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria* (November 1992).

<sup>16</sup>These two men were sentenced to nine-year prison terms in March 1992.

<sup>17</sup>Middle East Watch, *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup>U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1992*, p. 1089.

CDF reported that six political prisoners are believed to have died under torture between October 1992 and January 1993. Three men died at Sednaya prison, just north of Damascus. The body of one of them – Shakour Ta'ban, a lawyer in his fifties who had been arrested in connection with a communique issued in January 1991 in opposition to the Gulf War – was returned to his family at the beginning of November 1992. (Two other lawyers arrested in the same case, Mrs. Naif al-Hamaoui and Walid Mouteiran, remain in detention as of this writing.)

The other deaths at Sednaya prison were those of sixty-year-old Muhsen Abdallah, who died in November 1992, and sixty-three-year-old Qasem Hesso, who died sixteen days after his arrest in October 1992. Ahmad Mattar, Abdel Karim Dhouehi, and Muhammed Barakat died at al-Riqqa prison, located east of Aleppo, some time between December 20, 1992 and January 15, 1993.

### **PRISON CONDITIONS**

Syrian prisons, long known for their abysmal conditions in violation of minimum international standards, remain off-limits to independent domestic or foreign scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> There continue to be grave concerns about inadequate medical care for prisoners suffering from serious illnesses. In August, the Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights and CDF, its Syrian affiliate, submitted to the U.N. Human Rights Commission the names of fourteen prisoners, including one woman, believed to be in poor health.<sup>20</sup>

On March 24, fifty-seven prisoners perished in a fire in al-Hassakah prison in northeastern Syria. Most of them reportedly were Kurds, and at least four were political prisoners.<sup>21</sup> Following the fire, one political prisoner held at al-Hassakah wrote in a letter to his brother that sleeping quarters designed for fifty or sixty had been packed with up to 115 inmates of all categories, and that political detainees were not separated from criminal prisoners, in violation of international standards.

The Ministry of Interior appointed a four-member committee of high-ranking military and security figures to investigate the fire. The committee found eight prisoners culpable, and condemned five to death, two to life imprisonment, and a seventeen-year-old to twelve years in prison.<sup>22</sup> The state-run Syrian Arab News Agency reported on May 20 that the five condemned men – described as "criminals" – were hanged

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<sup>19</sup>For additional information about prison conditions in Syria, see Middle East Watch, *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*, pp. 11-24. The information in this November 1992 report was obtained from recently released prisoners interviewed by Middle East Watch in Jordan and Syria in July and August 1992.

<sup>20</sup>Their names are: Adnan al-Qadi, lawyer Riad al-Turk (arrested in 1980), Mustafa Khalifa, Abbas, Khaled Nasser, Hisham Zouqi, Mahmoud Fayyadh, former government minister Muhammed `Id Ashshawi (arrested in 1970), Rosette Issa (arrested in 1992), Issa Muhammed, Nabil Fawwaz, engineering professors Nizar Mradni and Ghassan Kassis (both arrested in 1987), and Ahmad Hassan Mansour.

<sup>21</sup>The names of the political prisoners were: Fahd Bakr, Muhammed Haj Hassan, Gulmaz Koro, and Hosni Hassan Ali.

<sup>22</sup>The Syrian government daily *Tishrin* reported that the five condemned men had poured heating fuel on beds and then set a fire to cover up drug-dealing. ("Syrian Prison Fire Kills 57," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 1993.)

that morning in a public square in al-Hassakah. They were not afforded the right to legal counsel or the right to appeal the committee's decision, CDF reported.

## **MINORITIES IN SYRIA**

Syria's large Kurdish minority, estimated at over one million, continues to suffer from blatant state-sponsored discrimination and denial of basic rights. Some 300,000 Palestinians remained at risk of arbitrary state actions due to their refugee status and lack of citizenship. The remaining tiny Jewish population faced obstacles in securing exit permits, in a reversal of the regime's April 1992 liberalization of departure rules.

**Kurds:** Kurdish political activists are in detention for exercising freedom of expression on subjects that met with clear government disapproval. On October 5, 1992, four illegal Kurdish political organizations<sup>23</sup> had published materials to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Decree Law No. 93 of 1962, which effectively stripped about 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenship and passports (the number of stateless Kurds has since risen by natural increase to 180,000). The four groups had called upon Syrian citizens to support equal civil and cultural rights for the Kurds. The authorities responded with the arrest of about 260 Kurds in al-Hassakah, Ras al Ain and al-Qamishli in the northeast, and in Aleppo and Afrin in the northwest.

According to CDF, forty of the Kurds remain in detention, most of them suspected of membership in the banned Kurdish Popular Union Party of Syria. CDF reported that authorities took other measures against Syrian Kurds as well, including preventing some Kurdish intellectuals from travelling abroad throughout 1993. Also prohibited was the establishment of Kurdish cultural centers, bookshops, publishing houses and other associations. In a further mark of discrimination against Kurdish culture, a September 1992 decree (No. 122) prohibited Syrian civil servants from registering children with Kurdish first names.<sup>24</sup>

**PALESTINIANS:** Most of Syria's 300,000 Palestinians remain as refugees under the law, pending final resolution of their status through the Arab-Israeli peace process. Thus, while Palestinian residents of Syria are issued identity cards, they are not granted Syrian citizenship and passports, even if born in Syria to refugee parents. Beginning in mid-1993, about thirty Palestinian families of Gazan origin were expelled after authorities confiscated their papers.

**Jews:** In 1993, Syria's remaining Jewish community of 1,100 to 1,200 people<sup>25</sup> faced renewed obstacles to emigration, following the liberalization of exit-visa procedures in April 1992 that had led to the departure of about 2,650 Jews for the United States, according to the New York-based Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews (CRSJ). Beginning in October 1992, however, the issuance of exit permits slowed to a trickle,

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<sup>23</sup>The Kurdish Popular Union Party of Syria, the Unified Kurdish Democratic Party, the Kurdish Democratic Workers Party, and the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria.

<sup>24</sup>For additional information about the Syrian government's discriminatory treatment of the Kurdish minority, see Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime*, pp. 95-99.

<sup>25</sup>U.S. State Department estimate. (MEW telephone interview with State Department official, November 11, 1993.)

CRSJ reported in October 1993 that exit permits are not being issued to entire families (a pre-liberalization practice); Jewish prisoners released in 1992 have not been permitted to travel; harassment by security forces has noticeably increased; and the sale of personal and business property continues to be barred, despite promises made by the government in April 1992 to reverse this policy.

### **SYRIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS DEFEND THE SYSTEM**

Despite the regime's poor human rights record, this year Syrian officials celebrated the country's political system, glossing over the lack of pluralism, the absence of an independent civil society, and the thousands of victims of human rights abuse. Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam, quoted on April 27 in the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Watan*, proclaimed that Syria was "the most stable country in the Third World, and that the Syrian political system has proved its efficacy because of this stability over the past twenty-three years." The vice president added that the system provided "strength, progress and development" and said that others should study it "to avoid many problems."

During an official visit to France in February, Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shar`a was interviewed by the London-based Arabic daily *al-Hayat* and asked about human rights and Syria's inclusion on the U.S. list of countries that engage in state-sponsored terrorism. "As regards human rights," he commented, "we believe that no state in the world, not even a superpower interested in a new world order, has a right to dictate the political regimes of other states...[T]he aim of putting Syria's name on the terrorism list and raising the issue of human rights is to put pressure on Syria to change its position. We in Syria do not give in to any pressure from any source."<sup>26</sup>

Foreign Minister al-Shar`a addressed the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna on June 17, and declared that Syria was "committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...[had] participated in the formulation of international human [rights] charters and covenants, and reflected in its different legislation and laws the humanitarian yardsticks which are encapsulated in these charters and covenants." He noted violations against Bosnian Muslims and abuses committed by Israel against Arabs, but made no reference to his own government's lack of respect for human rights. He also appeared to reject the universality of human rights when he remarked that it was a mistake "to believe that concepts and patterns of human rights can be imposed by force on other peoples because each people has its own history and each nation has its own heritage and culture which are peculiar to it."<sup>27</sup>

The regime demonstrated sensitivity to its human rights image abroad, however, when it dispatched representatives to an October 18 conference in Paris organized by CDF, the International Federation of Human Rights, and Amnesty International. The three representatives were Ghassan Rifa'i, the former editor-in-chief of the Syrian government daily *Tishrin*; Gen. Asad Muqaed, president of the official association of the Syrian community in France; and Dr. Adel Zaaboub, the head of the government-owned Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) in France and a former official responsible for censorship in the Ministry of Information.

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<sup>26</sup> *Al-Hayat*, February 25, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> *Syria Times* (Damascus), June 19, 1993. This is an English-language newspaper.

**In their remarks, Mr. Rifa'i and Gen. Muqaed noted that the Syrian government was involved in a struggle against terrorism, and acknowledged that some rights abuses occurred as a result of this conflict and the state's efforts to protect society from terrorist actions. They also characterized the campaigns on Syria by CDF and international organizations as political rather than human rights work. In response, CDF representative Dr. Haytham Manna stated that even the torture of CDF members in detention had not uncovered links between CDF and any political party in Syria. He also disputed the justification put forward for the continuation of Syria's state of emergency, noting that there had not been a single terrorist incident in Syria since 1983.**

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