

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION REPORT

SYRIA

20 FEBRUARY 2007

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Preface

- i This Country of Origin Information Report (COI Report) has been produced by Research, Development and Statistics (RDS), Home Office, for use by officials involved in the asylum/human rights determination process. The Report provides general background information about the issues most commonly raised in asylum/human rights claims made in the United Kingdom. The main body of the report includes information available up to 31 December 2006. The latest news section contains information available up to 14 February 2007.
- ii The Report is compiled wholly from material produced by a wide range of recognised external information sources and does not contain any Home Office opinion or policy. All information in the Report is attributed, throughout the text, to the original source material, which is made available to those working in the asylum/human rights determination process.
- iii The Report aims to provide a brief summary of the source material identified, focusing on the main issues raised in asylum and human rights applications. It is not intended to be a detailed or comprehensive survey. For a more detailed account, the relevant source documents should be examined directly.
- iv The structure and format of the COI Report reflects the way it is used by Home Office caseworkers and appeals presenting officers, who require quick electronic access to information on specific issues and use the contents page to go directly to the subject required. Key issues are usually covered in some depth within a dedicated section, but may also be referred to briefly in several other sections. Some repetition is therefore inherent in the structure of the Report.
- v The information included in this COI Report is limited to that which can be identified from source documents. While every effort is made to cover all relevant aspects of a particular topic, it is not always possible to obtain the information concerned. For this reason, it is important to note that information included in the Report should not be taken to imply anything beyond what is actually stated. For example, if it is stated that a particular law has been passed, this should not be taken to imply that it has been effectively implemented unless stated.
- vi As noted above, the Report is a collation of material produced by a number of reliable information sources. In compiling the Report, no attempt has been made to resolve discrepancies between information provided in different source documents. For example, different source documents often contain different versions of names and spellings of individuals, places and political parties etc. COI Reports do not aim to bring consistency of spelling, but to reflect faithfully the spellings used in the original source documents. Similarly, figures given in different source documents sometimes vary and these are simply quoted as per the original text. The term 'sic' has been used in this document only to denote incorrect spellings or typographical errors in quoted text; its use is not intended to imply any comment on the content of the material.
- vii The Report is based substantially upon source documents issued during the previous two years. However, some older source documents may have been included because they contain relevant information not available in more

recent documents. All sources contain information considered relevant at the time this Report was issued.

- viii This COI Report and the accompanying source material are public documents. All COI Reports are published on the RDS section of the Home Office website and the great majority of the source material for the Report is readily available in the public domain. Where the source documents identified in the Report are available in electronic form, the relevant web link has been included, together with the date that the link was accessed. Copies of less accessible source documents, such as those provided by government offices or subscription services, are available from the Home Office upon request.
- ix COI Reports are published regularly on the top 20 asylum intake countries. COI Bulletins are produced on lower asylum intake countries according to operational need. Home Office officials also have constant access to an information request service for specific enquiries.
- x In producing this COI Report, the Home Office has sought to provide an accurate, balanced summary of the available source material. Any comments regarding this Report or suggestions for additional source material are very welcome and should be submitted to the Home Office as below.

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ADVISORY PANEL ON COUNTRY INFORMATION

- xi The independent Advisory Panel on Country Information was established under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 to make recommendations to the Home Secretary about the content of the Home Office's country of origin information material. The Advisory Panel welcomes all feedback on the Home Office's COI Reports and other country of origin information material. Information about the Panel's work can be found on its website at www.apci.org.uk.
- xii It is not the function of the Advisory Panel to endorse any Home Office material or procedures. In the course of its work, the Advisory Panel directly reviews the content of selected individual Home Office COI Reports, but neither the fact that such a review has been undertaken, nor any comments made, should be taken to imply endorsement of the material. Some of the material examined by the Panel relates to countries designated or proposed for designation for the Non-Suspensive Appeals (NSA) list. In such cases, the Panel's work should not be taken to imply any endorsement of the decision or proposal to designate a particular country for NSA, nor of the NSA process itself.

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Latest News

EVENTS IN SYRIA, FROM 1 JANUARY 2007 TO 14 FEBRUARY 2007

- 13 February Two bombs explode in the Bikfaya area of Lebanon, the ancestral home of the Gemayel clan, founders of the Phalangist Party which played a major role in the Lebanese civil war and is currently firmly in the anti-Syrian camp. Prominent pro-government/anti-Syrian figures such as Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and former President Amin Gemayel immediately point the finger of accusation at the Syrian regime. The following day thousands of pro-Government Lebanese take to the streets for a planned demonstration commemorating the second anniversary of Rafiq Hariri's assassination.
Fragile Lebanon needs urgent remedy, 13 February 2007
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6357569.stm
Accessed 14 February 2007
Thousands flock to Hariri protest, 14 February 2007
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6359669.stm
Accessed 14 February 2007
Thousands commemorate Hariri death, 14 February 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2012811,00.html>
Accessed 14 February 2007
- 26 January Canada has apologised to Maher Arar, in whose deportation by the US authorities to Syria – where he was imprisoned for ten months and allegedly tortured – the Canadian authorities may have played a part. Syria denies that he was tortured.
Canada compensates deported man, 26 January 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6304227.stm>
Accessed 14 February 2007
Victim of US torture flights wins £4.5m in damages, 27 January 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2000014,00.html>
Accessed 14 February 2007
- 16 January A former Israeli diplomat claimed that Israelis and Syrians held secret talks about a peace deal, although the talks were arranged privately and not officially sanctioned by the Israeli authorities. Syria denied the claims. According to Israel's Haaretz daily, Israeli and Syrian representatives met secretly in Europe several times between September 2004 and July 2006 but these talks ended when the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel broke out.
Syrians and Israelis 'held talks', 16 January 2007
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6267117.stm
Accessed 14 February 2007
Secret talks led to Israeli-Syrian peace roadmap, paper claims, 17 January 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1991836,00.html>
Accessed 14 February 2007

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REPORTS ON SYRIA PUBLISHED OR ACCESSED SINCE 1 JANUARY 2007**Syrian Human Rights Committee**

Mohammed Haydar Zammar Sentenced Pursuant to Article 49/1980, 13 February 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d2/3052.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

On the 25th Anniversary of the Great Massacre of Hama, 12 February 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d9/3049.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Committee to Protect Journalists

Attack on the Press 2006: Middle East and North Africa, released 5 February 2007

http://www.cpi.org/attacks06/mideast06/mideast_analysis_06.html

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Urgent Call for the Release of Hussein Ismail Dgheim, 4 February 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d7/3037.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

A call for the Release of Mohammed Mustafa Bayram, 4 February 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d6/3036.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Human Rights Watch

US, Jordan, Syria Must Open Doors to Iraq Refugees, 2 February 2007

<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/02/02/syria15239.htm>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Reporters sans frontières

Syria – Annual Report 2007, published on 1 February 2007

http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20777

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Comment on Occasion of Canadian PM's Apology to Maher Arar, 29 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d2/3032.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Urgent Appeal to Release Dr. Jihad Kabakibo, 29 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d1/3031.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Amnesty International

Syria: Further Information on fear of torture/incommunicado detention/prisoners of conscience and new concern: unfair trial (MDE 24/007/2007), 25 January 2007

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240072007?open&of=ENG-SYR>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Amnesty International

Syria: Further information on fear of torture and other ill-treatment/incommunicado detention/forcible return/medical concern (MDE 24/006/2007), 25 January 2007

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240062007?open&of=ENG-SYR>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Reporters sans frontières

After 255 days in pre-trial detention, journalist Michel Kilo's trial is postponed again, 23 January 2007

http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20588

Accessed 14 February 2007

British Broadcasting Corporation

Country profile: Syria, 22 January 2006

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/801669.stm

Accessed 14 February 2007

British Broadcasting Corporation

Timeline: Syria, 22 January 2006

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/827580.stm

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Mr. Shalabi arrested upon return to Syria, 22 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data.aspx/d1/3021.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Amnesty International

Syria: Further information on fear of torture and other ill-treatment/incommunicado detention/forcible return/medical concern (MDE 24/005/2007), 18 January 2007

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240052007?open&of=ENG-SYR>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2007, released 17 January 2007

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=457>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Urgent Call: Armed Militias burn 15 flats of Syrians living in Haifa Street, 17 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data.aspx/d5/3015.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Arrests in al-Salmiah and Ain al-Arab, 16 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data.aspx/d2/3012.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Exiled Syrians in Iraq face further killings and abductions, 16 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data.aspx/d1/3011.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

SSSC: A new wave of severity and harshness, 16 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data.aspx/d0/3010.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Amnesty International

Syria: Further information on incommunicado detention/fear of torture or ill-treatment

New concern: Possible prisoner of conscience: 'Ali Sayed al-Shihabi (m)

(MDE 24/003/2007), 10 January 2007

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240032007?open&of=ENG-SYR>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Reporters sans frontières

Cyber-dissident freed under presidential amnesty, 10 January 2007

http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20370

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Arrests among Syrians at Hayfa Street in Baghdad, 10 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d2/3002.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Two Citizens Murdered by Military Intelligence, 10 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d1/3001.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Ali al-Shihabi Released, 10 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d0/3000.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Mahmud Iso Arrested, 10 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d9/2999.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Amnesty International

Syria: Fear of torture and other ill-treatment/incommunicado detention/possible prisoner of conscience: Muhi al-Din Sheikh A'ali (m) (MDE 24/002/2007), 5 January 2007

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240022007?open&of=ENG-SYR>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Amnesty International

Syria: Fear of torture and other ill-treatment/incommunicado detention/forcible return/medical concern (MDE 24/004/2007), 5 January 2007

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE240042007?open&of=ENG-SYR>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK

Country Profile: Syria, last reviewed on 4 January 2007

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394365&a=KCountryProfile&aid=1021373886647>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Abduction and Murder of Eight Syrians in Iraq, 4 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d1/2991.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

Syrian Human Rights Committee

Abduction and Murder of General Ahmed Abdul Qader Tarmanini, 4 January 2007

<http://www.shrc.org/data/asp/d0/2990.aspx>

Accessed 14 February 2007

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Background information

GEOGRAPHY

- 1.01 The Syrian Arab Republic (Arabic: al-jamhuriya al Arabia as-Souriya) is situated in western Asia and – as the UN reference map of January 2004 shows below (see [paragraph 1.03](#)) – it borders Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, and Lebanon and Israel to the south-west. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; UN reference map, January 2004, Ethnologue.com 2005) [1a] [2] **(Country Profile)** [3] Syria's coastline is located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and much of the terrain is mountainous and semi-desert. The capital of Syria is Damascus (Arabic: Dimashq) (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; UN reference map January 2004) [1a] **(Country Profile)** [2]
- 1.02 Syria's national language is Standard Arabic, although there are five other forms of Arabic spoken in Syria. There are also a number of minority languages used in Syria, including Kurdish and Armenian. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; Ethnologue.com 2005) [1a] **(Country Profile)** [3] As of 31 December 2005, there were 432,048 Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), although only 115,473 – or 27 per cent – were said to reside in one of the ten official camps. (UNRWA, 31 December 2005) [4a] Although there is a substantial Christian minority of various sects – including Greek and Syrian Orthodox, various Rites of the Roman Catholic Church, Anglicans and Evangelicals – over 80 per cent of the population are Muslims, most of whom are Sunnis. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; BBC Country Profile 13 November 2006) [1a] **(Society and Media - Religion)** [38a]

For further information on the geography of Syria, refer to Europa: Regional Surveys of the World – Middle East and North Africa: Syria, 2006, source [1b].

MAPS

1.03 United Nations Cartographic Section (UNCS) reference map of January 2004:



[2]

See also [Section 18 on Kurds: Map](#), [Section 26 on Internally Displaced Persons: Map of the Golan Heights](#) & [Map of IDPs](#), and [Section 27 on Palestinians: Map](#)

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ECONOMY

- 2.01 Information retrieved from the World Bank Group's (WBG) website on 4 August 2006 states that "Syria is a lower middle-income country with a per capita income of about US\$1,200, a population of 17.6 million growing at about 2.6 percent per annum and a labor force growing at the rapid rate of about 4 percent per annum." [5] (**Countries – Syrian Arab Republic**) According to International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2005 statistics, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was estimated at \$27.3 billion (at current prices), and this was greatly dependent on the oil and agricultural sectors, the latter accounting for approximately 30 per cent of both the GDP and employment. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; WBG accessed 4 August 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006) [1a] (**Economic Affairs**) [5] (**Countries – Syrian Arab Republic**) [6a] (**Economy**)
- 2.02 The national currency is the Syrian Pound (SYP). (Europa World accessed 4 August 2006; FXConverter accessed 14 February 2007) [1a] (**Country Profile**) [7a-7b] As of 31 December 2006 the exchange rate was:

1 Syrian Pound (SYP)	equals	0.01024 British Pounds (GBP)
1 British Pound (GBP)	equals	97.64315 Syrian Pound (SYP)
1 Syrian Pound (SYP)	equals	0.02005 US Dollars (USD)
1 US Dollar (USD)	equals	49.86500 Syrian Pound (SYP)

[7a-7b]

The 2003 Country Profile of Syria, produced by the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU), reports that "Official data suggest that nearly 70% of the workforce earns less than US\$100 a month, with some 40% of public-sector employees taking second jobs to boost their income. Low state-sector salaries also perpetuate corruption." [8] (**Income gap widens**) Also, "Official estimates of unemployment are difficult to obtain, but unemployment increased in the second half of the 1990s, and unofficial estimates put this at over 20% in 2002." [8] (**Income gap widens**)

For further information on the economy of Syria, refer to Europa: Regional Surveys of the World – Middle East and North Africa: Syria, 2006, source [1b].

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HISTORY

- 3.01 Although Syria declared independence from the French Mandate in September 1941, French powers were only transferred in 1943-44 and full independence was not achieved until 17 April 1946 following pressure from Syrian nationalist groups on France to remove its forces. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; EIU Country Profile 2003; FCO Country Profile last reviewed 22 May 2006) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (French Occupation) [8] (Independence and its aftermath) [9] (Recent History)

POST-INDEPENDENCE: 1946 – 1970

- 3.02 During the 1950s and 1960s Syria experienced a period of political upheaval, which included a series of military governments, a three-year abortive attempted union with Egypt, and further military coups until – in November 1970 – power was seized from radicals in the Baath party by the party's moderate wing, led by Lieutenant-General Hafiz al-Assad. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; EIU Country Profile 2003; FCO Country Profile last reviewed 22 May 2006) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (Independence to 1970) [8] (Independence and its aftermath) [9] (Recent History)
- 3.03 Europa World (accessed 27 July 2006) recorded that, during the same period, increased tension on the Israeli-Syrian border was a major factor in the commencement of the Six-Day War of June 1967, in which Israel seized the Golan Heights. [1a] (Recent History)

REIGN OF PRESIDENT HAFIZ AL-ASSAD: 1970 – 2000

- 3.04 President Hafiz al-Assad swiftly moved to consolidate his position, building a consensus among powerbrokers, combining populist measures with the uncompromising suppression of his enemies and establishing an array of overlapping intelligence services in order to maintain his position of power. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; EIU Country Profile 2003; FCO Country Profile last reviewed 22 May 2006) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (1970-2000) [8] (Independence and its aftermath) [9] (Recent History) As a result, Syria undoubtedly enjoyed more political stability than at any time since independence, but this was at the almost total expense of political opposition as Assad's regime was an authoritarian one that quickly silenced its critics. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; EIU Country Profile 2003) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (1970-2000) [8] (Independence and its aftermath)
- 3.05 Following the Six-Day War, "An uneasy truce lasted until October 1973, when Egyptian and Syrian forces launched simultaneous attacks on Israeli-held territory. On the Syrian front, there was fierce fighting in the Golan Heights until a cease-fire was agreed after 18 days." (Europa World, accessed 27 July 2006) [1a] (Recent History) Israel formally annexed the Golan Heights in December 1981, which remained a key obstacle to the achievement of peace between the two countries at the time of writing. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; FCO Country Profile last reviewed 22 May 2006) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (Arab-Israeli Relations) [9] (Middle East Peace Process & Frequently Asked Questions)

Lebanon: Intervention and occupation

- 3.06 From 1976 – when the Lebanese civil war began – until April 2005, Syria maintained a military and intelligence presence in Lebanon; its intervention during the 1980s – including Syrian endorsement of the 1989 ‘Taif Accord’ – brought an end to the civil war. The continued presence of Syrian forces in Lebanon helped the regime establish and maintain its barely concealed hegemony of Lebanon’s political arena during the 1990s. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; EIU Country Profile 2003; LoC Country Profile April 2005) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (Involvement in Lebanon) [8] (Independence and its aftermath) [10] (Foreign Relations)
- 3.07 During the Lebanese civil war, Syrian and Israeli forces clashed in Lebanon and Syria’s rejection of the May 1983 Israel-Lebanon peace accord – which would have led to the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon – was pushed upon the Lebanese President of the time who, nearly a year later, annulled the agreement. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; LoC Country Profile April 2005) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (Involvement in Lebanon) [10] (Foreign Relations)

REIGN OF PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD: 2000 – THE PRESENT

- 3.08 President Hafiz al-Assad died in June 2000, after spending almost 30 years in power. His death was immediately followed by a Parliamentary amendment to the constitution, which reduced the minimum age of the President to 34 years thus making his son, Bashar al-Assad – who had been groomed for the role of President since 1994 – eligible for nomination by the ruling Ba’ath party. One month later Bashar al-Assad received 97.29 per cent (Syrian Government statistics) of the vote in the Presidential referendum, in which he was the only candidate. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; EIU Country Profile 2003; FCO Country Profile last reviewed 22 May 2006; LoC Country Profile April 2005) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (1970-2000) [8] (Independence and its aftermath) [9] (Politics) [10] (Foreign Relations)

“Bashar al-Assad’s first two years in office were characterised by his efforts to maintain the support of the old guard while gradually modernising and reforming the economy. Although he initially attempted to introduce some political reforms, most of those have been retracted following outspoken criticism of the regime (past and present) by political activists. Dissent is no longer tolerated and increased political participation appears to be on hold at least until the regional political environment becomes more settled—unlikely before 2004.” (EIU Country Profile 2003) [8] (Independence and its aftermath)

Withdrawal from Lebanon: April 2005

- 3.09 Europa World, accessed on 27 July 2006, reported that in mid-2000 – as Bashar al-Assad assumed the Syrian Presidency and Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon – calls for a lessening of Syria’s role in the country intensified, with the anti-Syrian Minister of Parliament (MP) Rafik Hariri defeating the Syrian-sponsored Government in the July 2000 Lebanese elections, and even former pro-Syrian politicians beginning to question Syria’s predominance in Lebanon. [1a] (Recent History) Despite reducing the visibility of its forces by redeploying its troops from Beirut and Mount Lebanon in June 2001 – and making further redeployments over the next few years, including withdrawing some troops altogether – Syria still retained control over Lebanon’s political

and security environment. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; EIU Country Profile 2003) [1a] (Recent History) [8] (Politics: Lebanon)

- 3.10 On 14 February 2005, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in a car bombing in Beirut, which proved to be a catalyst for pro- and anti-Syrian protests in Lebanon and a heightening of international pressure for a full Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, a move already called for in the United Nations' Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559. Syria claimed to have fully withdrawn all its forces as of the end of April 2005, a claim verified by the UN inspection team in May 2005, in so far as it was able to do so. (Europa World, accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; FCO Country Profile last reviewed 22 May 2006; LoC Country Profile April 2005) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (2000-2006/Involvement in Lebanon) [9] (International Relations) [10] (Foreign Relations)
- 3.11 Suspicion of official Syrian involvement in the murder of Hariri and a spate of other failed and successful assassinations of, by and large, anti-Syrian politicians and journalists as well as other issues – such as its continued sponsorship of groups designated by other countries as terrorists, the regime's alleged pursuit of 'weapons of mass destruction', and its inability or unwillingness to assist in the stabilisation of Iraq – all contributed to its continued isolation from the international community. (Europa World accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note October 2006; FCO Country Profile last reviewed 22 May 2006) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (2000-2006/Involvement in Lebanon) [9] (International Relations)

See also [Annex A – Chronology of major events](#)

For further information on the history of Syria, refer to Europa: Regional Surveys of the World – Middle East and North Africa: Syria, 2006, source [1b].

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RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

- 4.01 In early June 2006, unidentified gunmen clashed with Syrian security forces near Umayyad Square in Damascus with the authorities claiming to have thwarted a 'terrorist' attack. (BBC, 2 June 2006) [38i] In July, thousands of Lebanese fled into Syria as Israel retaliated to Hezbollah's kidnapping of two members of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) by blockading Lebanon's air and sea ports, and bombing large areas of the country, particularly suspected Hezbollah positions in south Beirut and south Lebanon, and infrastructure such as fuel depots and roads. (BBC Timeline, 21 November 2006) [38b]
- 4.02 Following the passing of UN Resolution 1701, which brought about the ceasefire that ended the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad threatened to close his country's border with its smaller neighbour if an international peace-keeping force were to deploy troops to police said border. (BBC, 2 June 2006) [38j] Following a meeting with President al-Assad, UN Secretary General (SG) Kofi Annan stated that Syria had promised to increase border security with Lebanon, including increasing patrols and possibly establishing joint patrols with Lebanese forces, and take steps to stop the flow of arms to Hezbollah. (BBC, 1 September 2006) [38k]
- 4.03 In mid-September 2006, the Syrian security forces prevented an apparent terrorist attack on the United States' Embassy in Damascus resulting in speculation over the future relationship between the two regimes, and whether this and the clash with militants earlier in the year signalled a worrying time for the authorities' usually air-tight stranglehold on security. (BBC, 12 September 2006) [38l-38m] In November 2006, Syria and Iraq restored diplomatic relations for the first time since they were severed in 1982; the countries both reopened their respective embassies the following month. (BBC 21 November 2006, 11 December 2006; *The Guardian* (UK) 21 November 2006) [38b, 38w] [62c]
- 4.04 The United States (US) Government accused Syria and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah of plotting to overthrow the Lebanese Government; a claim denied by both parties. (BBC, 2 November 2006) [38v] The US' accusation gathered strength in the eyes of some following the assassination of the anti-Syrian Maronite Christian Minister of Parliament (MP) Pierre Gemayel later that month. However, other commentators questioned whether the Syrian authorities were behind this latest assassination as it seemed more likely to be of harm than good to the cause of Damascus and Hezbollah. (BBC 24 November 2006; *The Guardian* (UK) 23 November 2006) [38x] [62b]

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CONSTITUTION

5.01 The Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) Country Profile of 2003 records:

“Syria’s constitution, drawn up in 1930, defines the country as a democratic, secular state, but carries a requirement that the president be a Muslim. Under the constitution, parliament is sovereign, with the Council of Ministers (cabinet) forming the executive. In reality, since 1970 ultimate power has rested with the president and senior members of the myriad intelligence services and army units controlled by the Alawi community to which the Al Assad family belong.” [8] (Politics: Constitution, institutions and administration)

5.02 Whilst Islam is not expressly designated as the state religion, the Constitution does state that Islamic doctrine and law must be the main source of legislation. (USSD Background Note October 2006; LoC Country Profile April 2005) [6a] (Government) [10] (Constitution) Europa World (accessed 27 July 2006) states:

“A new and permanent Constitution was endorsed by 97.6% of voters in a national referendum held on 12 March 1973. The 157-article Constitution defines Syria as a ‘Socialist popular democracy’ with a ‘pre-planned Socialist economy’. Under the new Constitution, Lt-Gen. Hafiz al-Assad remained President, with the power to appoint and dismiss his Vice-President, Premier and government ministers, and also became Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Secretary-General of the Baath Socialist Party and President of the National Progressive Front.” [1a] (The Constitution)

5.03 Europa World (accessed 27 July 2006) records that “Following the death of President Hafiz al-Assad on 10 June 2000, the Constitution was amended to allow his son, Lt-Gen. Bashar al-Assad, to accede to the presidency. Bashar al-Assad also became Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, Secretary-General of the Baath Socialist Party and President of the National Progressive Front.” [1a] (The Constitution)

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POLITICAL SYSTEM

6.01 The Library of Congress Country Profile of April 2005 states:

“Ostensibly a republic, in reality Syria is an authoritarian, military-dominated regime where opposition to the president is not tolerated, and, with the succession of the previous president’s son, concern about hereditary rule is plausible. Whereas the citizens may vote for the president and members of parliament, they cannot change the government; the president, for example, is not actually elected but, rather, confirmed by unopposed popular referenda. Parliament may assess and sometimes modify laws proposed by the executive branch, but it may not initiate laws. The president and his senior aides make most decisions in the political, economic, and security sectors, with a very limited degree of public accountability.” **[10] (Government Overview)**

6.02 Europa World (accessed 27 July 2006) records that “According to the Constitution, the President is elected by direct popular vote for a seven-year term. Legislative power is vested in the People’s Assembly, with 250 members elected for a four-year term by universal adult suffrage (83 seats are reserved for independent candidates).” **[1a] (The Constitution)** The Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) reports that whilst the People’s Assembly was “A fiery debating chamber before the Al Assad era, it is now effectively a rubber-stamp for decisions of the presidential elite.” **[8] (Politics: Constitution, institutions and administration)**

6.03 In 1971-72, in order to extend the source of his government, President Hafiz al-Assad created the National Progressive Front (NPF) a grouping of the five (increasing to ten) main political parties, which included the Baath Party. The existence of the NPF created the appearance of a multi-party system, but in reality the NPF had little power independent of the Baath Party. (Europa World, accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note, October 2006; LoC Country Profile, April 2005) **[1a] (Recent History) [6a] (Government/Political conditions) [10] (Politics/Political Parties)** EIU’s Country Profile reports that “Since 1990 the power of the Baath Party-which helped to bring Hafez al-Assad to power-and its executive, the Regional Command, has diminished, although the party still forms a parallel structure of power.” **[8] (Politics: Constitution, institutions and administration)**

“Power and patronage in Syria has tended to be given first to the family, then the clan, the religious community, the Baath Party, and finally the state. Members of the immediate Al Assad family hold senior positions in the military; members of the Alawi community, to which they belong, hold a disproportionate number of senior government and military posts. At a wider level, membership of the ruling Baath Party was a prerequisite for anyone with political ambition, although this is slowly changing as the party’s power diminishes.” **[8] (Politics: Political forces)**

ELECTIONS: 2003

6.04 On the March 2003 elections, the EIU Country Profile of 2003 noted that the composition of the People’s Assembly was not significantly altered by the results. **[8] (Politics: Constitution, institutions and administration)**

“... the Ba’th Party took 137 of the 167 seats reserved for the National Progressive Front (al-Jabha al-Wataniyah at-Taquadumiyah). The remaining 83

seats are reserved for independents, typically businessmen. 30 women who ran on the lists of the National Democratic Front won parliamentary seats. No independent women succeeded in capturing any seats. The new parliament included 40 lawyers, 19 medical doctors, 36 engineers, 14 businessmen and 4 industrialists. New members joining the parliament were 178 in number, while 72 of those elected were incumbents." (UNDP-POGAR, undated) [11]
(Elections)

- 6.05 The EIU also records that "The independents are, with few exceptions, government loyalists. Five opposition political groups boycotted the [March 2003] poll, maintaining that the process was 'not democratic', although some local analysts said that their refusal to run was more likely owing to their lack of support." [8] **(Politics: Constitution, institutions and administration)**

See also [Section 14 on Political affiliation](#)

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Human Rights

INTRODUCTION

- 7.01 The Arab Socialist Baath Party has ruled Syria since 1963, the same year that the Emergency Law – which remained in place at time of writing – was imposed. The Baath Party, and Syria, have been under the leadership of an al-Assad since 1970 when General Hafez al-Assad took power in a bloodless coup. (EIU Country Profile, 2003; LoC Country Profile, April 2005; HRW World Report, 2006; FH ‘Worst of the Worst’, September 2006) [8] **(Politics: Political background) [10] (Independence) [13a] [15a]** Hafez was succeeded by his son – Bashar – upon his death in June 2000, and promises of progressiveness made by President Bashar al-Assad in his inaugural speech of July 2000, despite the resistance of the old guard, led to a brief period of increased civil liberalisation known as the ‘Damascus Spring’. During this time several hundred political prisoners were released, dissidents returned from exile and informal reformist groups openly discussed Syria’s social, economic and political difficulties. (EIU Country Profile, 2003; LoC Country Profile, April 2005; FH ‘Worst of the Worst’, September 2006) [8] **(Politics: Recent political developments) [10] (Independence) [15a]**
- 7.02 During February 2001 – in an abrupt reversal, ostensibly prompted by outspoken criticism of the regime – most of the leading reformists were arrested and jailed for lengthy prison terms; the remaining few endured the continual attention of the mukhabarat (secret police) whilst reform laws were shelved or ineffectually implemented. (EIU Country Profile, 2003; FH ‘Worst of the Worst’, September 2006) [8] **(Politics: Recent political developments) [15a]** The Library of Congress (LoC) Country Profile of April 2005 states that “...[President Bashar] Assad reportedly is slowly dismantling the old regime by enforcing mandatory retirement and replacing certain high-level administrators with appointments from outside the Baath Party.” [10] **(Independence)** Nevertheless, Freedom House’s (FH) September 2006 report ‘Worst of the Worst’ still reports “Although Bashar Assad’s Syria remains marginally freer than his father’s in most respects (and significantly freer in a few respects), it has proven to be no less resistant to political change.” [15a]
- 7.03 The US Department of State (USSD) Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2005: Syria, published on 8 March 2006, listed the human rights abuses reported in 2005:
- “absence of right to change government
 - arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life
 - torture in prison
 - poor prison conditions
 - arbitrary arrests and detentions
 - absence of rule of law
 - severely restricted civil liberties—freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and movement
 - limited freedom of religion
 - government corruption and lack of transparency
 - violence and societal discrimination against women
 - discrimination against the Kurdish minority
 - severely restricted workers’ rights” [6b] (p1)

- 7.04 Reports by international human rights organisations, which covered the same period, also recorded the severe restriction of freedom of expression, assembly and association; the continued harassment of human rights defenders and government critics; and the discrimination faced by Syrian Kurds and women. (AI Annual Report, 2006; HRW World Report, January 2006; FH 'Worst of the Worst', September 2006) [12a] [13a] [15a]
- 7.05 Additionally, the London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) released its Annual Report, which covered the period from June 2005 to May 2006, the preface of which states "Human Rights in Syria reached its lowest point since Bashar Al-Asad became President in mid-2000, when security and intelligence forces carried out widespread arrests in mid-May 2006, including 16 political opposition figures and civil society and human rights activists, after they had signed a petition calling for Syria to normalise its relations with Lebanon." [14a] (First: Preface)
- 7.06 The report goes on to record human rights abuses such as extra-judicial detention, including of peaceful civil liberty activists, citizens returning from exile and Islamists (particularly the persistent targeting of Muslim Brotherhood and Tahrir Party members, supporters and even acquaintances of suspected members); the mistreatment and discrimination of the Kurdish minority continued; and – hanging over all forms of human rights abuses that involved detention – the use of torture in prisons and interrogation centres, which sometimes resulted in death. [14a]
- "Writer Farouk Mardam-Bey ... voiced concern about the fact that the situation of government opponents is deteriorating as the regime now feels protected [due to changes in the geopolitical situation]. Repression takes various forms, he said, including torture, arbitrary arrests, abduction of the relatives of government opponents and sham trials. He also mentioned the revival of Law 49 targeting Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters, and the zero tolerance displayed for Syria's Kurdish minority." (RSF, 14 November 2006) [30o]
- 7.07 During 2005, President al-Assad ordered the release of a total of 557 political prisoners in February, March and November; those freed in February and November were mostly Islamists who were long-term detainees, some spending almost 20 years in jail, whilst in March many of the released were Kurds who had been detained since the Qamishli riots in March 2004. (USSD HR, 2005; AI Annual Report, 2006; HRW World Report; SHRC Annual Report) [6b] (Section 1d) [12a] (Releases of political prisoners) [13a] (Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and "Disappearances") [14a] (2.8-Releases) However, SHRC's Annual Report states "Despite official claims, none of the [Qamishli] detainees were released despite statements that President Al-Asad issued a pardon pertaining to 312 Kurdish detainees in 2005." [14a] (Fourth: The Kurds)
- 7.08 Nonetheless, AI notes "Scores of people were arrested during the year for political reasons, including tens of prisoners of conscience. At least several hundred people, including prisoners of conscience, remained imprisoned for political reasons." [12a] (Imprisonment for political reasons) Whilst the USSD HR report 2005 remarks that:
- "The precise number of political prisoners is unclear. Human Rights groups estimated that there were at least 325 political prisoners remaining in Saidnaya prison, including Kurds, Islamic fundamentalists, and a number of civil society activists. At least 150 political prisoners were held in Adraa prison,

including the 6 'Damascus Spring' prisoners. In addition, human rights organizations noted that an undetermined number of persons were detained in other prisons, security service detention centers, or other secret detention facilities; estimates range from several hundred to one thousand."
[6b] (Section 1d)

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SECURITY FORCES

- 8.01 The US Department of State report on Human Rights (USSD HR) in Syria – 2005, released on 8 March 2006, reports that “The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, in practice these activities persisted and remained significant problems.” [6b] (Section 1d)

“The role of the security services extends far beyond strict security matters due to a state of emergency, which has been in place since 1963. The government justifies the ongoing Emergency Law on the basis of its war with Israel and past threats from terrorist groups. Syrian Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence are military agencies; the Ministry of Interior exercises nominal control over general security, state security, and political security.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 1d)

- 8.02 The same report also states that:

“Corruption continued to be a serious problem throughout the police forces and security services. Human rights lawyers and family members of detainees cited solicitation of bribes for favorable decisions and provision of basic services by government officials throughout the legal process in both courts and prisons. Traffic police officers regularly and openly solicited bribes from drivers.” [6b] (Section 1d)

POLICE

- 8.03 The USSD HR report 2005 records that “The Ministry of Interior controlled the police forces, which consist of four separate divisions: emergency police, traffic police, neighborhood police, and riot police.” [6b] (Section 1d) Whilst the US-based Global Security website remarks that “It incorporated the 8,000-man Gendarmerie, which had originally been organized by the French Mandate authorities to police rural areas.” [48a]

OTHER GOVERNMENT FORCES

- 8.04 The Global Security website reports that “The largest intelligence-gathering and internal security organization was the National Security Directorate, employing about 25,000 personnel.” [48a] The USSD HR report 2005 records:

“There are four major branches of security forces--Political Security Directorate (PSD), Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI), General Intelligence Directorate (GID), and Syrian Air Force Intelligence (SAFI)--all of which devote some of their overlapping resources to monitoring internal dissent and individual citizens. The four branches operate independently and generally outside of the control of the legal system.” [6b] (Section 1d)

- 8.05 A Middle East Intelligence Bulletin of July 2000 briefly described the four separate branches:

The Political Security Directorate (Idarat al-Amn al-Siyasi)

“The Political Security Directorate (PSD) is responsible for detecting signs of organized political activity that run counter to the interests of the regime. This involves surveillance of suspected political dissidents, as well as the activities

of foreigners residing in the country and their interaction with locals. The PSD also monitors all print and audiovisual media. ...

General Security Directorate (Idarat al-Amn al-‘Amm)

“The General Security Directorate (GSD) is the main civilian intelligence service in Syria. It is divided into three branches. The internal security division is responsible for internal surveillance of the population in general--a duty which clearly overlaps with that of the PSI. The purpose of this redundancy, notes one prominent scholar of the Ba’athist regime, is to ensure that Assad ‘has always in the security field two strings to his bow . . . acting in a manner not unlike that of Napoleon, who pressed into service a secret police under Fouché and simultaneously organized a counterpolice to check on Fouché.’ The other two divisions of the GSD are external security (equivalent to the CIA) and the Palestine division, which monitors the activities of Palestinian groups in Syria and Lebanon. ...

Military Intelligence (Shu’bat al-Mukhabarat al-‘Askariyya)

“Syria’s military intelligence service, headquartered at the Defense Ministry complex in Damascus, is formally responsible for the usual range of military surveillance operations, planning, etc. that one would expect. In addition, it is responsible for providing military and logistical support to Palestinian, Lebanese, and Turkish extremist groups, monitoring (and often assassinating) political dissidents abroad, and coordinating the activities of Syrian and Lebanese military forces stationed in Lebanon. ...

Air Force Intelligence (Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya)

“Despite its name, this intelligence service is *not* primarily concerned with providing information to the air force. It’s [*sic*] evolution into Syria’s most secretive and fearsome intelligence service has a great deal to do with the fact that Hafez Assad was once commander of Syria’s air force. After he assumed power in 1970, Assad turned to this intelligence service, dominated by men that he knew well (and in most cases had appointed himself), to undertake sensitive domestic and international operations. For nearly thirty years, the service was commanded by Maj. Gen. Muhammad al-Khouli, a trusted advisor whose office was adjacent to Assad’s in the presidential palace.

“On the domestic level, Syrian air force intelligence has frequently spearheaded operations against Islamist opposition elements in the country. It played a leading role in the regime’s suppression of Muslim Brotherhood revolt during the 1970’s and early 1980’s [*sic*]. More recently, air force intelligence agents reportedly led the nationwide manhunt for members of the Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir) in December 1999.

“Air force intelligence has also been central to the regime’s sponsorship of international terrorism. It’s [*sic*] agents, frequently stationed abroad in Syrian embassies and in branch offices of Syria’s national airline, have directly coordinated dozens of terrorist operations. The most well-documented example was the attempted bombing of an Israeli airliner at London’s Heathrow airport in April 1986.” [52]

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ABUSES BY THE SECURITY FORCES

Arbitrary arrest and detention

- 8.06 The USSD HR report 2005 records that “The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, in practice these activities persisted and remained significant problems.” [6b] (Section 1d) It continues:

“Human rights organizations documented the arrest of at least 80 individuals by security forces for alleged ties to radical Islam during the year. According to the 2005 HRW report, more than 40 students in Lattakia were arrested and claimed that they were tortured while in custody. Human rights organizations estimated that the total arrests based on suspicion of extremist Islamist involvement reached at least 500 during the year.” [6b] (Section 1d)

- 8.07 Human rights groups, such as Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC), reported on the arbitrary arrest and detention of Syrians throughout 2005 and 2006, particularly those who publicly criticised or challenged the current regime and its practices. [12a-12b, 12d-12e, 12g-12h, 12k-12m, 12o, 12r, 12t, 12x-12z, 12aa, 12ac, 12af] [13a-13e, 13k] [14a, 14d-14e, 14l, 14q-14t, 14v-14x, 14z-14aa, 14ac, 14af-14ai]

“The government continued to withhold new information on the welfare and whereabouts of persons who have disappeared or held incommunicado for years; little is known other than the approximate date of their detention. A local human rights organization recorded at least three thousand disappearance cases of Syrians and Palestinians since the late 1970s in the country, and estimated that the actual number may be several thousands more.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 1b)

- 8.08 Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) covered abuses against members of the press, particularly bloggers and journalists who published on the Internet. [30a-30j, 30m] [31a-31c] The UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also reported on the arrest and detention of Syrians during 2006. [16h, 16k, 16m, 16p] [38u]

- 8.09 AI, SHRC, IRIN and RSF also reported on the release of some detainees; some on bail, some on completion of their sentences and others without charge. [12r-12s, 12v-12w, 12y-12z, 12aa-12ab] [14g-14h, 14k, 14o, 14ab] [16f] [30k-30l] Nevertheless, on some notable occasions those released were soon re-arrested, or at risk of re-arrest, as in the case of Mahmoud 'Issa, one of the signatories of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration who was released on bail in October 2006 but rearrested only weeks later. (AI October 2006) [12s, 12y-12z]

See also [Section 15 on Freedom of speech and the media](#) and [Section 16 on Human Rights institutions, organisations and activists](#)

Torture

- 8.10 The USSD HR report 2005 notes that “During the year [2005] local human rights organizations cited numerous cases of security forces torturing prisoners, including the case of 200 Kurds on trial in a Damascus military court for their involvement in the March 2004 riots in Qamishli. During the proceedings, a number of detainees complained of torture and displayed their

injuries to the judge. Torture of political detainees also was common.” [6b] (Section 1c) AI, HRW, SHRC and RSF all detailed numerous reported or suspected incidents of torture during 2005 and 2006. [12a-12b, 12d-12e, 12g-12h, 12k-12m, 12o, 12t-12u, 12aa, 12ac, 12af] [13a-13e] [13k] (p3-4, 6-7, 9) [14a, 14y, 14ad, 14ai-14aj] [30k-30l, 30o]

- 8.11 “Torture was most likely to occur while detainees were held at one of the many detention centers operated by the various security services throughout the country, particularly while authorities attempted to extract a confession or information.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 1c) Torture methods, according to former detainees and reputable local human rights groups, included:

- electrical shocks;
- pulling out fingernails;
- burning genitalia;
- forcing objects into the rectum;
- beating, sometimes while the victim was suspended from the ceiling;
- alternately dousing victims with freezing water and beating them in extremely cold rooms;
- hyper extending the spine;
- bending the detainees into the frame of a wheel and whipping exposed body parts;
- using a backward-bending chair to asphyxiate the victim or fracture the victim’s spine. (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 1c)

- 8.12 The USSD HR report 2005 reports that:

“Past victims of torture have identified the officials who tortured them, up to the level of brigadier general. In past years, when allegations of excessive force or physical abuse were made in court, the plaintiff was required to initiate a separate civil suit against the alleged abuser for damages. However, no action was taken against the accused. There were no confirmed cases of new allegations during the year. In December a French citizen filed a complaint with French courts, claiming to have been tortured during his September detention in Syria. Courts did not order medical examinations for defendants who claimed that they were tortured.” [6b] (Section 1c)

Extra-judicial killings

- 8.13 There were allegations that Syria was responsible for the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in February 2005, which were borne out – at least in part – by the UN International Independent Investigation Committee (UNIIC) initial findings that the Syrian authorities were involved in the killing. (USSD HR, 2005; BBC, 14 February 2005; UNIIC, October 2005) [6b] (Section 1a) [38n] [58a] Further bomb attacks in Lebanon, targeting critics of the Syrian regime and its involvement in Lebanon, were also attributed to the Syrian authorities and/or its agents within Lebanon. (USSD HR, 2005; BBC, 2 June 2005—14 December 2005) [6b] (Section 1a) [38o-38s]
- 8.14 The UNIIC continued to report on its ongoing investigation into the assassination of Hariri during 2005 and 2006. [58b-58e] In November 2006, anti-Syrian Maronite Christian Minister of Parliament (MP) Pierre Gemayel became Lebanon’s latest assassination victim. (BBC 24 November 2006; *The Guardian* (UK) 23 November 2006) [38x] [62b]

- 8.15 Also, reports released in 2005 and 2006 recorded that – within Syria – deaths in detention and prison, apparently as a result of torture or other mistreatment, continued to occur. (USSD HR 2005; AI Annual Report 2006; HRW World Report 2006; SHRC Annual Report June 2006) [6b] (Section 1a & 1c) [12a] [13a] [14a]

See also [Section 4 on Recent Developments](#) and [Section 11 on Arrest and detention: Legal Rights](#)

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MILITARY SERVICE

- 9.01 War Resisters' International's (WRI) comprehensive survey, 'Refusing to Bear Arms', of 1998 and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers' (CSC) Global Report of 2004 record the estimated number of troops in the Syrian armed forces as 319,000-320,000, of whom approximately 250,000 were conscripts. [32] [33a] Military service was governed by Article 40 of the Constitution; the 1953 National Service Act, and the 1950 Military Penal Code, which was amended in 1973. Conscription has been in place since 1946 and consists of 30 months' service. (WRI, 1998) [32]
- 9.02 Men of 18-40 years of age are eligible for conscription. Men and women may voluntarily join the armed forces at the age of 18; reserve duties of six months' military training can potentially apply up to the age of 45-50 years. (WRI, 1998; CSC, 2004; IBCR, 2006) [32] [33a] [34] The WRI report of 1998 recorded that men who reach the minimum age for recruitment are expected to report for a medical examination. Those who do not – or who report late – may be liable for arrest as draft evaders. Failure to report is punishable by one month to five years in prison during wartime, whilst evading military service by leaving the country may result in a sentence of three months to two years in prison, plus fines. "After registering for military service young men receive a document containing full details about their service, including whether they are entitled to postponement. They must have this document with them at all times, so that the authorities can at any time check their details." [32]

EXEMPTIONS AND POSTPONEMENTS

- 9.03 Jewish persons – of whom there were approximately 80 in Syria – were permanently exempt from military service and barred from voluntary service. (USSD HR, 2005; WRI, 1998) [6b] (Section 2c) [32] WRI (1998) and CSC's Global Report of 2004 both recorded that exemptions could be obtained for domestic reasons (such as being the only son), serious medical reasons, or if a person lived abroad although this was dependent on the below conditions and incurred a fee of between US\$1,000 to US\$5,000:
- Working abroad for at least five years, must have lived abroad for at least ten years, and have reached the age of 35 (US\$5,000),
 - Left Syria before reaching the age of 12 and must have lived abroad for at least 15 years (US\$1,000),
 - Born abroad and remained living abroad at least until the age of 18 years (US\$1,000). [32] [33a]
- 9.04 The Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade's Travel Advice, issued on 13 September 2006, also notes that "Payment of fines in lieu of military service is possible in certain circumstances." In addition, the Syrian authorities may allow such persons to enter and stay for up to three months before they become liable for military service, but cautioned that this information should be requested in writing from the nearest Syrian Embassy or Consulate before departing. [27] (Information for Dual Nationals) WRI (1998) noted that Syrian nationals who live abroad are often interrogated on return to Syria and can be sentenced for draft evasion, and ordered to perform their military service. [32] "During the year [2005] a number of émigrés were imprisoned for refusing to pay the fee." (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 2d)

- 9.05 WRI (1998) and CSC's Global Report 2004 recorded that postponements are possible for students. [32] [33a] University courses are usually of four years' duration, during which male students are required to complete one and a half months' military training per year. On completion of their studies, students are expected to enlist for two years' military service owing to the six months' worth of training completed whilst studying being deducted from the full term of 30 months. Students who have not completed military service must apply for special permission in order to travel abroad. (WRI, 1998) [32]

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

- 9.06 WRI (1998) reported that this right is not legally recognised and that it will not be by the Syrian authorities whilst "... Syria remained threatened by Israel". [32] Although the National Service Act apparently provided for the opportunity to perform a substitute service in lieu of military service for reasons such as religion, health and social position, there were no practical provisions for such an alternative. "The government has stated several times that there have been no known cases of conscientious objection in Syria." (WRI, 1998) [32]

DESERTION

- 9.07 The penalties for desertion, as set out in the 1950 Military Penal Code (amended 1973), varied according to a number of factors:

- Deserting with no additional factors – five years,
- Deserting and leaving the country – five to ten years,
- Deserting with military material – fifteen years,
- Deserting during wartime – fifteen years,
- Deserting during combat – fifteen years,
- Second desertion offence – fifteen years,
- Deserting in the face of the enemy – life imprisonment,
- Conspiring to desert in the face of the enemy – execution allowed,
- Deserting to enemy ranks – execution allowed.

The penalties received were also affected by "... the deserter's rank and the circumstances under which the desertion has taken place." [32]

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JUDICIARY

- 10.01 The United Nations Development Programme's 'Programme on Governance in the Arab Region' (UNDP-POGAR) noted that "The legal system of Syria draws primarily from Civil Law traditions, as well as Islamic and Egyptian legal traditions." [11] (Judiciary)

"The chief codifications of law are contained in the Civil Code of 1949, the Commercial Code of 1949, the Penal Code of 1949, the Criminal Procedure Code of 1950, the Civil Procedure Code of 1953, and the Personal Status Code, contained in Legislative Decree No. 59 of 1983. The Judicial Authority Law of 1961 and the Civil Code of 1949 are the primary documents governing the organization and functioning of the secular judicial system. Administrative authority of the judiciary, including the powers to appoint, promote, and transfer judges, is vested in the Supreme Judicial Council, which is presided over by the Minister of Justice." (UNDP-POGAR, undated) [11] (Judiciary)

ORGANISATION

- 10.02 The Syrian judicial system was split into two parts; secular (civil and criminal), and religious:

Civil and Criminal Courts

- Courts of Peace, or Court of Conciliation (Sulhiyya)
Lowest level – composed of a single judge with jurisdiction to hear cases involving lesser offences.
- Courts of First Instance (Bida'iyya)
Second level – divided into civil and criminal courts.
- Court of Assize
Second level – additional criminal court, heard cases in which the punishment may exceed three years' imprisonment.
- Court of Appeal
Third level – 30 Courts of Appeal existed in Syria; three criminal courts and four civil courts were located in Damascus, and one civil court and one criminal court was located in every district.
Heard decisions rendered by the Courts of Peace/Conciliation, Courts of First Instance, and Court of Assize. The decisions of this court could not be appealed.

See also [Court of Cassation](#) below

Religious Courts

- Shari'a courts
There were three Shari'a Courts in both cities of Damascus and Aleppo; all other districts had one.
Heard cases involving personal status, family, and inheritance disputes among Syrian Muslims, and non-Syrian Muslims who applied Islamic personal status laws in their own countries.
- Doctrinal Courts

Composed of a judge of the Druze Muslim sect; empowered to guarantee that personal status decisions of members of the Druze sect were not in conflict with the rules of the sect.

- **Spiritual Courts**
Settled personal status matters for Jewish, Christian and other non-Muslim groups.

A number of other courts with specialised jurisdictions existed, including the Court of Juvenile Offenders, Court of Customs, Court of Labour Conflict, and the Military Courts. (UNDP-POGAR, undated) [11] (Judiciary) The Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) tried political and national security cases, operating under the provisions of the 1963 Emergency Law – its verdicts were not subject to judicial appeal. (USSD HR, 2005; SHRC Annual Report) [6b] (Section 1e) [14a] (6.1- Sentences passed by the SSSC)

See also [Fair trial](#) below

- **Court of Cassation**
Final court of appeal – located in Damascus and divided into specialised areas devoted to civil, criminal, canonical, and military matters, which were presided over by three-judge panels.
Heard some decisions rendered by the Courts of Peace/Conciliation, First Instance and Assize; it could nullify the decisions of the Court of Appeal. Also, decisions of all of the religious courts could be appealed to the Canonical and Spiritual divisions of the Court of Cassation.
- **Supreme Constitutional Court**
Composed of five members who were appointed by the President of the Republic for renewable four-year terms.
Ruled on the constitutionality of laws, heard election disputes, and could try the president if accused of criminal offences; could also deliver advisory opinions on request. (UNDP-POGAR, undated) [11] (Judiciary)
Heard special appeals but did not hear civil or criminal cases. (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 1e)

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INDEPENDENCE

- 10.03 The Constitution guarantees the independence of the judiciary; however the courts were subject to political interference. (USSD HR, 2005; UNDP-POGAR, undated) [6b] (Section 1e) [11] (Judiciary) UNDP-POGAR states that “The Supreme Judicial Council oversees the judiciary and has the power to appoint, dismiss and transfer judges. The Minister of Justice chairs the Council.” [11] (Judiciary)

FAIR TRIAL

- 10.04 The US Department of State’s (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) in Syria – 2005, released on 8 March 2006, listed the main precepts under which ordinary civil and criminal trials are heard in Syria; these included the right to be legally represented, to present evidence and to challenge accusers, the presumption of innocence, and the right of appeal. “Defendants and their attorneys have access to government-held evidence relevant to their cases.

However, human rights lawyers noted that the prosecution case file to which defense lawyers were provided access often did not include any evidence in some politically charged cases.” [6b] (Section 1e)

- 10.05 The report stated that most trials were held in public – except cases involving juvenile or sex offenders – but there was no provision for trial by jury. All citizens held these rights by law, although certain sections of family and criminal law – based on Shari’a – were gender-biased in favour of men and some personal status laws employed Shari’a without consideration for the religious beliefs of those involved. [6b] (Section 1e) On military courts, it continued:

“Regular military courts have authority over crimes committed by soldiers or members of other military or police branches. Military courts also have authority to try civilians in cases based on military law. A military prosecutor decides the venue for a civilian defendant. There have been reports that the government operated military field courts in locations outside established courtrooms. Such courts reportedly observed fewer of the formal procedures of regular military courts.” [6b] (Section 1e)

- 10.06 The USSD HR report 2005 recorded the cases of a human rights activist, an opposition figure and 200 Kurds being heard by military courts; the former two were still pending when the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) published its Annual Report in June 2006, whilst the 200 Kurds were pardoned in March 2005, although SHRC’s report states that they were never in fact released. [6b] (Section 1e) [14a] (6.2- Cases still being considered by the SSSC & Fourth: The Kurds)
- 10.07 In the period October 2006 to December 2006, AI, SHRC and Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) reported on civilian cases heard by military courts, including the case of writer Ali al-Abdullah and his son, Mohammad, who were found guilty – respectively – of spreading false or exaggerated news, and of charges related to the causing of riots. [12v] [14g-14h, 14k] [30l]

Supreme State Security Court (SSSC)

- 10.08 The USSD HR report 2005 records that the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) did not “... observe constitutional provisions safeguarding defendants’ rights.” [6b] (Section 1e) SHRC’s Annual Report adds that “The SSSC is an extra-ordinary legal structure whose sentences cannot be appealed or contested, and relies in passing its sentences on security authorities’ minutes and reports, which are normally extracted from suspects forcefully and under torture.” [14a] (6.1- Sentences passed by the SSSC)
- 10.09 The USSD HR report 2005 also notes that:
- “Under SSSC procedures, defendants are not present during the preliminary or investigative phase of the trial, during which the prosecutor presents evidence. Trials were usually closed to the public. Lawyers were not ensured access to their clients before the trial and were excluded from the court during their client’s initial interrogation by the prosecutor. Lawyers submitted written defense pleas rather than making oral presentations.” [6b] (Section 1e)
- 10.10 The Minister of Interior was able to ratify, nullify or alter the court’s rulings, whilst “The president must approve the verdict or may cancel it and ask for a

retrial.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 1e) Although the SSSC was – according to the Syrian Government – meant to try only persons believed to have intended to use violence against the state, most defendants were prosecuted for exercising their political rights; in the main, those brought before the SSSC were reported to be suspected Islamists, Kurdish political activists, dissident Alawis and civil activists. (USSD HR 2005; AI February 2006 – December 2006; HRW November 2005 – April 2006; SHRC June 2006 – November 2006; IRIN October 2006 – November 2006) [6b] (Section 1e) [12a, 12g-12i, 12k-12m, 12o, 12r, 12t, 12ac, 12af] [13a-13b, 13f] [14a] (Sixth: Supreme State Security Court Dossier) [14f, 14g-14h, 14j, 14m-14n, 14u, 14y, 14ad, 14ai, 14al-14an, 14ap] [16i, 16n, 16p]

“The Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) views these arbitrary arrests as a severe violation of human rights in Syria, and considers the trialling of detainees at the unlawful SSSC as another severe violation of human rights in Syria. SHRC calls upon the Syrian authorities to stop arresting citizens arbitrarily and despotically, to abolish the SSSC based on the emergency laws imposed on the country 44 years ago, and to allow citizens their individual and general rights.” (SHRC, 11 December 2006) [14am]

See also [Section 14 on Political affiliation](#) and [Section 16 on Human Rights institutions, organisations and activists](#)

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ARREST AND DETENTION – LEGAL RIGHTS

- 11.01 On non-security cases, the US Department of State's (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) in Syria – 2005, released on 8 March 2006, reports:

“Upon arrest, an individual is brought to a police station for processing and detained until a trial date is set. At the initial court hearing, which may be months or years after arrest, the accused may retain an attorney at personal expense or be assigned a court-appointed attorney. The individual is then tried in a regular court, where a judge renders a verdict. While the prison code provides for prompt access to family members, human rights organizations and families reported inconsistent application of the code, with reports of some families waiting up to a year for access to relatives. ...

“Arrest and search warrants exist only for nonsecurity related cases; however, police bypassed this requirement in many instances by claiming security or emergency grounds for entry.” [6b] (Section 1d)

- 11.02 With regard to security cases:

“The 1963 Emergency Law authorizes the government to conduct preventive arrests and overrides constitutional and penal code provisions against arbitrary arrest and detention, including the need to obtain warrants. In cases involving political or national security offenses, arrests were often carried out in secret. Suspects were detained incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and denied the right to a judicial determination regarding pretrial detention. Human rights organizations reported that many detainees were not informed of charges against them until their arraignment, which often was months after their arrest. Additionally, those suspected of political or national security offenses were arrested and prosecuted under ambiguous and broad articles of the penal code and subsequently tried in either the criminal or security courts. There were reliable reports that the government did not notify foreign governments when their citizens were arrested or detained, or did so only after the person was released.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 1d)

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PRISON CONDITIONS

- 12.01 The US Department of State's (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) in Syria – 2005, released on 8 March 2006, notes that:

“Prison conditions generally were poor and did not meet international standards for health and sanitation. At some prisons security officials demanded bribes from family members. Overcrowding and the denial of food remained problems at several prisons. According to the Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR), Abdul Karim Dhaon, an official at the Ministry of Health, was arrested in May 2004 for allegedly writing a report about the unacceptable conditions at the prisons he supervised. Dhaon was released in December 2004, and his case was on appeal at year's end [2005].” [6b] (Section 1c)

- 12.02 The report also notes that:

“There were separate detention facilities for men, women, and children; several reports cited minors being held in adult facilities. Pretrial detainees, particularly those held for political or security reasons, were usually held separately from convicted prisoners. Facilities for political or national security prisoners generally were worse than those for common criminals. Released political detainees confirmed reports of poor prison conditions, including overcrowded cells and a shortage of beds. ...

“The government did not permit any independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions; however, diplomatic and consular officials were granted access in some cases.” [6b] (Section 1c)

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DEATH PENALTY

- 13.01 The United States' Department of State (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) – 2005: Syria, released on 8 March 2006, recorded the sentencing to death of two persons during 2005; a 17-year-old boy who was tried because of his family's association with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and an alleged member of the MB. Both sentences were commuted to custodial terms of 6 and 12 years respectively. [6b] (Section 2e) Amnesty International's (AI) 'Death Sentences and Executions in 2005' also reported that death sentences were known to have been imposed in Syria during 2005, although it did not record any further details. [12p]
- 13.02 AI's Annual Report 2006 states:
- “The death penalty remained in force for a wide range of crimes but the authorities disclosed little information about its use. It was not known how many people were sentenced to death or executed in 2005. However, the government informed the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) that 27 executions were carried out during 2002 and 2003, although it was unclear whether this was the total or it *[sic]* excluded executions carried out after trials before the SSSC or military courts.” [12a]
- 13.03 The Syrian Human Rights Committee's (SHRC) Annual Report on Human Rights 2006 highlighted the existence of Law 49/1980. Passed in July 1980, the Law criminalised the act of joining or sympathising with the MB and made such acts punishable by death. [14a] (Third: Law 49/1980) SHRC noted the past claims of a former Information Minister that Law 49/1980 was no longer in effect but juxtaposed this statement with information concerning the death sentences handed down to MB members and supporters by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) during the period covered by the report – and in previous years – although these were usually immediately commuted to custodial sentences of 12 years. [14a] (Third: Law 49/1980)

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POLITICAL AFFILIATION

- 14.01 The National Progressive Front (NPF), a grouping of the ten main political parties, which included the Baath Party and created the appearance of a multi-party system. In reality the NPF has little power independent of the Baath Party. (Europa World, accessed 27 July 2006; USSD Background Note, October 2006; LoC Country Profile, April 2005) [1a] (Recent History) [6a] (Government/Political conditions) [10] (Politics/Political Parties) The USSD HR report 2005 records:

“The president and the Ba'ath Party suppressed political opposition. The constitution provides that the Ba'ath Party is the ruling party and ensures it a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers' and women's groups. The Ba'ath Party and nine other smaller political parties comprise the NPF, originally established in 1971. The NPF represented the only framework for legal political party participation for citizens; however, the Ba'ath Party dominated it, and the one-party character of the political system remained. Other political parties of the NPF were satellites and conformed strictly to Ba'ath party and government policies.” [6b] (Section 3)

See also [Section 6 on the Political system](#)

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

- 14.02 The Constitution provides for both freedom of assembly and association but the former right was surpassed by the state of emergency, in place since 1963, whilst the Constitution itself contains provision for the Government to restrict the latter. (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 2b) “Private associations are required to register with authorities, but requests for registration were usually denied, presumably on political grounds. The government usually granted registration to groups not engaged in political or other activities deemed sensitive.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 2b)
- 14.03 Most demonstrations that occurred were permitted or organised by the authorities; those that were not were usually forcibly broken up by the security forces, sometimes in tandem with pro-regime activists as occurred in March 2005 when a peaceful civil protest calling for the end of the Emergency Law, and marking the events in Qamishli the previous year, ended in violent confrontations. (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 2b) In October 2006, the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) reported on the repression of a peaceful demonstration to mark the anniversary of the census that led to thousands of Kurds losing their Syrian citizenship. [14i]

See also [Section 18 on Ethnic groups: Kurds](#)

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OPPOSITION GROUPS AND POLITICAL ACTIVISTS

ISLAMIST/SALAFIST POLITICAL ACTIVISTS

- 14.04 International and national human rights groups, such as AI, HRW and SHRC, reported on the continued repression of Islamist and Salafist Syrians suspected of political activity by the authorities during 2005 and 2006.

[6b] (Section 1e) [12a] [13a] [14a] (p10-11, 16-17, 23-29) [14f, 14j, 14m-14n, 14u, 14y-14aa] [16i, 16n] [50] The arrest and detention of such persons invariably led to charges of 'being a member of an Islamic organisation' – although often the reports of their arrest did not refer to the organisation of which they were alleged to be a part – unfair trials before the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) and an eventual sentence of, usually, 3 to 12 years. (USSD HR 2005; AI Annual Report 2005; HRW World Report 2006; SHRC 2005 – December 2006; IRIN October – November 2006; [6b] (Section 1e) [12a] [13a] [14a] (p10-11, 16-17, 23-29) [14f, 14j, 14m-14n, 14u, 14y-14aa, 14ak-14al, 14ap] [16i, 16n] [50a-50c]

Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood)

- 14.05 The Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) released a report in February 2006, 'Massacre of Hama (February 1982) Genocide and A crime against Humanity', recounting the events before, during and after the Syrian authorities' overwhelming use of force against the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood. [14b] A January 2005 report by the US Library of Congress (LoC) also records:

"Once considered the most imminent threat to Syrian stability, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, formerly the largest Islamist opposition group, has been largely in exile since its crushing defeat at the hands of the Asad regime in 1982, when Syrian forces attacked the Brotherhood's stronghold in the city of Hama and killed approximately 10,000 people. Since then, the government has attempted to coopt the forces of political Islam by continuing to outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood and keep its activists in prison, while promoting Islam as a social force for national unification." [10b] (p15)

- 14.06 The SHRC Annual Report of June 2006 covered in some detail Law 49/1980, passed on 7 July 1980, which criminalised the act of joining or supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and instigated the death penalty as punishment for those convicted under this law. [14a] (Third: Law 49/1980) Despite doubts concerning the amount of support – particularly active support – within the country, according to a number of human rights organisations Syria continued not only to hold thousands of Muslim Brothers in prison but also continued to convict large numbers in the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) in recent years. (USSD HR, 2005; AI Annual Report, 2006; HRW Global Report, 2006; SHRC Annual Report, 2006; Mideast Monitor, April/May 2006) [6b] (Section 1e) [12a] [13a] [14a] [50a]

See also [Section 10 on Judiciary: Supreme State Security Court \(SSSC\)](#)

- 14.07 The Mideast Monitor, April/May 2006, notes:

"Since the election of Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni as general supervisor (*muraqib am*) in 1996, the brotherhood has negotiated on and off with the government (through intermediaries) in hopes of reaching an accommodation. These negotiations made some progress after the ascension of Bashar Assad, who released several hundred brotherhood members from prison, but the regime remained unwilling to grant Bayanouni's three core demands - a general amnesty that would free thousands of Brotherhood members still in detention, permission for all exiles to return home, and a lifting of the government's ban on the Brotherhood (membership in the organization is still punishable by death under Syrian law)." [50a]

- 14.08 During the last months of 2006, SHRC and IRIN both reported on the sentencing to death of a man found guilty of membership of the Muslim Brotherhood under Law 49/1980; as is usually the case, his sentence was reduced to 12 years imprisonment. [14m] [16i] Also "The national organisation for Human Rights in Syria reported today that the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) issued a 12 year prison sentence against Mr. Mohammed Thabet Hilli pursuant to Article 49/1980 charged with affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood Movement." (SHRC, 11 December 2006) [14a]

Hizb ut-Tahrir (Islamic Liberation Party)

- 14.09 SHRC's annual report of June 2006 and Middle East Intelligence Bulletin (MEIB) issue of July 2000 report that the Syrian authorities began its clamp down on the Tahrir Party in 1998-1999 with hundreds of members being arrested in a nationwide manhunt, reportedly led by Air Force Intelligence (Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya). [14a] (2.4 – Tahrir Party) [52a] In 2002, the SHRC had released a list of 59 Tahrir Party members held in Saydanya prison. [14c] The MEIB issue of December 2000 states that "Representatives of the group [Hizb ut-Tahrir] have said that 1,200 of its members were arrested by Syrian security forces in December 1999 and January 2000." [52b]
- 14.10 In its annual report of 2005, AI stated that members and affiliates of the Tahrir Party had been released; however, the report also notes "Between June and November [2004] dozens of Islamist students and clerics were arrested, mostly in the Hama and Qatana areas. Many of those arrested reportedly had links with the banned Hizb al-Tahrir (Islamic Liberation Party) and were to be tried before FMCs [Field Military Courts]. At least 30 remained in detention at the end of the year." [12q] (Releases of Political Prisoners & Prisoners of Conscience)
- 14.11 The SHRC's annual report of June 2006 recorded the continuing repression of the Tahrir Party stating that members were again detained by Syrian Intelligence Services during 2005 and 2006. [14a] (2.4 – Tahrir Party) In November 2006, SHRC reported that approximately 40 suspected members of the Tahrir Party were arrested in Homs. [14z-14aa]

See also [Section 17 on Religious groups](#) and [Annex B – Political organisations](#)

KURDISH POLITICAL ACTIVISTS

- 14.12 Kurdish activists experienced arrests, detentions and unfair trials throughout 2005 and 2006. (AI, 15-16 November 2006; SHRC Annual Report 2006, SHRC, 2 October 2006 – 22 December 2006; IRIN, 2 October 2006) [12aa-12ab] [14a] (p2, 12, 18-19, 22-25, 28-29, 32) [14g-14h, 14i, 14v-14w, 14ab, 14ag, 14am, 14ao] [16f] The day after the International Day for Human Rights – 10 December 2006 – SHRC reported on the case of a Kurdish activist, who also had 'Islamic tendencies':

"The Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) in Damascus sentenced the Kurdish citizen Qanbar Hussein Qanbar to three years in prison, accusing him of belonging to a secret organisation and of attempting to split off Syrian territories and annexing them to a foreign country. This is an accusation that the Syrian Authorities have been attaching to all Kurdish activists who protest for their ethnic and cultural rights which have been forbidden by the Syrian regime." [14am]

Yekiti (Kurdish Democratic Party)

- 14.13 In a June 2006 speech to the United States' House Committee on International Relations' Subcommittee on the Middle East & Central Asia, Farid Ghadry, President of the Reform Party of Syria, states:
- “The Kurdish Movement is characterized by a mature opposition inside Syria and one that is more nascent outside Syria. Those on the inside are very much influenced by the Iraqi leadership in the Kurdistan area of Iraq. They rally around three or four strong political parties such as the Yekiti, the Kurdish Future Movement, and the Democratic Party. The Kurdish movement is strong and is able to mobilize the masses.” [44]
- 14.14 In 2005:
- “Scores of people were arrested during the year for political reasons, including tens of prisoners of conscience. At least several hundred people, including prisoners of conscience, remained imprisoned for political reasons. Scores were brought to trial before the SSSC [Supreme State Security Court] and Military Courts, all of which suffer from a gross lack of independence and impartiality.” (AI Annual Report, 2006) [12a]
- 14.15 AI's Annual Report noted that “Many of those facing trial were suspected members or affiliates of banned political parties such as the Kurdish Democratic Union Party” [12a]
- 14.16 Two October 2005 *AFP* reports record the sentencing of members of the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party to two-and-a-half year jail terms for belonging to a secret organisation, which aims to annex part of Syrian territory to another country. “This is the habitual charge made against all Kurds who appear in this tribunal. It is unfounded because all Kurdish parties seek a democratic and just solution to the Kurdish problems within the framework of Syria's territorial unity,’ [their lawyer Faisal Badr] added.” [45b, 45c]
- 14.17 Whilst, in December 2005, *AFP* reported that another member of the same party had been sentenced to two years in prison for the same reason, and that 14 Kurds – held on suspicion of being members of Al-Qaeda – began a hunger strike as their trial was postponed. The 14, who had already been detained for nearly a year, were joined in their protest by 30 of their fellow inmates. “The hunger strike was ‘to protest the conditions of their detention’, said Bunni, who added that the proceedings were ‘unjust’ and ‘unconstitutional’.” [45a]
- 14.18 The Office of the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) website published a number of reports on various human rights issue, including individual cases involving Kurdish activists. [39a] [39b] (Paras 222-235) [39c] (Paras 936-961) [39d] (p3-4) In 2006, reports continued of the mistreatment of Kurds in general, and also the sentencing of alleged members and affiliates of opposition parties, including the Yekiti/Kurdish Democratic Union Party to prison terms for their membership of the organisation. (*World Markets Analysis*, 10 April 2006; *Financial Times Information*, 9 April 2006; Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), March & April 2006) [46] [47] [16a-16e]
- 14.19 In October 2006, IRIN reported that a former leader of the Yekiti Party – who had been detained in June 2006 – was released from jail whilst in December

2006 SHRC recorded the arrest of one of the party's leading figures. [14ao]
[16f]

LEFT-WING/COMMUNIST PARTIES

- 14.20 SHRC's annual report of June 2006 recorded the arrest, detention and harassment of members of the Communist Labour Party, Union of Syrian Communists and Communist Union Movement during the period June 2005-May 2006. [14a] (p7, 9, 31) SHRC also reported on the release of two members of the Communist Party during the last months of 2006. [14g, 14o, 14s] Mahmoud Issa was released in late September 2006, although he was later rearrested, whilst Fateh Jamoos was released on bail six months after being detained on his return from a European trip on 1 May 2006. [14a] (p7) [14g, 14o, 14s]

See also [Annex B – Political organisations](#)

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FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND MEDIA

15.01 The Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC), Freedom House (FH), Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) all reported on the severe restriction of press freedom, and freedom of speech by the Syrian authorities during 2005 and 2006. [14a] [15b] [30a-30j] [31a-31c] "The country still has no free and independent media and Syrians have no other source of news but the state-run media that recycles official propaganda. President Bashar el-Assad, even more isolated internationally since the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, continues to tightly control all news." (RSF Annual Report, May 2006) [30a]

15.02 As well as the Emergency Law of December 1962, the 2001 Press Law, articles contained in the Penal Code and Decree No. 6 of 1965 – among other laws – all served to limit freedom of speech, and of the press, in Syria. The Ministry of Information's June 2005 pledge to introduce a new press law had not been honoured at time of writing. (FH Freedom of the Press Draft Country Reports, 27 April 2006) [15b] (Syria)

"Press and media freedoms made no progress in Syria this year. Indeed, these freedoms saw a clear decline through systemising the mono-dimension throughout all media sources, and returning to the usage of totalitarian media slogans that assert the brilliance of the President, and offering him an aura of invincibility and holiness. Attempts were intensified to block any type of media pluralism, whether within the present media sources, or in the issuing of licenses for new independent media channels, which may reflect the opposing view and opinion, which is totally and completely suppressed throughout the country." (SHRC Annual Report, June 2006) [14a] (p33)

15.03 In May 2006, the CPJ released the Special Report '10 Most Censored Countries' in which Syria was ranked ninth. The report describes how censorship worked in Syria:

"The media are under heavy state control and influence. Some newspapers and broadcast outlets are in private hands but are owned by regime loyalists, or are barred from disseminating political content. Some private and party newspapers offer mild criticism of some government policies or the Baath party, but they are largely toothless. State papers and broadcasters remain unflinchingly supportive of the regime. The press law maps out an array of restrictions against the media, including a requirement that periodicals obtain licenses from the prime minister, who can deny any application not in the 'public interest.' The regime has harassed critics through arrests or warnings." [31a]

15.04 RSF's Worldwide Press Freedom Index, released on 23 October 2006, concurs:

"Saudi Arabia (161st), Syria (153rd) and Iran (162nd) were again among the bottom group on the Index, as they have been for years since they have no independent media, only organs that spout government propaganda. The rulers of these countries keep a tight grip on the news and have set many red lines journalists must not cross. Self-censorship remains the best protection for journalists. Foreign journalists can only rarely get entry visas." [30n] (p3)

- 15.05 The UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) reported on the closure by the Ministry of Information of Syria's only private satellite television station, Sham, in early November 2006. Rumours about why it was censored included its perceived Islamist stance or its airing of a drama about official corruption but the station's director simply blamed bureaucracy. [16m, 16o] Around the same time as Sham's closure, Al-Watan – the country's first privately owned political newspaper – was launched. [16o]
- 15.06 Amnesty International (AI), IRIN and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also reported on incidents of repression concerning free speech and the media. [12r-12t, 12v, 12y-12z, 12af] [16k, 16m, 16o] [38u] Whilst, in addition to their annual and special reports SHRC, RSF and the CPJ reported on a number of individual incidents of harassment against writers, journalists and others who attempted to exercise their right to free speech during 2006. [14d, 14h, 14k, 14p-14r, 14x, 14ai] [30b-30o] [31b-31c]
- 15.07 The cases of Michael Kilo, Anwar al-Bunni and other signatories of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration were particularly well-covered by these organisations, AI, IRIN and the BBC. The Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which was released in May 2006, called for the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty, and was endorsed by several hundred Syrian and Lebanese citizens. [12s, 12y-12z, 12ae] [14q-14s] [16k, 16m] [30k, 30o-30p] [38u] The detained signatories were variously subjected to prolonged detention, beating, unfair and disjointed trials, release and re-arrest, which prompted some to go on hunger strikes of a few days, and their families and human rights organisations to call for their release. [12s, 12y-12z, 12ae] [14q-14s] [16k, 16m] [30k, 30o-30p] [38u]

See also [Section 16 on Human Rights institutions, organisations and activists](#)

- 15.08 Human Rights Watch (HRW), SHRC, RSF and CPJ also highlighted the regime's attempts at censorship of the Internet during 2005 and 2006. [13b] (p66-88) [14a] (p33) [14d, 14h, 14p] [30a, 30c-30k, 30o, 30q] [31b-31c] HRW's more extensive November 2005 report, 'Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa', related various narratives concerning the harassment and detention of bloggers and other Internet users deemed a threat to the state. [13b] Nevertheless, Internet users were able to successfully circumvent the censorship practices described below:

"In his letter to Human Rights Watch, Ambassador Moustapha outlined the Syrian government's policy on online censorship thus:

'Yes, certain types of Web sites are blocked in Syria by all ISPs: pornography, fanatic religious sites, and extremist zionist [sic] Web sites. Some ISPs have their own policy for blocking Web sites that are not applied by other ISPs (e.g. the Syrian Telecom ISP blocks access to Yahoo! mail and MS mail services, while the SCS ISP does not block access to these services).'

"In practice, the Syrian government censors the Internet extensively under the terms of the Emergency Law, which allows for the censorship of letters, publications, broadcasts, and other forms of communication. One Syrian Internet user called the censorship regime imposed by the STE and the SCS 'hell'." [13b] (p85)

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HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS, ORGANISATIONS AND ACTIVISTS

- 16.01 The US Department of State (USSD) report on Human Rights in Syria – 2005, released on 8 March 2006, records that:

“The constitution permits private associations, but it also grants the government the right to limit their activities. In practice the government restricted freedom of association. Private associations are required to register with authorities, but requests for registration were usually denied, presumably on political grounds. The government usually granted registration to groups not engaged in political or other activities deemed sensitive.” [6b] (Section 2d)

- 16.02 The same report also notes that “The government did not allow domestic human rights groups to exist legally. In the past human rights groups operated legally but ultimately were banned by the government. During the year there were reports of government harassment of domestic human rights activists.” [6b] (Section 2d)

- 16.03 As well as the USSD HR report 2005, Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), the London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC), the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) all reported on a number of cases involving the harassment, detention and conviction, on dubious charges, of civil and human rights activists in Syria. [6b] (Section 2d) [12a-12b, 12h, 12j-12m, 12s, 12w-12z, 12ac, 12ae] [13a-13f, 13h-13i] [14a, 14i, 14o-14r, 14y, 14ad, 14ah] [16f, 16k, 16m, 16p] [30k, 30o-30p] [38u] The authorities also continued to deny such activists – as well as leaders of opposition groups – permission to travel abroad. (USSD HR, 2005; HRW, July 2006) [6b] (Section 2d) [13i]

- 16.04 Two of the most high profile cases – the prolonged detention of Michael Kilo and Anwar al-Bunni, both of whom remained in detention at time of writing – concerned the signing of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration by several hundred Lebanese and Syrians, which called for respect for Lebanese sovereignty. [12s, 12y-12z, 12ae] [14q-14s] [16k, 16m] [30k, 30o-30p] [38u]

“Anwar al-Bunni, Michel Kilo and Mahmoud 'Issa have been subjected to persistent harassment by the Syrian authorities over the years as a result of their work in support of democratic rights. They are three of at least ten Syrian civil society activists arrested by State Security service officers between 14 and 18 May 2006. They were among several hundred Syrian and Lebanese nationals who signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration. Despite Syria's withdrawal of troops from Lebanon in April 2005, following the assassination two months earlier of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, in which senior Syrian and Lebanese intelligence and security service officers were implicated, relations between the two countries remain tense.” (AI, 25 October 2006) [12y]

See also [Section 15 on Freedom of speech and the media](#) and [Section 25 on Freedom of movement](#)

- 16.05 The USSD HR report 2005 also specifically states that:

“In August 2004 the government denied registration to the AOHR [Arab Organisation of Human Rights] and the Syrian Human Rights Organization (also known as SWASIAH, or ‘equal’). The CDF [Committee for the Defense of Democracy, Freedom, and Human Rights] and HRAS [Human Rights Association in Syria] were both denied registration in the past, and both organizations operated without government permission or support. All four organizations continued operation during the year.” [6b] (Section 2b)

16.06 In terms of international NGOs, it records:

“The government last met with international human rights organizations in 1997. As a matter of policy, the government has denied to international human rights groups that it commits human rights abuses. The government has also stated that it responds in writing to all inquiries from NGOs regarding human rights issues, including the cases of individual detainees and prisoners, through an interagency governmental committee attached to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. However, NGOs have reported that they usually heard nothing from the ministry. The government normally responded to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by claiming that the case was still under investigation and the prisoner could therefore not be released, or that the prisoner in question violated national security laws.” [6b] (Section 4)

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FREEDOM OF RELIGION

- 17.01 The International Religious Freedom (IRF) report on Syria, released by the US Department of State (USSD) on 15 September 2006, records that “The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government imposes restrictions on this right. There is no official state religion; however, the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation.” [6d] (p1) Nevertheless, “There is a de facto separation of religion and the state. The Government generally refrains from involvement in strictly religious matters and religious groups tend not to participate in internal political affairs.” [6d] (Section II. Legal/Policy Framework)
- 17.02 The USSD IRF report noted a moderate increase in certain religious freedoms, including the greater use of religious language in public spaces, and state radio’s broadcasting of dawn and afternoon Muslim prayers, in addition to its traditional broadcast of noon prayers. The report records that “In April 2006, President Bashar al-Asad signed a decree permitting the establishment of a Shari’a (Islamic Law) faculty at Aleppo University. In the same month, the Government also announced a decision, the first of its kind, to license three private Islamic banks.” [6d] (Section II. Legal/Policy Framework)

RELIGIOUS GROUPS

- 17.03 Some concerns regarding the treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews and some Islamists remained. (USSD IRF, 2006) [6d] (Section II. Restrictions on Religious Freedom) In terms of societal tensions, “The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups mainly attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation.” (USSD IRF, 2006) [6d] (Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination)
- “In 1964, the Government banned Jehovah’s Witnesses and branded it a ‘politically motivated Zionist organization.’ The Government bans Witnesses from employment in the civil service, receiving religious literature by post, and traveling abroad. They are also prohibited from holding worship services; however, individual members of Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to practice their faith privately.” (USSD IRF, 2006) [6d] (Section II. Restrictions on Religious Freedom)
- 17.04 Anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews existed in Syria, although there had been no reports of harassment against the small Syrian Jewish community itself since early 2005. (USSD IRF, 2006) [6d] (Section II. Restrictions on Religious Freedom & Anti-Semitism)
- “The Government primarily cited tense relations with Israel as the reason for barring Jewish citizens from employment in the civil service, serving in the armed forces, and for exempting them from military service obligations. Jews were the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards noted their religion. They must obtain the permission of the security services before traveling abroad. Jews also faced extra scrutiny from the Government when applying for licenses, deeds, or other government papers.” (USSD IRF, 2006) (Section II. Restrictions on Religious Freedom)
- 17.05 Islamist movements – such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Tahrir Party – were seen as the greatest threat to the regime and as such were closely

monitored, at increased risk of detention – including torture – and prosecution based at least in part on their religious beliefs. (USSD IRF, 2006; SHRC Annual Report, 2006) [6d] (Section II. Restrictions on Religious Freedom) [14a] (p10-12, 16-17) Possibly in part due to the Syrian regime's belief that these Islamist groups were its greatest threat, the arrest and sentencing of Islamists/Salafists continued to be reported by SHRC and IRIN, often with no mention of any actual or suspected political activity on the part of the accused. [14f, 14j, 14m-14n, 14u, 14y-14aa] [16i] [16n]

- 17.06 Over 200 political prisoners – most of whom were Islamists – were released in the last couple of years. Nevertheless, it is believed that “The Government continued to hold an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists as political detainees and prisoners. Their arrests and, in some cases, convictions, were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability.” (USSD IRF, 2006) [6d] (Section II. Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom & Restrictions on Religious Freedom)

See also [Section 14 on Opposition groups and political activists](#)

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ETHNIC GROUPS

- 18.01 The US Department of State's (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) in Syria during 2005 states "The government generally permitted national and ethnic minorities to conduct traditional, religious, and cultural activities; however, the government's attitude toward the Kurdish minority remained a significant exception." [6b] (Section 5)

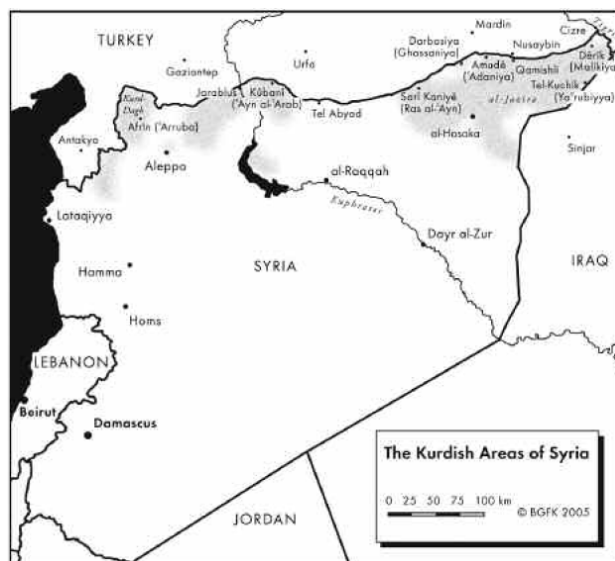
"While the Syrian government deserves credit for decades of assistance to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and now to the growing number of Iraqi refugees present on their territory due to the ongoing crisis in Iraq, it must recognize in a concrete way the rights of hundreds of thousands of individual Kurds within its own borders who have been arbitrarily denied the right to Syrian nationality. The Syrian government needs to repeal all draconian restrictions on the free expression of Kurdish cultural identity and grant citizenship to individuals who lack it." (Refugees International (RI) 'Buried Alive', January 2006) [35a]

KURDS

- 18.02 It is estimated that Kurds made up approximately 8-15 per cent of the 18 million inhabitants of Syria, Chatham House's (CH) January 2006 paper, 'The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered' estimated that Syrian Kurds numbered approximately 1.75 million – and approximately 300,000 of them were stateless. Roughly half the Kurdish population were located in the northeast – in Hassakeh (Hasaka) and Jazeera (Jazira) – and in Afrin, Aleppo, Kubani and Kurd Dagh in the north to northwest. The other half were mostly to be found in the urban centres of Aleppo and Damascus. (USSD HR, 2005; RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [6b] [35a] [37]

Map

- 18.03 The Kurdish areas of Syria taken from Chatham House's January 2006 paper, 'The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered' (original source: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien - Berliner Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Kurdologie e. V.). [37]



- 18.04 The lack of status suffered by these people is, put briefly, due to the aggressive campaign of Arabisation pursued by the Syrian Government in the 1960s and 1970s, specifically the 1962 census that stripped of their citizenship those who were unable to prove their residence in Syria in or before 1945. (USSD HR, 2005; RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [6b] [35a] [37]
- 18.05 Persons that participated in the census but were unable to prove their entitlement to Syrian citizenship (or refused/were unable to pay large bribes to retain it) are known as Ajanib (foreigners) and were issued 'Red Cards', which state that they are not Syrian nationals and are not entitled to travel. Others who did not take part in the census, or who were unable to be registered at birth due to the lack of status of their parent(s), are known as Maktoumeen ('those who are muted') and have no identity document whatsoever. (RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [35a] [37]
- 18.06 The implications of statelessness are far-reaching, affecting not only the Kurds' access to services such as health and education but also their ability to travel abroad, purchase property, and register businesses, cars, even their marriages and births. (RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [35a] [37] RI's January 2006 report 'Buried Alive: Stateless Kurds in Syria' includes a table detailing whether a marriage – and the children of such a union – can be registered:

WIFE	HUSBAND	Can their marriage be legally registered?	Can their children be legally registered?
Maktoumeen	National	NO	YES – under father
Maktoumeen	Ajanib	NO	YES – under father
Maktoumeen	Maktoumeen	NO	NO
Ajanib	National	YES	YES
Ajanib	Ajanib	NO	YES – under father
Ajanib	Maktoumeen	NO	NO
National	National	YES	YES
National	Ajanib	NO	YES – under father
National	Maktoumeen	NO	NO

[35a]

- 18.07 Ajanib and Maktoumeen are unable to access government health care and must pay for all health services. The children of Ajanib can access primary education but find it more difficult to access secondary and higher education whereas Maktoumeen children's education is very restricted with attendance at higher education practically impossible. Stateless Kurds were forced to rely on the goodwill of others to own property or businesses as – unable to register either in their own names – Kurds would ask to use the names of friends or family, leaving them open to exploitation or theft with no legal recourse. (RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [35a] [37]
- 18.08 As non-citizens, Ajanib and Maktoumeen did not have full access to the judicial system, nor were they able to exercise their political rights to vote or hold public office. (RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [35a] [37] CH's paper did note that:

“There have been, and still are, many Kurds in positions of power or influence in Syria and these are often cited by Syrian Arabs as evidence of Kurdish equality and immersion in the state. However, these Kurds tend to be urban and affluent, to speak Arabic rather than *[sic]* Kurmanji and to be reconciled to the ‘Arabness’ of their identity. As such they command little respect among the Kurdish population, especially in the north.” [37]

- 18.09 Unable to acquire travel documents their only options in leaving the country were to use false documents or people smugglers, leaving them permanently exiled and at risk of deportation back to Syria where subsequent prison terms of months or years – during which they may be subjected to ill-treatment or torture – could await them. (USSD HR, 2005; RI ‘Buried Alive’, January 2006; CH ‘A People Discovered’, January 2006) [6b] (Section 5) [35a] [37]

- 18.10 In terms of abuse or harassment by the Syrian authorities, the Kurds in Syria – both nationals and stateless, but particularly those involved in the struggle for their people’s political and civil rights – have been under increasing pressure since the Qamishli riot of March 2004. (USSD HR, 2005; RI ‘Buried Alive’, January 2006; CH ‘A People Discovered’, January 2006) [6b] (Section 5) [35a] [37] CH’s paper briefly recounted the events at a football match in Qamishli, which escalated into wider demonstrations and violent disturbances concerning the decades-old maltreatment of the Kurdish people in Syria:

“The trouble began at a football match in Qamishli in the Jazira on 12 March [2004] when hostilities between Kurdish and Arab supporters ended with the security forces shooting dead at least seven Kurds. This was followed by further shootings at their funerals. Thousands demonstrated in Qamishli and in Kurdish areas across Syria – the Jazira, Afrin, Aleppo and Damascus. Some protests turned into riots, government and private property was ransacked and burned and a police station was attacked in Amude. Depictions of Hafez al-Asad were vandalized, the Syrian flag was burned and banners daringly proclaimed ‘Free Kurdistan’ and ‘Intifada until the occupation ends’. *Ajanib* appear to have been especially enthusiastic participants. The Syrian authorities reacted with customary brutality, beating, arresting and imprisoning large numbers of Kurds. The army moved into Kurdish regions in force, tanks and helicopters appeared in Qamishli and a week later calm was restored. It is not known how many Kurds died at the hands of the military and later in custody, but estimates reach around 40 plus over 100 injured. More than 2,000 Kurds were jailed. Five Syrian Arabs also died, including one policeman.” [37]

- 18.11 Despite the March 2005 release of some 312 Kurds arrested during March 2004’s ‘uprising’, Kurdish dissent has continually flared up over the past two years. In March and May-June 2005 the arrests of approximately 40 and 60 Kurds were made at the Kurdish New Year celebrations (Newroz) and the funeral of Kurdish Sheikh Ma’shuq Khaznawi respectively. Sheikh Khaznawi – a respected religious figure – disappeared in Damascus, and was tortured and killed; although the government said ‘criminal elements’ were responsible for his murder, there were rumours concerning official involvement in his death. (USSD HR, 2005; RI ‘Buried Alive’, January 2006; CH ‘A People Discovered’, January 2006) [6b] (Section 5) [35a] [37]

- 18.12 The Syrian Government appeared to be making guarded attempts at conciliation with its large Kurdish minority, with President Bashar al-Assad

admitting the existence of the Kurds in Syria when making an unprecedented visit to Jazeera, and the March 2005 Presidential pardon that led to the aforementioned prisoner releases. (RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [35a] [37] On the central issue of citizenship for the Ajanib and Maktoomeen, in recent years members of the Government have spoken of finding a solution, particularly since the Qamishli riots; most recently the President himself in his November 2005 address stated that he wished to solve the problem of nationality. (USSD HR 2005; RI 'Buried Alive', January 2006; CH 'A People Discovered', January 2006) [6b] (Section 5) [35a] [37] But other promises of a resolution to the plight of stateless Kurds have been made before and have failed come to fruition. [35a] [37]

- 18.13 In the last months of 2006 AI, SHRC, IRIN and RSF all reported on the continued abuse of the Kurds at the hands of the Syrian authorities. [12aa-12ab] [14g-14h, 14l, 14v-14w, 14ab, 14ag] [16f] [30k] Most of the harassment, which usually involved arrest and/or detention, appeared inspired by the actual or suspected political or civil activism on the part of those targeted by the security services. [12aa-12ab] [14g-14h, 14l, 14v-14w, 14ab, 14ag] [16f] [30k]

See also [Section 14 on Political affiliation](#) and [Section 16 on Human Rights institutions, organisations and activists](#)

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LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER PERSONS

- 19.01 The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) Legal Survey, which was last updated in July 2000, reports that:

“Article 520 [of the Penal Code of 1949] sanctions (consensual) sodomy with males, females or animals with imprisonment of up to one year’. (Schmitt and Sofer – ‘Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Societies’)

“The Third Pink Book gives a slightly different picture, stating that ‘Section 520 of the Penal Code criminalizes any ‘carnal knowledge against the order of nature’ with a maximum penalty of three years’ imprisonment.” [17]

- 19.02 Little information concerning the situation of gay men in Syria is available, largely due to the legal position limiting their freedom to be open about their sexuality, and the information that is available is mostly anecdotal. (GlobalGayz.com, June 2005 & June 2006; Syria TV, August 2005; DanielChamberlin.com, January 2006; AlBawaba.com, August 2003; GME.com, August 2003) [19a-19b] [20] [21] [22] [23] An August 2003 article by reporters of the website AlBawaba.com records the growth in coverage of the issue of homosexuality in the print and – particularly – electronic media. [22] After outlining many of the various websites devoted to Gay Arabs, the article cautions:

“With all that’s been said regarding the rising openness throughout the Arab gay community and the increase in media outlets homosexuals can find comfort in, it is essential to remember that gays living in the Middle East still widely suffer from persecution. Gays and lesbians living in the Arab world are fighting against their own governments’ persecution, according to various human rights groups.” [22] (p3)

- 19.03 The same article also republished part of a letter written by a Syrian gay man, originally featured on GayMiddleEast.com (GME.com), in which he briefly described the life of gays in Syria, stating that – although he believed gays needed protection, citing the risk of detention attached to being too obviously ‘gay’ in public – gays had become more open, and were able to meet people in the street. [22] (p2) However, one week after AlBawada.com had published its article GME.com expressed its concern for the welfare of its Syrian readership as a result of the article, stating that the Syrian author of the letter quoted by AlBawada.com had contacted GME.com requesting that they remove his letter from the site. [23]
- 19.04 From some perspectives, the freedom of gay men to meet others – although apparently only for casual sexual encounters – particularly in known cruising areas and bath houses, does not appear too restricted provided they are otherwise discreet. (DanielChamberlin.com, January 2006; AlBawaba.com, August 2003; GME.com, August 2003) [21] [22] [23] Nevertheless, more recent articles published on GlobalGayz.com in June 2005 and June 2006 still strike a note of alarm concerning the need to hide homosexuality from the authorities, and society at large. [19a-19b] The August 2005 comments of the Syrian Deputy Minister of Religious Endowments, Muhammad Abd al-Satter al-Sayyid on the subject of AIDS are indicative of the authorities’ official view of gay men:

“All the diseases that have to do with sexual organs, mainly AIDS, syphilis, gonorrhea, and so on... When these diseases appeared, they killed millions. More people were killed by these diseases than by wars. The only reason for this is the straying from the divine way regarding fornication, and when I say fornication – ‘Do not even approach abomination’ – this means fornication, homosexuality, and all the sexual deviation it entails. ...

“If only we had stoned everyone who had committed this abomination – wouldn't it have been better than letting these diseases infect others, spreading to millions around the world?” [20]

- 19.05 Lesbianism is only briefly acknowledged in these articles, almost certainly – at least in part – due to the greater restrictions faced by women just by virtue of their gender, regardless of their sexuality. (GlobalGayz.com, June 2005 & June 2006; Syria TV, August 2005; DanielChamberlin.com, January 2006; AlBawaba.com, August 2003; GME.com, August 2003) [19a-19b] [20] [21] [22] [23]

See also [Section 21 on Women](#)

- 19.06 One news article, published in March 2004 by the *Middle East Times* (*METimes*) online, reported on a Syrian man who underwent a sex change after receiving the assurance of an Iraqi Imam that – as tests showed that his original gender was female – “... having a sex change did not contradict the teachings of Islam, which aim to serve the interests of humanity and ensure the happiness of people ...”. [18] From the content of the article, it appeared that the operation did not take place in Syria and it was not clear whether the Syrian transsexual returned to Syria, although it did state that only her mother had accepted her transformation whilst the rest of her family had rejected her. [18]

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DISABILITY

- 20.01 A 2001 report by the World Health Organization (WHO) concerning the equalisation of opportunities for persons with disabilities records that:

“The medical care system in Syria provides services for persons with disabilities; there is no tendency to treat certain groups of persons with disabilities outside the general medical care services. The medical care system includes programs for treatment of impairment. It includes also programs for rehabilitation techniques and necessary referrals. The organisations of persons with disabilities are *sometimes* involved in the planning and evaluation of the above mentioned programs.” [24a] (p59)

- 20.02 The report continues by noting the existence of a national rehabilitation programme for persons with disabilities, although only 6-20 per cent of such persons actually received rehabilitation including persons with mobility and hearing impairments, and those with severe sight impairment. [24a] (p59) Throughout the four areas covered (medical care, rehabilitation, support services and personnel training), WHO recorded that Syrian organisations of persons with disabilities – and persons with disabilities themselves – were either only partially consulted or not consulted at all about the development or planning of the relevant programmes. [24a] (p59-60)

- 20.03 The Landmine Monitor report of 2006, produced by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), recorded the provision of services for disabled persons – including those injured by landmines and unexploded ordinance – which included the assistance provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to disabled Palestinians. [25a] The previous year’s version of the same report notes that:

“Other organizations assisting persons with disabilities, including mine survivors, in the mine-affected areas include the Syrian Society for the Physically Disabled (SSPD) and Syrian Society for the Blind. SSPD distributes up to 500 wheelchairs and assists more than 300 people with medical apparatus and artificial limbs each year. SSPD also organizes social and recreational activities, and educational and vocational training throughout the country, with funding from local donors and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor.

“In the Qunaitra area, the ministry reportedly runs a program called Support for Victims of Landmines and Disabled People, which provides referrals to medical and rehabilitation services, vocational training and a credit scheme.” [25b]

- 20.04 The US Department of State (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) 2005, released on 8 March 2006, states:

“The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities and seeks to integrate them into the public sector work force; however, implementation remained inconsistent. In December 2004 the government implemented regulations reserving 4 percent of government and public sector jobs for persons with disabilities. There are no laws that mandate access to public buildings for persons with disabilities.” [6b] (Section 5)

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WOMEN

- 21.01 The US Department of State (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) 2005, released on 8 March 2006, records that “The Syrian Agency for Family Affairs reports directly to the prime minister and reviews the legal and social status of women and children, and coordinates with NGOs that provide services to women and children.” [6b] (Section 5)

“UNICEF has been active in Syria for more than 30 years, since 1971, providing assistance and advice to government and non-governmental organisations in designing and implementing plans for children and women.

“On 11 April 2002 the Master Plan of Operation (MPO) for the 2002-2006 programme cycle was signed by Dr Taufik Ismael, head of the State Planning Commission, representing the Syrian Government and Mr Mohamad Bendriss Alami on behalf of UNICEF.

“The Country Programme is the outcome of a participatory process on different levels. The Country Programme consists of three major components, all of which focus on ensuring that the rights of children and women are upheld.” (UNICEF Country Strategy) [53]

LEGAL RIGHTS

- 21.02 A UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) research paper – ‘Women and the People’s Assembly in the Syrian Arab Republic’ – published in March 2006 notes that:

“Divorce is a husband right, not a wife’s one; she does not have the right to take her share of family properties that she has contributed to, in case of separation or husband death; the man has the right to get married to more than one woman; women do not have the right of custody over themselves or their children; females inherit half share compared with males and in the majority of the rural and urban areas women do not even inherit that half due to the traditions’ influence and this forms a big challenge in front of women freedom of movement and activity.” [56] (p40)

- 21.03 The USSD HR report 2005 concurs:

“... the government has not changed personal status, retirement, or social security laws that discriminate against women. In addition, some secular laws discriminate against women. For example, under criminal law, if a man and woman separately commit the same criminal act of adultery, the woman’s punishment is double that of the man’s.

“Christians, Muslims, and other religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws on personal status issues of marriage and divorce. For Muslims, personal status law is based on the government’s interpretation and application of Shari’a. This application of laws discriminated against Muslim women.” [6b] (Section 5)

POLITICAL RIGHTS

- 21.04 UNIFEM's March 2006 research paper notes that "The General Union of Women, despite being the only recognized organization in Syria that represents women who constitute more than 49% of the population, is not represented in the NPF." [56] (p4) The paper identified three key factors preventing the full participation of women in politics; patriarchal domination and the supremacy of the clan, tribe or sect; undeveloped electoral publicity; the National Progressive Front's pre-eminence; and the hindrance of the Association's Law. [56] (p39)
- 21.05 Women held 30 out of 250 seats in the People's Assembly, equalling 12 per cent, which ranked Syria joint 85th in the world in terms of the representation of women in parliament. (IPU, 31 October 2006) [57]

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

- 21.06 The USSD HR report 2005 records that "The constitution provides for equality between men and women and equal pay for equal work. Moreover, the government sought to overcome traditional discriminatory attitudes toward women and encouraged women's education by ensuring equal access to educational institutions, including universities." [6b] (Section 5)
- 21.07 The Initial report of States Parties – Syria – to the UN Committee on the Elimination of the Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), dated 29 August 2005, records:
- "Following Syria's ratification of the Convention, efforts were made by governmental, non-governmental and grass-roots organizations to disseminate, promote and provide training in the Convention in the Arabic language (the country's official language). ...
- "The intended aim was to spread ideas and to work to develop the dominant mindset, eliminate preconceptions, change attitudes and alter patterns of conduct concerning such delicate issues as gender, upbringing, reproductive health, women's rights and children's rights." [55] (p23)
- 21.08 On the subject of divorce, the USSD HR report 2005 notes that:
- "Husbands and wives can claim adultery as grounds for divorce; however, criminal law discriminates against women in this regard. A man can only be accused of adultery if his actions occur in the home which he shares with his wife; a woman can be accused of adultery regardless of venue. Also, the court accepts any evidence a man presents when claiming adultery; if a woman attempts to file for divorce based on adultery, her husband must admit to the crime or there must be a third witness to the act. There were no reported cases where a woman successfully filed for divorce based on adultery.
- "A divorced woman might not be entitled to alimony in some cases, particularly if she gave up her right to it in order to persuade her husband to agree to the divorce.
- "Regardless of divorce or other circumstances, the law provides that a child is entitled to financial support of a minimum of \$20 (1 thousand Syrian pounds) per year.

“In addition, under the Personal Status Law modified in October 2003, a divorced mother loses the right to physical custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13 and of her daughters at age 15. Guardianship, or control over exercise of the legal rights of the children, always remains with the paternal side of the family.” [6b] (Section 5)

- 21.09 On travel the same report records “A husband may request that his wife’s travel abroad be prohibited. While official statistics are not available, foreign embassies reported a number of such incidents during the year.” [6b] (Section 5)

Violence Against Women

- 21.10 The USSD HR report 2005 notes that:

“Violence against women occurred, but there were no reliable statistics regarding the prevalence of domestic violence or sexual assault. The vast majority of cases were likely unreported, and victims generally were reluctant to seek assistance outside the family. In some cases observers reported that the abused women tried to file a police report, but the police did not respond aggressively, if at all, to their claims. Women reported incidents at police stations of sexual harassment, verbal abuse, hair pulling, and slapping by police officers when attempting to file police reports, particularly at the Criminal Security branch at Bab Musallah in Damascus. Battered women have the legal right to seek redress in court, but few did so because of the social stigma attached to such action. The Syrian Women’s Federation offered counseling services to battered wives to remedy individual family problems. The Syrian Family Planning Association also provided counseling in an effort to address the problem. Some private groups, including the Family Planning Association, organized seminars on violence against women. There were a few private, nonofficial, specifically designated shelters or safe havens for battered women who fled or tried to flee from their husbands. In December 2004 representatives of all government agencies were required to attend a gender issues training seminar with representatives of domestic women’s NGOs.” [6b] (Section 5)

- 21.11 A Violence Against Women Study of 2005, compiled by UNIFEM found that – from the sample of 1,891 families from urban and rural areas of the 14 Syrian governorates – the vast majority of the 21.8 percent of women who had been assaulted, physically or sexually, stated that a male family member had been responsible. [56b]

Rape

- 21.12 “The Syrian Penal Code covers violence against women, including the offence of rape. Article 489 of the Code provides that:

1. Anyone who uses violence or threat to force a person other than his spouse to engage in sexual intercourse shall be punished with a minimum of five years of hard labour.
2. The penalty shall be not less than 21 years if the victim is under 15 years of age.” (UN CEDAW, 29 August 2005) [55] (p37)

- 21.13 The USSD HR report 2005 records that:

“Rape is a felony; however, there are no laws against spousal rape. According to the law, ‘the punishment for a man who rapes a woman (other than his wife) is at least 15 years in prison.’ However, if the individual who commits the crime agrees to marry the victim, he faces no punishment. The victim’s family sometimes agrees to this arrangement to avoid the social scandal and stigma attached to rape. If the victim is too young for marriage, the rapist receives a longer prison sentence. No statistics were kept on spousal rape because it is not a crime under the law.” [6b] (Section 5)

‘Honour’ crimes

- 21.14 The same report states that “The law specifically provides for reduced sentences in ‘honor’ crimes, which are violent assaults by a male against a female, usually a family member, with intent to kill for alleged sexual misconduct. No official statistics were kept on honor crimes.” [6b] (Section 5) CEDAW’s August 2005 report states that the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs “... formed a committee of legal experts to study the Personal Status Act and draft a family law. Legal experts similarly studied the articles of the Penal Code relating to so-called ‘honour crimes’ and a draft for their amendment has been proposed.” [55] (p105)

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CHILDREN

BASIC INFORMATION

- 22.01 The US Department of State (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) 2005, released on 8 March 2006, records that “The law emphasizes the need to protect children, and the government organized seminars on child welfare. During the year some of these seminars were organized in cooperation with the local UNICEF [UN Children’s Fund] office.” [6b] (Section 5)

“UNICEF has been active in Syria for more than 30 years, since 1971, providing assistance and advice to government and non-governmental organisations in designing and implementing plans for children and women.

“On 11 April 2002 the Master Plan of Operation (MPO) for the 2002-2006 programme cycle was signed by Dr Taufik Ismael, head of the State Planning Commission, representing the Syrian Government and Mr Mohamad Bendriss Alami on behalf of UNICEF.

“The Country Programme is the outcome of a participatory process on different levels. The Country Programme consists of three major components, all of which focus on ensuring that the rights of children and women are upheld.” (UNICEF Country Strategy) [53]

- 22.02 On marriage, the USSD HR report 2005 notes:

“The legal age for marriage is 18 for males and 17 for females. However, a male 15 or older and a female 13 or older may be married if both are deemed by a judge to be willing parties to the marriage and ‘physically mature’ to have children. In the event of a marriage under the legal age limit, there must be consent by the father or grandfather to the marriage. While underage marriage has declined considerably in the past decades, it was still common in the country. It occurred in all communities, but tended to be more prevalent in rural and lesser-developed regions. There were no statistics available on the rates of marriage in the country according to age.” [6b] (Section 5)

- 22.03 In terms of travelling abroad, the Initial report of States Parties – Syria – to the UN Committee on the Elimination of the Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), dated 29 August 2005, states that:

“All children have their own passport with the consent of their guardian (father – paternal grandfather – paternal uncle over 18 years of age – cadi), who must also give his consent for the child to travel outside the country. The requirement for consent is not applicable to a Syrian man except where the mother has custody of her children following the couple’s separation, in which case she must consent to her children travelling with the father.” [55] (p46)

- 22.04 “The law provides for severe penalties for those found guilty of the most serious abuses against children. Although there were cases of child abuse, there was no societal pattern of abuse against children.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 5) “Syria has no laws on child prostitution. Any sexual assault of children, however, is punishable as a criminal offence.” (CEDAW, August 2005) [55] (p37) “Child prostitution and trafficking in children were rare; incidents that arose mainly involved destitute orphans.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 5)

EDUCATION

22.05 CEDAW's report on Syria of August 2005 records that:

"In regard to education, the conditions for enrolment in any kind of basic, general secondary or vocational school, as contained in the directives on registration and admission to schools and classes, do not discriminate on the basis of gender. After the primary education stage, both male and female students have the opportunity to choose between general and vocational education, depending on their averages." [55] (p12)

22.06 The USSD HR report 2005 concurs, stating:

"The government provided free, public education to citizen children from primary school through university. Education is compulsory for all children, male and female, between the ages of 6 and 12. According to a 2005 joint study by the UNDP and the Syrian State Planning Commission, 49.6 percent of students through the secondary level were female. Nevertheless, societal pressure for early marriage and childbearing interfered with girls' educational progress, particularly in rural areas where the dropout rates for female students remained high." [6b] (Section 5)

22.07 The report continues "Palestinians and other noncitizens can send their children to school. Stateless Kurds can also send their children to school but because they do not have any identification, their children cannot attend state universities." [6b] (Section 5) However, two January 2006 reports by Refugees International (RI) and Chatham House (CH) asserted that access to education for stateless Kurds was difficult, especially past primary level. [35a] [37]

See also [Section 18 on Kurds](#) and [Section 27 on Foreign refugees](#)

HEALTH ISSUES

22.08 The USSD HR report 2005 states that "The government provides free medical care for citizen children until the age of 18." It also noted that there was no legal discrimination between boys and girls in access to health care. [6b] (Section 5) It should be noted that RI and CH both reported in January 2006 that stateless Kurds – as non-citizens – were unable to access government health care and had to pay for all health services whereas Palestinian refugees were able to access Syrian hospital care via referrals by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). [4a] [35a] [37]

See also [Section 18 on Kurds](#) and [Section 27 on Foreign refugees](#)

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TRAFFICKING

- 23.01 The US Department of State (USSD) report on Trafficking in Persons (TP), released on 5 June 2006, states that "Syria is a destination country for women from South and Southeast Asia and Africa for domestic servitude and from Eastern Europe and Iraq for sexual exploitation." [6e] (Country Narratives: Syria) The USSD report on Human Rights in Syria 2005 notes that "Child prostitution and trafficking in children were rare; incidents that arose mainly involved destitute orphans." [6b] (Section 5)
- 23.02 The former were often subjected to exploitation, involuntary servitude, which included long hours, withholding of wages and passports and restrictions on movement. They may also face physical and sexual abuse. Cabaret dancers recruited from eastern European countries had their freedom of movement restricted, their employers keeping their passports and insisting on them seeking permission to leave the premises. "In addition, of the 450,000 Iraqis in Syria, some of the women and children are reportedly forced into sexual exploitation." (USSD TP, 5 June 2006) [6e] (Country Narratives: Syria) Articles published by the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks and *The Guardian (UK)* in October 2006 that related the experiences of individual Iraqi women. [16j] [62a]

"Syria is increasingly becoming a popular destination for traffickers, according to humanitarian agencies.

"A report released in May by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), the UN's Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) spoke of 'organised networks dealing with the sex trade' in Syria. It made a correlation between the deteriorating conditions of Iraqi citizens and an increase in prostitution and trafficking of Iraqi sex workers.

"'It is not possible to say how big the trafficking problem from Iraq to Syria is but we know it does exist,' said Ann Maymann, a protection officer with UNHCR in Damascus. 'It is something that has been kept quiet because people are afraid to talk about it.'" [16j]

See also [Section 21 on Women](#), [Section 22 on Children](#) and [Section 27 on Foreign refugees: Iraqis](#)

PROSECUTION, PROTECTION AND PREVENTION

- 23.03 Although a committee responsible for drafting an anti-trafficking law was formed in September 2005 it had not met by the end of 2005; consequently, there was no progress on the promulgation of a new law of regulations and Syria remained without an anti-trafficking policy, programmes or co-ordinator. There were no known prosecutions of trafficking offences between June 2005 and June 2006 and, despite being illegal, manpower agencies continued to operate unhindered: (USSD TP, 5 June 2006) [6e] (Country Narratives: Syria)

"During the year, the Government of Syria took insignificant steps to improve protection of trafficking victims. Syria failed to financially support or make available protection services such as a shelter or legal aid to trafficking victims. Minors caught in sexual exploitation are reportedly housed in juvenile detention facilities. ...

“Syria took minimal steps in preventing trafficking over the year. Syria continued to monitor its borders closely for signs of smuggling and trafficking, though it did not detect one case of trafficking over the last year.” (USSD TP, 5 June 2006) [6e] (Country Narratives: Syria)

23.04 IRIN's October 2006 article records:

“Last September, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) co-hosted a workshop with the Ministry of Interior to raise awareness on counter-trafficking.

“Maria Rumman, IOM chief of mission in Damascus, said the organisation was assisting a Syrian government committee established to draft a counter-trafficking law, and was waiting for international donor funds for a proposed shelter to assist victims of trafficking. Without such a facility, she said, surveying the number of people trafficked into Syria was impossible.

“‘The government agrees there is a need for new legislation and for a shelter,’ said Rumman. ‘But we have not received any reply from donors, including the US, for a year. The minute we have any donor commitment we will begin.’” [16j]

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MEDICAL ISSUES

24.01 The World Health Organization (WHO) Euro-Mediterranean Regional Office's (EMRO) Country Profile on Syria listed a number of key statistical indicators from 2004-2005, including demographic, socio-economic, health expenditure and health status. Government and private (out-of-pocket) health expenditure was almost 50-50, with the government allocating 6.3 per cent of its total general expenditure on health. Life expectancy was between 71 and 73 years, and the under-five morbidity rate was 17.1 per 1,000 live births. [24c]

OVERVIEW OF AVAILABILITY OF MEDICAL TREATMENT

24.02 The percentage of the population with access to local health services was reported as 100 per cent in urban areas, and 90 per cent in rural areas. (WHO EMRO Country Profile, 2004-2005) [24c]

Physicians per 10,000 population	14.4	2004
Dentists per 10,000 population	8.5	2004
Pharmacists per 10,000 population	7.1	2004
Nursing and midwifery personnel per 10,000 population	19.0	2004
Hospital beds per 10000 population	12.8	2004

[24c]

See also [Section 18 on Ethnic groups](#) and [Section 27 on Foreign refugees](#)

HIV/AIDS – ANTI-RETROVIRAL TREATMENT

24.03 The 2006 report of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) covering the Global AIDS Epidemic recorded that, of an estimated population of 19,043,000, less than 0.2 per cent of adults aged 15 to 49 were

HIV positive and, of that number, nine per cent of sufferers were receiving anti-retroviral treatment. [42a] (Annex 1: Country Profiles) The UNAIDS country page on Syria states:

“Around 250,000 HIV tests are performed annually in the country, a large part of these mandatory. In 1999, 196,341 blood transfusion units were tested as well as 44,231 Syrians travelers seeking job opportunities abroad (mainly in the Arab Gulf countries.) Blood donation is mandatory and collected at least once in a lifetime from adults applying for driving licenses or entering public service, universities and the military. All foreigners applying for marriage licenses, residency or work are tested for HIV. Results of HIV testing of the various high and low risk groups are consistently below 0.5%. In results reported in 2001, only 12 (0.07%) of 16,401 high-risk individuals, including IDUs [intravenous drug users], MSM [men who have sex with men] and bar girls, were positive; of 323,087 blood donors, three (<0.01%) were positive. In a 2001 study on STI [sexually transmitted infections] prevalence among 800 pregnant women and 200 women attending gynecology services in urban and rural areas of Damascus, there was no HIV infection.” [42b]

MENTAL HEALTH

- 24.04 The World Health Organization's (WHO) 2005 Mental Health Atlas notes that “There is a paucity of epidemiological data on mental illnesses in Syrian Arab Republic in internationally accessible literature.” [24b] A mental health policy and a national mental health programme were both formulated in 2001; also present was mental health legislation concerning the admission and discharge of patients in Government psychiatric hospitals. The treatment of mental health problems was available at primary health care level. [24b] The Atlas records the following statistics:

Total psychiatric beds per 10,000 population	0.8
Psychiatric beds in mental hospitals per 10,000 population	0.78
Psychiatric beds in general hospitals per 10,000 population	0.02
Psychiatric beds in other settings per 10,000 population	0
Number of psychiatrists per 100,000 population	0.5
Number of neurosurgeons per 100,000 population	0.6
Number of psychiatric nurses per 100,000 population	0.5
Number of neurologists per 100,000 population	0.9
Number of psychologists per 100,000 population	0
Number of social workers per 100,000 population	0

[24b]

- 24.05 The Atlas also noted that beds had been set aside for female patients, forensic beds were available, and that there were specific programmes or services available for refugees, the elderly, the mentally challenged and delinquents. [24b] The following therapeutic drugs were generally available at primary health care level in Syria:

- Carbamazepine,
- Phenobarbital,
- Phenyton sodium,
- Sodium valproate,
- Amitriptyline,
- Chlorpromazine,

- Diazepam,
- Fluphenazine,
- Haloperidol,
- Carbidopa,
- Levodopa. [24b]

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FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

- 25.01 The US Department of State (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) in Syria, released on 8 March 2006, recorded that this freedom was enshrined in the constitution but curbed by potential judicial decisions or laws; moreover, it was not fully respected in practice. Internal movement was partially limited by security checkpoints, which were often found in military or restricted areas but were less common on main roads or in populated areas. "The security services used checkpoints to conduct warrantless searches for smuggled goods, weapons, narcotics, and subversive literature." [6b] (Section 2d)
- 25.02 The report also recorded that travel to Israel was forbidden, and passage to the Golan Heights was restricted for all Syrian citizens. Adult women (over the age of 18) were permitted to travel abroad but their husband or father could apply to the Ministry of Interior to prohibit her departure from the country. Due to their lack of status – and therefore identity and travel documentation – the estimated 300,000 stateless Kurds in Syria were unable to legally travel out of the country and, if they were to leave illegally, were unable to re-enter Syria. [6b] (Section 2d)
- 25.03 Critics of the Government – including leading opposition figures, human rights defenders and other individuals – were often prevented from travelling abroad. (USSD HR, 2005, HRW, 12 July 2006) [6b] (Section 2d) [13i] "At least 10 human rights defenders were forbidden from travelling outside the country." (AI Annual Report, 2006) [12a] The USSD HR report 2005 also states that "The law provides for the prosecution of any person attempting to seek refuge in another country or travel abroad illegally." [6b] (Section 2d)

See also [Section 14 on Political affiliation](#), [Section 16 on Human Rights institutions, organisations and activists](#), [Section 18 on Kurds](#) and [Section 21 on Women](#)

DEPARTURE AND RETURN

- 25.04 Amnesty International (AI) and the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) both reported on the arrest of Murad al-Khaznawi – son of the late Ma'shooq al-Khaznawi - on the Damascus-Amman highway. [12aa] [14w] Sheikh Ma'shooq al-Khaznawi, a prominent Kurdish Imam, was abducted and killed in May 2005 by unknown assailants. [12aa] [14w]

"In October 2006, a warrant for the arrest of [Murad's brother] Murshid al-Khiznawi was issued by the Syrian authorities, leading him to flee to Jordan. Murshid al-Khiznawi had reportedly accused Maher al-Assad, the head of Syria's Presidential Guard and the brother of the Syrian President, of involvement in the assassination of his father. Murad al-Khiznawi was arrested while attempting to join him." (AI November 2006) [12aa]

- 25.05 A few days later Murad al-Khaznawi was reported to have been released from detention. (AI November 2006; SHRC November 2006) [12ab] [14ab] The same SHRC press release also reported on the arrest of two other Kurdish citizens, although it was not clear whether the arrests were believed to be linked. The press release notes that “It was known that they had been detained for three months earlier, after their return from a visit to the Iraqi province of Kurdistan.” [14w]

See also [Section 18 on Ethnic groups: Kurds](#)

- 25.06 Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a November 2006 report on ‘Diplomatic Assurances’:

“Diplomatic assurances take a variety of forms. Some are simply oral promises. Others are written documents, in some cases signed by officials from both governments. The content of the assurances also varies, and assurances against torture are sometimes packaged with other promises, such as for a fair trial. Some assurances do no more than reiterate that the receiving government will respect its domestic law or its obligations under international human rights law. Some diplomatic assurances include arrangements for post-return monitoring.” [13k] (p1)

- 25.07 HRW recounted the case of Maher Arar, a dual Canadian-Syrian citizen who was transferred by the United States authorities to Syria in October 2002 and was released a year later. Arar alleged that he had been tortured during his time in Syrian custody and, “In September 2006, the [Canadian] Commission of Inquiry itself concluded that Arar’s torture in Syria is ‘a concrete example’ that diplomatic assurances from totalitarian regimes have ‘no value’ and do not provide a safeguard against torture.” [13k] (p4) Whilst SHRC’s annual report on the period June 2005-May 2006, records:

“A number of detainees who had returned from exile or were forced to return from Iraq in 2003, [were] subject to being tried under this law [49/1980], most prominent amongst them is Mohammed Osama Sayes who was deported by [the] British authorities having refused him the right to political asylum. Sayes is presently held in Sednaya prison and awaits to stand before the SSSC, knowing full well the fate that awaits him.” [14a] (p17)

- 25.08 In October 2006 Amnesty International records the release of Fateh Jamoos (Jamus):

“Fateh Jamus is a human rights defender who was arrested on 1 May 2006 by officers of Syrian State Security when he arrived at Damascus airport after a trip to Europe, during which he addressed an Amnesty International conference in Sweden on human rights and asylum issues. He also met the Swedish Parliamentary Human Rights Group and appeared while in the UK on a radio programme promoting Arab-Kurdish dialogue and peaceful reform in Syria.” (AI, 17 October 2006) [12w]

See also [Section 16 on Human Rights institutions, organisations and activists](#)

- 25.09 HRC also reported on the arrest and detention of Syrian citizens and Palestinians habitually resident in the country on their return to Syria from the United Arab Emirates and Libya in November 2006. [14t] [14ac] “The four [returned from Libya], alongside a group of Palestinians living in Lebanon and Jordan have been detained in Libya since 1990; accused of being members of

a Sufi sect. the Libyan court had issued life sentences against them, however, sixteen years later, last Friday, they were released.” [14ac] In December 2006, SHRC reported that the four returnees from Libya had been released from their detention in Syria. [14ak]

- 25.10 Two SHRC reports of December 2006 reported on the continued practice by the Syrian authorities of providing assurances to persons wishing to return to Syria but reneging on these promises once they have returned. [14al, 14an] In one such case – where the returnees were found guilty of membership of the Muslim Brotherhood – SHRC states:

“An informed source in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Movement assured SHRC that the three citizens have never been members of the MB movement.

“It is worth noting that the three citizens had left Syria with their families in the early 1980's when they were children. Following the deterioration of security in Iraq and the targeting of Syrians resident there, they were obliged to return from their exile last year. They had received assurances from the Syrian embassy in Iraq for a safe return. However, they were arrested by the security forces upon arriving in Syria, subjected to interrogation, torture and degrading treatment, and later the SSSC issued unfair sentences against them.” [14al]

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INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE (IDPs)

- 26.01 The International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) April 2005 overview recorded the lack of international attention to the situation of Syrians displaced from the Golan Heights during the Six-Day War of 1967. The Heights were formally annexed by Israel in 1981 – an act that, at time of writing, remained unrecognised internationally – leading to the application of Israeli law in the region, although the United Nations (UN) has continually asserted that the application of Israeli law was “...null and void and without international legal effect.” [29a]

MAP OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

- 26.02 Middle East Insight map of the occupied Golan Heights, dated November-December 1999, extracted from *Le Monde Diplomatique*:

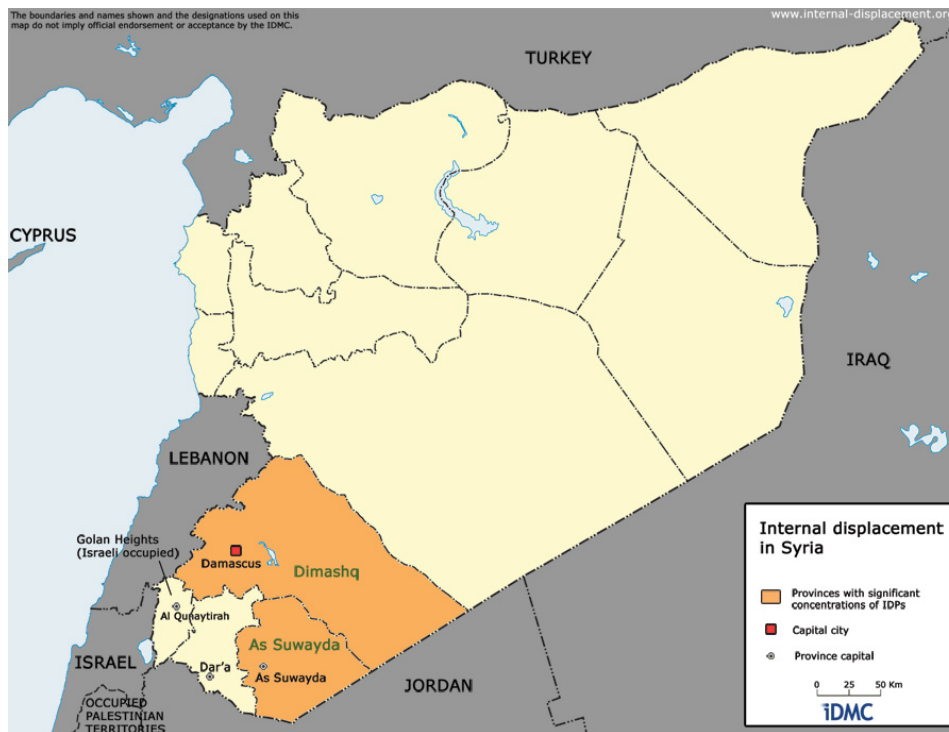


[61]

- 26.03 The true figures, and circumstances, of those displaced were disputed with Syria claiming 130,000 persons were originally displaced by the 1967 conflict and that they and their descendants now numbered over 305,000, whilst Israel claims only 70,000 were displaced in 1967. Most have settled close to the Golan; the majority in Jermana – a suburb of Damascus – and also Sweida in southern Syria. (IDMC, 14 April 2005) [29a] The ability of IDPs to return was inextricably linked to the Syrian and Israeli Governments reaching a consensus, not only on the terms of a peace agreement, but also on long-term issues such as water resources, access to the Sea of Galilee and security concerns; plus the added complications of Israeli settlements in the region and the opacity of the legal situation of those who fled the Heights. (IDMC, 14 April 2005) [29a]

MAP OF IDPs

26.04 Internal displacement in the Syrian Arab Republic, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), November 2005:



[29b]

26.05 The IDMC report highlights the continuing state of emergency – in place since 1963 – and consequential lack of civil and political rights but simply notes that, other than anecdotal evidence, “There is little available information on the living conditions of the internally displaced in Syria.” [29a] Nevertheless, it does recount one known concern for Syria’s displaced:

“An ongoing pressing human rights issue for the displaced is separation from their families. It continues to be almost impossible for most of Golan’s IDPs to exercise their right to respect for family life. Family visits were authorised by the Israeli authorities until 1992. Since then, contact between tens of thousands of Syrians living in Israeli-occupied Golan and their displaced family members is strictly restricted. There have been a few exceptions, including students, religious pilgrims and brides who were able to cross the separation line, under the auspices of the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross].” [29a]

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FOREIGN REFUGEES

- 27.01 Although Syria was not party to the 1951 UN Convention on the Protection of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, the Government did co-operate with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) – responsible for the well-being of Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East – and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and was generally tolerant of refugees. (USSD HR, 2006; RI Bulletin, 15 November 2005 & Country Information, November 2005) [6b] (Section 2d) [35d-35e]
- 27.02 The US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) World Refugee Survey, 2006, reported that both Palestinian and non-Palestinian refugees enjoyed freedom of movement around Syria and were permitted to live anywhere in the country (although not to own property or land); most chose to live in or around the capital, Damascus. [36] Most Palestinian refugees' needs – such as health and education – were met by UNRWA, whereas other refugees were reliant on the Syrian authorities and UNHCR. (USSD HR, 2006; RI Bulletin, 15 November 2005 & Country Information, November 2005; USCRI World Refugee Survey, 2006) [6b] (Section 2d) [35d-35e] [36]
- 27.03 In addition to the estimated 429,000-432,000 Palestinian refugees resident in Syria there were an estimated 450,000 to 500,000 Iraqis present in the country, although only a small fraction of these had approached UNHCR (22,000+ registered in Damascus) and refugees from various other primarily Middle East and African countries, including Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan and Iran. Nearly 5,000 foreigners had been recognised as refugees by the UNHCR during 2005. (USSD HR, 2006; IRIN, 29 October 2006; RI Bulletin, 15 November 2005 & Country Information, November 2005; USCRI World Refugee Survey, 2006) [6b] (Section 2d) [16i] [35d-35e] [36]

IRANIANS

- 27.04 In November 2006, Amnesty International (AI) and the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) both reported on the forcible return during 2006 of at least four Iranians believed to be at risk of imprisonment and torture in Iran. [12ad] [14ae] Further information on these and other cases of forced return stated that they were all believed to be politically active members of the Ahwazi ethnic group:

"Faleh Abdullah Mansuri, the 60-year-old head of the ALO [Ahwazi Liberation Organisation] who holds Dutch citizenship, was also arrested by Syrian security in April while he was visiting an Ahwazi friend in Damascus.

"Syrian authorities confirmed earlier this year that Mansuri, also a UNHCR recognised refugee, was deported to Tehran in May at the request of Iran, just a few weeks before the two countries signed a landmark agreement on military and security cooperation.

"Mansuri is now reportedly in prison in Tehran, facing a sentence of death by hanging imposed on him in 1988 by a military court, apparently in connection with his activities as a member of the ALO.

"Saeed Saki, also a member of the ALO and a UNHCR refugee, had been due to be resettled in Norway when he was arrested and extradited to Tehran. Only high-level intervention from international officials prevented his

execution, and he remains imprisoned in Iran.” (IRIN, 11 December 2006) [16q]

IRAQIS

- 27.05 The US Department of State (USSD) report on Human Rights (HR) in Syria – 2005, released on 8 March 2006, notes that “Since 1991 thousands of Iraqis have applied for refugee status and have received legal and material assistance from the UNHCR in [Syria].” [6b] (Section 2d) This report and a Refugees International (RI) Bulletin of November 2005, recorded that in early 2003 Syria agreed to admit those displaced by the hostilities in Iraq but – whilst this was initially thought of as a temporary situation – it has now become a prolonged issue. [6b] (Section 2d) [35d] “Syria is also the only Arab country with such open borders, permitting refugees from Iraq to enter freely and obtain legal temporary residence for up to six months.” (RI Bulletin, 15 November 2005) [35d]

“A report published recently by the UNHCR and Unicef, the UN children's fund, concluded that an estimated 450,000 Iraqis in Syria ‘are facing aggravated difficulties’ related to their ‘ambiguous legal status and unsustainable income’.

“Privately, officials acknowledge the real number is far higher. The majority of Iraqis live in the suburbs of Damascus in deteriorating conditions without work permits, suffering unemployment.” (*The Guardian (UK)*, 24 October 2006) [62a]

- 27.06 As of 2005, the Government ceased to recognise the UNHCR's temporary protection letter – although it still assisted Iraqis in avoiding deportation, were they to be found in breach of local immigration laws – requiring instead that all Arab nationals apply for residency authorisation, which was only valid for three months and must then be replaced by a residence permit issued by the Department of Immigration and Passports. (HRW ‘The Silent Treatment’, November 2006; RI Bulletins November 2005, December 2006; USCRI World Refugee Survey, 2006) [13j] (p87-90) [35d, 35g] [36]
- 27.07 USCRI's 2006 World Refugee Survey notes “Many Iraqis simply left the country and re-entered to renew their stay, but this was difficult for poorer Iraqis and, as a result, many had to live clandestinely.” [36] Whilst RI's November 2005 Bulletin highlights that “This also poses difficulties as some are refused entry back into Iraq due to fears that returnees may be potential insurgents.” [35d] Women aged 15-40 years who were not accompanied by a male relative experienced an additional difficulty in entering Syria from Iraq as the authorities suspected that they may engage in prostitution, an occupation undertaken as a means to survive or send money home, which put the women at risk of detention and deportation. [35d] [36] In October 2006, IRIN and *The Guardian (UK)* both published articles concerning the trafficking of Iraqi women for sex. [16j] [62a]

See also [Section 21 on Women](#) and [Section 23 on Trafficking](#)

- 27.08 Refugees who were detained by the authorities were accessible by the UNHCR, who were able to determine their application for asylum and – in some cases – secure their release; nevertheless, it was reported that some Iraqis were deported in 2005 and, according to immigration regulations brought in during 2004 and 2005, foreigners expelled from Syria would have to

apply for permission to re-enter from the Minister of the Interior. (USSD HR, 2005; HRW 'The Silent Treatment', November 2006; RI Bulletins November 2005; USCRI World Refugee Survey, 2006) [6b] (Section 2d) [13l] (p87-90) [35d-35e] [36]

- 27.09 The socio-economic conditions of Iraqi refugees in Syria were poor; the process for obtaining a work permit was long and arduous resulting in most refugees working informally in manual labour and other menial occupations. [6b] (Section 2d) [36] Iraqis, as with other non-Palestinian refugees, were unable to access Syrian health care without paying, although "... in 2003 and 2004, Iraqi children in Syria had free access to public hospitals ..."; the UNHCR did provide some services but this was limited and insufficient to meet the refugees' needs, and the agency's aid tended to be concentrated on the most vulnerable cases. (HRW 'The Silent Treatment, November 2006; RI Bulletins November 2005, December 2006; USCRI World Refugee Survey, 2006) [13l] (p87-90) [35d, 35f] [36]
- 27.10 An October 2006 IRIN article noted that schools in and around the capital were very overcrowded a situation that adversely effected Syrian and non-citizen children, such as Iraqi refugees. [16g] USCRI's World Refugee Survey 2006 reports that "Iraqi refugee children had the right to public education but most schools were already at capacity. As well, some Iraqi families had a hard time finding money to pay for school uniforms and books, an obstacle that nationals shared. Such fees led to high dropout rates and often Iraqi refugee families made their children work long hours to earn money." [36] An RI report of December 2006 concurred, stating that "...30% of Iraqi children between 6 and 11 do not attend school in Syria, and some children take jobs to support their families." [35h]

See also [Section 22 on Children: Education](#)

- 27.11 Nevertheless, in late 2006, Refugee International (RI) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that the situation of Palestinians fleeing from Iraq is very different to those of Iraqi citizens. [35f] [38z] The RI article of November 2006 reports that:

"Despite Syria's policy of giving Iraqis safe haven, it has started refusing entry to Palestinians from Iraq. With an estimated 700,000 Iraqi refugees (and 2,000 to 3,000 more arriving every day) adding to the 450,000 Palestinian refugees already living in Syria, the country is quickly reaching its limits. ...

"372 Palestinians from Iraq are now living near the Al Tanf border crossing between Iraq and Syria in a makeshift refugee camp located in the no man's land in between both borders. They have been denied entry by the Syrian government and they refuse to return to Iraq. As a result, they have been living in increasingly desperate circumstances and uncertainty for the past six months." [35f]

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PALESTINIANS

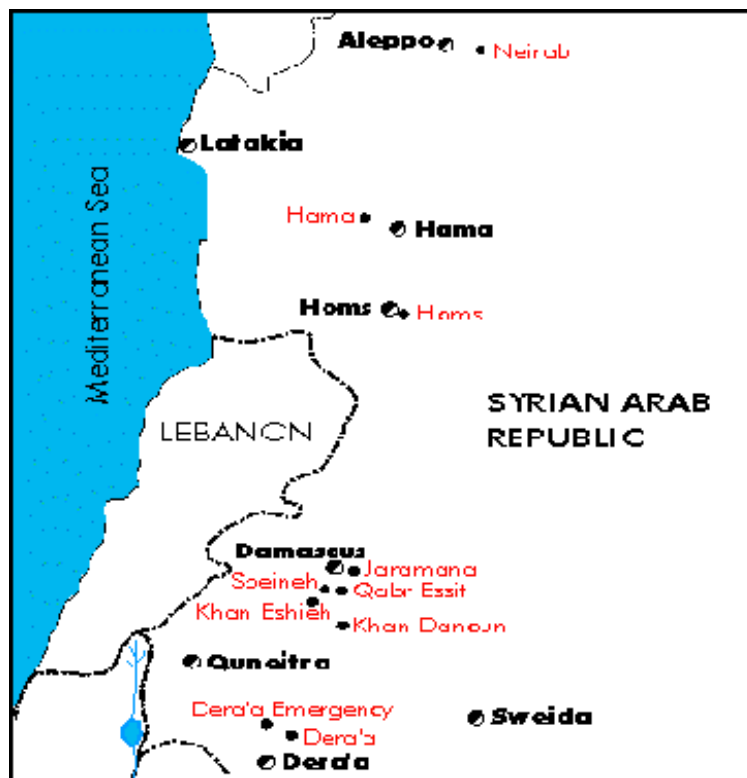
- 27.12 Of the approximately 430,000+ Palestinians estimated to reside in Syria, about 80,000 were not registered with UNRWA and only 115,000-130,000 of those registered with UNRWA lived in the 13 (10 official, 3 'unofficial')

Palestinian refugee camps with most living in and around Damascus. (USSD HR, 2006; RI Country Information, 15 November 2005; USCRI World Refugee Survey, 2006) [6b] (Section 2d) [35e] [36] The official camps' names, dates of creation, and locations are as follows:

- Neirab** – est. 1948 to 1950 – 13 kilometres east of the city of Aleppo, near Aleppo Airport,
- Hama** – est. 1950 – within the town of Hama, 200 kilometres north of Damascus,
- Homs** – est. 1949 – within the town of Homs which is 160 kilometres north of Damascus,
- Jaramana** – est. 1948 – eight kilometres from Damascus on the road to Damascus International Airport,
- Sbeineh** – est. 1948 – situated beside Sbeineh town, 14 kilometres south of Damascus,
- Qabr Essit** – est. 1967 to 1968 – near the town of Zeinab, 15 kilometres from Damascus,
- Khan Eshieh** – est. 1949 – situated beside the village of Khan Eshieh, 27 kilometres south of Damascus,
- Khan Dannoun** – est. 1950 to 1951 – situated near the ruins of Khan Dannoun, 23 kilometres south of Damascus,
- Dera'a** – est. 1950 to 1951 – adjacent to the town of Dera'a, close to the Jordanian border,
- Dera'a Emergency** – est. 1967 – located next to the older camp of Dera'a. (UNRWA Camp Profiles, June 2002) [4b]

Map

27.13 UNRWA map of the ten official Palestinian refugee camps in Syria:



[4b]

- 27.14 Three other 'unofficial' Palestinian refugee camps exist in Syria:

Ein el-Tal (a.k.a. Hindrat) – est. 1962 – 13 kilometres north-east of the city of Aleppo

Lattakia – est. 1955 to 1956 – within the city boundaries of Lattakia on the Mediterranean coast;

Yarmouk – est. 1957 – eight kilometres from the centre of Damascus, within the city boundaries. [4b]

- 27.15 The USSD HR report 2005 and the USCRI World Refugee Survey of 2006 noted that Palestinians resident in Syria were granted many of the rights of ordinary Syrian citizens, excepting naturalisation and the right to vote. Palestinians were able to work freely and those registered with the General Authority of Palestinian Arab Refugees in Syria (GAPAR) – a government agency created to assist the support and protection of Palestinian refugees – could obtain Syrian travel documents, which were valid for six years and renewable at Syrian Embassies and Consulates. This enabled Palestinians to travel in and out of Syria, which they did with little difficulty. [6b] (Section 2d) [36] “Additionally, Palestinians could travel between Syria and Lebanon using state-issued identity cards, and the Arab League also entitled them to travel documents.” (USCRI World Refugee Survey, 2006) [36]

- 27.16 UNRWA published statistical information concerning the number of registered refugees who made use of the agency's health, education, social and other services as of 31 December 2005. [4a] The USCRI World Refugee Survey reported that “Palestinian refugees generally used UNRWA health services, which made referrals to Syrian hospitals as needed.” Also:

“Primary education was mandatory for Palestinian children, who could enter UNRWA elementary schools as well as Syrian elementary schools. Syrian schools and universities also provided them with secondary and higher education. UNRWA ran a vocational college training center for Palestinian refugees in the suburbs of Damascus, offering those who completed secondary school a two-year semi-professional training course and trade courses to those who finished preparatory school.” [36]

See also [Section 27 on Foreign Refugees: Iraqis \(paragraph 27.10\)](#)

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CITIZENSHIP AND NATIONALITY

- 28.01 In March 2001, the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) released the 'Citizenship Laws of the World' report, which states that:
- "BY BIRTH: Birth within the territory of Syria does not automatically confer citizenship.
 - BY DESCENT:
 - Child born of a Syrian father, regardless of the child's country of birth.
 - Child born of a Syrian mother and an unknown or stateless father.
 - BY NATURALIZATION: Naturalized citizenship may only be acquired upon marriage to a Syrian citizen and by living in the country for over 10 years." [26] (p192)
- 28.02 The International Labour Organization (ILO) website contained information concerning equal employment in Syria which included relevant extracts from Decree 276 of 1969 on the right to acquire Syrian nationality that specifically dealt with the subject of children born to unknown or non-Syrian fathers:
- "Article 3(b) states that a Syrian woman can pass the nationality to her child only if she was residing in Syria at the time of delivery, and by that time the father's identity had remained unidentified. If later on, the father is identified and he turns out to be not Syrian, the daughter/son loses *[sic]* the Syrian citizenship.
- "Article 3(c) states that if at the time of birth the parents of a child were without a nationality, and s/he was born on the Syrian territories, the child acquires Syrian nationality. If, however, later on, at least one of the parent's nationalities is identified, and the child is entitled to acquire it, the daughter/son loses *[sic]* Syrian nationality. If after acquiring the Syria *[sic]* nationality this way, one of the parents acquires a nationality, the son/daughter does not risk losing *[sic]* the Syrian identity." [28]
- 28.03 On the subject of dual citizenship and loss of citizenship, the OPM report noted that the former is permitted – although a Syrian citizen who also holds another nationality is always considered a Syrian first – whilst voluntary loss (renunciation) of citizenship, which is also permitted except for persons of military service age, is "... so complicated that it is best not to attempt the process. In effect, according to [the Syrian Information] Office, the process is complicated in order to discourage renunciation of Syrian citizenship. Former citizens of Syria probably maintain an unofficial dual citizenship status and would be subject to Syrian law as citizens should they return to Syria." [26] (p192)
- 28.04 The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 'Travel Advice: Syria', issued on 13 September 2006, records that Syria does not recognise dual citizenship, warning that Australian nationals who also hold Syrian citizenship will be regarded as Syrian by the authorities, although it did also state that dual nationals may be allowed to stay in Syria for up to three months before being expected to perform military service. [27] (Information for Dual Nationals)

See also [Section 9 on Military Service](#) and [Section 18 on Ethnic groups](#)

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EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

- 29.01 According to the constitution, workers have the right to establish unions but – in practice – all unions had to belong to the Ba’ath Party-dominated General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) and, as such, were not independent. Workers were permitted to bargain collectively, although this did not normally happen in the public sector whilst private sector employees had previously suffered government repression for this reason so most workers were dissuaded from making further attempts at such bargaining. (USSD HR, 2005; ICFTU Annual Survey, 2006; ICL Syria – Constitution, 1973) [6b] (Section 6a) [40] [41] The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights 2006 reports that:

“Although the law does not forbid strikes, the right to strike is severely restricted by the threat of punishment and fines. Strikes involving more than 20 workers in certain sectors, and any strike action which takes place on the public highways or in public places or that involves the occupation of premises, are punishable by fines and even prison sentences. Civil servants who disrupt the operation of public services risk losing their civil rights. Forced labour can be imposed on anyone who causes ‘prejudice to the general production plan’.” [40]

- 29.02 Forced or compulsory labour did exist in Syria; it was used punitively for convicted criminals and foreign workers (including trafficked women) were sometimes subject to forced labour and harsh working conditions. Citizen women were known to participate in public life, were represented in most professions – including the armed forces – and, under law, were entitled to pay equal to that of a man performing the same work. “The labor law provides for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace; however, the government tolerated child labor.” (USSD HR, 2005) [6b] (Section 6a)

See also [Section 21 on Women](#), [Section 22 on Children](#) and [Section 23 on Trafficking](#)

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Annex A – Chronology of major events

Information extracted from source [38b] (BBC Timeline: Syria, 21 November 2006).

- 1936** France agreed to Syrian independence in principle but signed an agreement maintaining French military and economic dominance.
- 1940** World War II: Syria came under control of the Axis powers after France fell to German forces.
- 1941** British and Free French troops occupied Syria. General De Gaulle promised to end the French mandate.
- 1945** Protests over the slow pace of French withdrawal.
- 1946** Last French troops left Syria.
- 1947** Michel Aflaq and Salah-al-Din al-Bitar founded the Arab Socialist Baath Party.
- 1949** Army officer Adib al-Shishakli seized power in the third military coup in the space of a year.
- 1952** Al-Shishakli dissolved all political parties.
- 1954** Army officers led a coup against Al-Shishakli, but returned a civilian government to power.
- 1955** Veteran nationalist Shukri al-Quwatli elected president. Syria sought closer ties with Egypt.
- 1958** **27 February:** Syria and Egypt joined the United Arab Republic (UAR). Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser headed the new state. He ordered the dissolution of Syrian political parties, to the dismay of the Baath party, which had campaigned for union.
- 1961** **28 September:** Discontent with Egyptian domination of the UAR prompted a group of Syrian army officers to seize power in Damascus and dissolve the union.
- 1963** **8 March:** Army officers seized power. A Ba'athist cabinet appointed; Amin al-Hafez became president.
- 1966** **February:** Salah Jadid led an internal coup against the civilian Baath leadership, overthrowing Amin al-Hafez, and arresting Salah al-Din al-Bitar and Michel Aflaq. Hafez al-Assad became defence minister.
- 1967** **June:** Israeli forces seized the Golan Heights from Syria and destroyed much of Syria's air force.
- 1970** **November:** Hafez al-Assad overthrew president Nur al-Din al-Atasi and imprisoned Salah Jadid.
- 1971** **March:** Assad elected president for a seven-year term in a plebiscite.
- 1973** Rioting broke out after Assad dropped the constitutional requirement that the president must be a Muslim; accused of heading an atheist regime. The riots were suppressed by the army.
- 1973** **6 October:** Syria and Egypt went to war with Israel but failed to retake the Golan Heights seized during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.
- 1974** **May:** Syria and Israel signed a disengagement agreement.
- 1975** **February:** Assad said he's prepared to make peace with Israel in return for an Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab land.
- 1976** **June:** Syrian army intervened in the Lebanese civil war to ensure that the status quo was maintained, and the Maronites remained in power.
- 1978** In response to the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, Assad set out to gain strategic parity with Israel.
- 1980** After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Muslim groups instigated uprisings and riots in Aleppo, Homs and Hama. Assad began to stress Syria's adherence to Islam.
- 1980** Muslim Brotherhood member tried to assassinate Assad.
- 1980** **September:** Start of Iran-Iraq war. Syria backed Iran, in keeping with the traditional rivalry between Ba'athist leaderships in Iraq and Syria.

- 1981 December:** Israel annexed the Golan Heights.
- 1982 February:** Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama; suppressed by the military.
- 1982 June:** Israel invaded Lebanon and attacked the Syrian army, forcing it to withdraw from several areas. Israel attacked the PLO base in Beirut.
- 1983 May:** Lebanon and Israel announced the end of hostilities. Syrian forces remained in Lebanon.
- 1983 July:** Mufti of Jerusalem issued a fatwa calling for Assad to be killed because of his hostile treatment of the PLO.
- 1983** Assad suffered a heart attack, according to reports denied by authorities. Assad's brother Rifaat apparently prepared to take power.
- 1984** Rifaat promoted to the post of vice-president.
- 1987 February:** Assad sent troops into Lebanon for a second time to enforce a ceasefire in Beirut.
- 1990** Iraq invaded Kuwait; Syria joined the US-led coalition against Iraq. This led to improved relations with Egypt and the US.
- 1991 October:** Syria participated in the Middle East peace conference in Madrid and held talks with Israel.
- 1994** Assad's son Basil, who was likely to succeed his father, killed in a car accident.
- 1998** Assad's brother Rifaat 'relieved of his post' as vice-president.
- 1999 December:** Talks with Israel over the Golan Heights began in the US.
- 2000 January:** Syrian-Israeli talks indefinitely postponed.
- 2000 June:** Assad died; succeeded by his son, Bashar.
- 2000 November:** Bashar ordered the release of 600 political prisoners.
- 2001 April:** Outlawed Muslim Brotherhood said it will resume political activity, 20 years after its leaders were forced to flee.
- 2001 5 May:** Pope John Paul II paid historic visit.
- 2001 June:** Syrian troops evacuated Beirut; redeployed in other parts of Lebanon following pressure from Lebanese critics of Syria's presence.
- 2001 September:** Detention of MPs and other pro-reform activists crushed hopes of a break with the authoritarian past of Hafez al-Assad.
- 2001 November:** British PM Tony Blair visited to try to shore up support for the campaign against terror. He and President Assad failed to agree on a definition of terrorism.
- 2001 November:** More than 100 dissidents amnestied. Campaigners said hundreds of political prisoners remained in jail.
- 2002 May:** Senior US official included Syria in a list of states that made-up an 'axis of evil', first listed by President Bush in January. Undersecretary of State John Bolton said Damascus was acquiring weapons of mass destruction.
- 2003 April:** US threatened sanctions if Damascus failed to take what Washington called the right decisions. Syria denied US allegations that it was developing chemical weapons and helping fugitive Iraqis.
- 2003 September:** President Assad appointed Mohammed Naji al-Otari as PM.
- 2003 October:** Israeli air strike against alleged Palestinian militant camp near Damascus; Syria said action was 'military aggression'.
- 2004 January:** President Assad visited Turkey, the first Syrian leader to do so. The trip marked the end of decades of frosty relations.
- 2004 March:** At least 25 killed in clashes between members of the Kurdish minority, police and Arabs in the north-east.
- 2004 May:** US imposed economic sanctions on Syria over what it called its support for terrorism and failure to stop militants entering Iraq.
- 2004 September:** UN Security Council resolution called for all foreign forces to leave Lebanon.
- 2004 December:** Authorities said they amnestied 112 political prisoners.

- 2005 February-March:** Tensions with the US escalated after the killing of former Lebanese PM Hariri in Beirut. Washington cited Syrian influence in Lebanon. Damascus urged to withdraw its forces from Lebanon.
- 2005 April:** Syria said it had withdrawn all of its military forces from Lebanon.
- 2005 October:** Interior minister and Syria's former head of intelligence in Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan, committed suicide officials said. UN inquiry into assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri implicated senior Syrian officials.
- 2005 December:** Exiled former vice-president, Abdul Halim Khaddam, alleged that Syrian leaders threatened former Lebanese PM Hariri before his assassination.
- 2006 February:** Danish and Norwegian embassies in Damascus were set on fire during a demonstration against cartoons published in a Danish newspaper that satirised the Prophet Muhammad.
- 2006 July:** Thousands of people fled into Syria to escape Israel's bombardment of Lebanon.
- 2006 September:** Attack on the US embassy in Damascus. Four gunmen opened fire and threw grenades but failed to detonate a car bomb. Three of them were killed, one captured.
- 2006 November:** Syria and Iraq restored diplomatic relations after nearly a quarter of a century.

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Annex B – Political organisations

This list should not be viewed as exhaustive.

Information extracted from source [1a] (Europa World, accessed on 24 October 2006) unless otherwise indicated.

NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT (NPF—AL-JABHA AL-WATANIYAH AT-TAQADUMIYAH)

Headed by the late President Hafiz al-Assad.

Formed in March 1972 as a coalition of five political parties. The Syrian Constitution defines the Baath Arab Socialist Party as ‘the leading party in the society and the state’. [1a] (Political Organizations) At mid-2005 the NPF consisted of 10 parties:

Arab Socialist Party

Leader: Abd al-Ghani Kannout.

Damascus. A breakaway socialist party; contested the 1994 election to the People’s Assembly as two factions. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Arab Socialist Unionist Party

Leader: Safwan Qudsi.

Damascus. Founded 1964, following merger of four parties; Nasserite; supportive of the policies of the Baath Arab Socialist Party. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Ba’ath Arab Socialist Party (www.baath-party.org in Arabic)

Secretary-General: Lt-Gen. Bashar al-Assad.

Arab nationalist socialist party founded in 1947 as a result of merger of the Arab Revival (Baath) Movement (f. 1940) and the Arab Socialist Party (f. 1940); branches in most Arab countries; in power since 1963; supports creation of a unified Arab socialist society. There are more than 800,000 party members in Syria. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Democratic Arab Union Party (Ittihad ad-Dimuqrati al-'Arabi)

Chair: Ghassan Ahmad Othman.

Founded 1992; considers the concerns of the Arab world in general as secondary to those of Syria itself in the pursuit of pan-Arab goals. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Democratic Socialist Unionist Party (Hizb al-Wahdawi al-Ishtiraki al-Dimuqrati)

Chair: Fadllah Nasir Adeen.

Founded 1974, following split from the Party of Socialist Unionists. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Party of Socialist Unionists (Hizb al-Wahiduin al-Ishtirakin)

Chair: Fayez Issma’el.

Founded 1961, through split from the Baath Arab Socialist Party, following that organization's acceptance of Syria's decision to secede from the United Arab Republic; Nasserite; aims for Arab unity; produces weekly periodical Al-Wehdawi. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Syrian Arab Socialist Union Party

Secretary-General: Safwan Koudsi.

Nasserite. Damascus. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Syrian Communist Party (Bakdash)

Secretary-General: Wesal Farht Bakdash.

Damascus. Founded 1924 by Fouad Shamal in Lebanon and Khalid Bakdash (died 1995); until 1943 part of joint Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon; party split into two factions, Bakdash and Faisal (q.v.), in 1986; Marxist-Leninist; publishes fortnightly periodical *Sawt ash-Shaab*. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Syrian Communist Party (Faisal)

Secretary-General: Yousuf Faisal.

Founded 1986, following split of Syrian Communist Party into two factions, known as Faisal and Bakdash (q.v.); aims to end domination of Baath Arab Socialist Party and the advantages given to members of that party at all levels; advocates the lifting of the state of emergency and the release of all political prisoners; publishes weekly periodical *An-Nour*. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Syrian Social Nationalist Party (Centralist Wing) (Al-Hizb as-Suri al-Qawmi al-Ijtima'i) (<http://www.ssnp.net/main/> in Arabic)

Chair: Issam Mahayiri.

Founded 1932 in Beirut, Lebanon; also known as Parti populaire syrien; seeks creation of a 'Greater Syrian' state, incl. Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Kuwait and Cyprus; advocates separation of church and state, the redistribution of wealth, and a strong military; supports Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs; branches world-wide; joined the NPF in 2005. [1a] (Political Organizations)

NON-NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT PARTIES

Grouping for Democracy and Unity

Secretary-General: Muhammad Sawwan.

Nationalist. Formed in early 2001. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Islamic Movement for Change (IMC)

An illegal Syrian-based organization; claimed responsibility for a bomb attack in Damascus in December 1996. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Marxist-Leninist Communist Action Party

Regards itself as independent of all Arab regimes. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Movement for Social Peace

Leader: Riad Seif.

Pro-democratic. Formed in early 2001 but reportedly disbanded later the same year. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimun)

Spiritual leader: Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni (resident in the United Kingdom) [50]

Established in the mid-1940s. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is a creature of the socio-economic, cultural, and political setting in which it evolved – the Syrian brotherhood created by pedigreed ulama (scholars of Islam) closely aligned with wealthy Sunni landowners and merchants in Hama and Aleppo. The Brotherhood indulged in sporadic interludes of democratic political life in the 1950s, establishing itself as a leading opposition bloc in parliament. [50] [60]

Banned in 1958 when Syria joined with Egypt in the United Arab Republic (UAR); returned to politics after its dissolution in 1961, winning ten seats in parliamentary elections. Banned again in 1963 when Hafez al-Assad seized power. [50] [60] During the 1970s violence between the Brotherhood and Government forces steadily increased, although underground jihadist networks not affiliated to the Brotherhood may have been responsible for at least some assassinations of prominent Alawites,

resulting in the mass executions of imprisoned Brothers. [50] [59] [60] An attempt on the life of President Hafez al-Assad resulted in the passing of Law 49/1980 under which membership or support of the movement is punishable by death although sentences are usually commuted to a custodial sentence of up to 12 years. [14a] (Third: Law 49/1980) [60]

In 1982, following an escalation in the violence of the Brotherhood, accompanied by mass demonstrations and strikes in Sunni areas, the Government crushed the rebellion killing approximately 10,000 Hama residents, most of which were civilians. The Muslim Brotherhood has not been an organised force within Syria since the massacre at Hama with most of its members being in prison or exile. [14b] [50] [59] [60]

In hopes of building bridges with secular opposition currents, Bayanouni (who has lived in London since being ejected from Jordan's capital, Amman in 2000) has steadily moderated the brotherhood's declared objectives and principles. In October 2005, the brotherhood joined other opposition groups in signing the Damascus Declaration, which called for the establishment of a liberal democracy in Syria. Nevertheless, many Syrian Christians and Druze share Alawite fears about Sunni domination, even if a democratic system is put in place. [50] [60]

Syrian Democratic People's Party

Leader: Riad at-Turk.

Founded in 1973 as the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau), following at-Turk's decision to split from that party after its leader, Khalid Bakdash, decided to allow the organization to join the NPF. At-Turk's party adopted its current name in 2005. [1a] (Political Organizations)

Hizb ut Tahrir (Islamic Liberation Party) <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/english/about.htm>

Illegal. [14a] Islamic ideology. Hizb ut-Tahrir is a political group and not a religious one. Nor is it an academic, educational or a charity group. Hizb ut-Tahrir started its work in al-Quds (Jerusalem) in 1953 under the leadership of its founder, the honourable scholar, thinker, able politician, and judge in the Court of Appeals in al-Quds (Jerusalem), Taqiuddin an-Nabhani. Its aim is to resume the Islamic way of life and to convey the Islamic Call to the world. [61]

The party considers violence or armed struggle against the regime a violation of the Islamic Shari'ah. [61]

Yekiti (Yakiti/Yakidi) Party (Homepage of Netherlands-based website (in Kurdish and Arabic). <http://www.yekiti.nl/>) (Kurdish Democratic Union Party or the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party, the Kurdish Unity Party, or the Kurdish Union Party) Peacefully strives for an equalisation of Kurdish rights and democratic change. It is banned in Syria. [43a-43b]

See also [Section 14 on Opposition groups and political activists](#)

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Annex C – Prominent people

This list should not be viewed as exhaustive.

Information extracted from source [1a] (Europa World, accessed on 24 October 2006) unless otherwise indicated.

Lt-Gen. Bashar al-Assad

President: (assumed office 17 July 2000)

Farouk ash-Shara'

Vice-President, responsible for Foreign Affairs and Information

Dr Najah al-Attar

Vice-President

Muhammad Naji al-Otari

Prime Minister

Abdullah ad-Dardari

Deputy Prime Minister, responsible for Economic Affairs

Lt-Gen. Hasan at-Turkmani

Minister of Defence

Walid Mouallem

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Mohsen Bilal

Minister of Information

Brig-Gen. Bassam Abd al-Majid

Minister of the Interior

Hilal al-Atrash

Minister of Local Administration and Environment

Ali Sa'd

Minister of Education

Ghiath Barakat

Minister of Higher Education

Ahmad Khaled al-Ali

Minister of Electricity

Riyad Na'asan Agha

Minister of Culture

Yaarob Suleiman Badr

Minister of Transport

Sufian Allaw

Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources

Fouad Issa Joni

Minister of Industry

Dr Muhammad al-Hussein

Minister of Finance

Hamoud al-Hussein

Minister of Housing and Construction

Muhammad al-Gafri

Minister of Justice

Adel Safar

Minister of Agriculture

Nader al-Buni

Minister of Irrigation

Amr Nazir Salem

Minister of Communications and Technology

Dr Maher Hussami

Minister of Health

Muhammad Ziad Ayoubi

Minister of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments)

Diala Haj-Aref

Minister of Labour and Social Affairs

Dr Saadallah Agha al-Qalla

Minister of Tourism

Ghassan al-Lahham

Minister of Presidential Affairs

Boutaina Sha'ban

Minister of Expatriates

Yousuf Suleiman al-Ahmad,

Minister of State

Bashar ash-Sh'ar

Minister of State

Hussein Mahmoud Farzat

Minister of State

Joseph Sweid

Minister of State

Hassan as-Sarri

Minister of State

Ghiath Jaraatly

Minister of State

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Annex D – List of abbreviations

AI	Amnesty International
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
EU	European Union
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
FH	Freedom House
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
RSF	Reporters sans Frontières
SHRC	Syrian Human Rights Committee
STC	Save The Children
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
TB	Tuberculosis
TI	Transparency International
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSD	United States State Department
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

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Annex E – References to source material

The Home Office is not responsible for the content of external websites.

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