

# SYRIA

## SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

**Head of state:** Bashar al-Assad (replaced Hafez al-Assad in July)

**Head of government:** Muhammad Mustafa Miro (replaced Mahmud al-Zu'bi in March)

**Capital:** Damascus

**Population:** 16.1 million

**Official language:** Arabic

**Death penalty:** retentionist

**2000 treaty ratifications/signatures:** Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

Hundreds of political prisoners including prisoners of conscience were released during 2000, mostly as the result of a presidential amnesty issued in November. Restrictions on freedom of expression were apparently relaxed to some extent. Dozens of people were arrested during 2000 for political reasons. Hundreds of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, remained in detention without trial or serving long sentences passed after unfair trials by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC). At least one political prisoner died in custody and scores of ill political detainees remained held in cruel and inhuman conditions. The fate of hundreds of people who "disappeared" in the late 1970s and 1980s remained unknown. There were continuing reports of torture and ill-treatment of political detainees.

## Background

Following the death of President Hafez al-Assad in June, his son Bashar al-Assad was elected President in a general referendum in July. He was nominated as the sole candidate for the presidency by the ruling Ba'th party.

There were calls for political and economic liberalization from people including members of the National Assembly. A public statement issued by 99 Syrian intellectuals, mostly resident in Syria, called for the lifting of the state of emergency, which has been in place since 1963, and the release of political prisoners. This was the first time that such a statement had been issued without those involved being arrested and detained or otherwise harassed. In addition, the Ba'th party leadership approved a resolution allowing junior members of the Progressive National Front, including the two wings of the Syrian Communist Party, to publish their own newspapers.

## Human rights defenders

Restrictions imposed on the Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF) were relaxed during 2000, allowing a plenary meeting to take place, attended by CDF members and other human rights

activists and intellectuals. (In a related development, the restrictions imposed on the movement of Aktham Nu'aysa, a former prisoner of conscience, were lifted). During 2000, four members of the CDF who had been detained in connection with the distribution of a CDF leaflet marking the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were released, although prisoner of conscience Nizar Nayyuf remained in detention. The four released prisoners were 'Afif Muzhir, Muhammad Ali Habib, Bassam al-Shaykh and Thabit Murad. ☞ Human rights defender Nizar Nayyuf remained held despite his ill-health, after being moved to Sednaya Prison following the closure during the year of Mezze Prison. Sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for his involvement with the CDF, he was held in solitary confinement. Nizar Nayyuf was suffering from, among other things, a disease of the lower spine, apparently caused as a result of torture; weakening of the legs, leaving him unable to walk unaided; and deteriorating eyesight.

## Arrests

Sporadic arrest and detention of individuals for political reasons continued during 2000.

Among those detained were individuals critical of the government and nationals of neighbouring Arab countries.

There were reports about the arrest and detention of asylum-seekers forcibly returned to Syria. They included Hussain Daoud, reportedly forcibly returned to Syria from Germany accompanied by German police officers. He was reportedly arrested in December at Damascus airport and transferred to *Far 'Falastin*, Palestine Branch, where he was held at the end of 2000. His arrest was believed to be connected to his involvement with the unauthorized Kurdish Popular Union Party in Syria.

The arrest and transfer from Lebanon to Syria of at least five Lebanese soldiers in 1999 came to light. They included sergeants Nimer al-Naddaf and Fuad 'Asaker. They were held incommunicado in detention centres including *Far 'Falastin*, Palestine Branch, and *Far 'al-Tahqiq al-'Askari*, Military Interrogation Branch, where torture and ill-treatment were routine.

There were reports of harassment and intimidation of former prisoners of conscience released during the year and of the families of exiled Syrians.

☞ Ra'ad Washil Muhammad al-Shammari, an Iraqi national aged 42, was arrested in June and was reportedly held incommunicado in a detention centre in Damascus. Married with four children, Ra'ad Washil Muhammad al-Shammari was apparently arrested solely for political reasons and there were fears that he may have been tortured. He had in the past been detained for several years in Iraq for his involvement with the unauthorized Iraqi Communist Party.

☞ Relatives of a former prisoner of conscience who sought asylum overseas were repeatedly summoned to the Political Security Department for questioning about his whereabouts. Members of his family, including his wife and children, were held for hours at the security office almost daily and

subjected to verbal abuse and beating. Before managing to escape, the former prisoner of conscience used to be summoned regularly to the same department and subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

## Releases of political prisoners

### Presidential amnesty

Hundreds of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, were released in November following an amnesty issued by President Bashar al-Assad marking the 30th anniversary of the military coup which brought the late President Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970. The main beneficiaries were members of the unauthorized *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*, Muslim Brotherhood, and their sympathizers. They had been held, mostly incommunicado, in Tadmur Prison. Some had been detained without trial since 1979. Out of a total of around 600 released prisoners, according to the official media, more than 400 had been held in Tadmur Prison.

Among those released were scores of prisoners of conscience, most of whom were detained in connection with their involvement with the unauthorized *Hizb al-'Amal al-Shuyu'i* (PCA), Party for Communist Action, and *al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-Maktab al-Siyassi* (CPPB), Communist Party – Political Bureau. All these prisoners of conscience had been sentenced to up to 15 years' imprisonment after unfair trials before the SSSC. They included Faraj Ahmad Birqdar, Jurays Yusuf al-Talli, Nu'man 'Ali 'Abdu and 'Umar al-Hayek.

The presidential amnesty also led to the release of 46 Lebanese political detainees, some of whom who had been imprisoned since the 1980s.

### Other releases

A pattern of releases of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, after the expiry of their sentences or after long-term detention without trial, continued during 2000. Among those released were prisoners of conscience Fateh Jamus and Aslan 'Abd al-Karim, both leading members of the PCA, who had been held beyond the expiry of their 15-year sentences. Also released were more than 20 Jordanian and Palestinian political prisoners.

### Prisoners of conscience

Although the number of prisoners of conscience decreased significantly during 2000 as a result of releases, dozens remained in detention, some of them serving long sentences passed by the SSSC after unfair trials. They included nine members of the PCA serving up to 22 years' imprisonment, and scores of prisoners of conscience or possible prisoners of conscience detained incommunicado since the late 1970s in connection with their involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood, whose fate remained unknown. All the remaining prisoners of conscience who had been sentenced to prison terms of up to 15 years in connection with their membership of the CPPB were released during 2000.

☞ 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khayyir was arrested in February 1992 by members of *al-Mukhabarat al-'Askariyya*, Military Intelligence, in connection with his involvement with the

PCA, along with a dozen other leading members of the PCA. All were reportedly tortured and ill-treated during their initial stage of detention. In August 1995, he was sentenced by the SSSC to 22 years' imprisonment after an unfair trial. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khayyir was tried together with Bahjat Sha'bu, 'Abbas Mahmud 'Abbas, Muhammad Hasan Mi'mar and 'Adnan Mahfuz, who also remained in prison serving up to 17 years' imprisonment.

### 'Disappearances'

The cases of hundreds of people, including suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Lebanese nationals, who "disappeared" in the late 1970s and 1980s remained unresolved. Despite the release of 46 Lebanese political prisoners, the fate of scores of others remained unknown. They included Lebanese soldiers believed to have been taken to Syria in October 1990 following armed clashes between Syrian forces and troops loyal to the former Lebanese Army Commander Michel 'Aoun.

☞ Khadija Yahya Bukhari, a Lebanese woman singer, "disappeared" following her arrest in Syria on 29 April 1992. Al was informed by the authorities during 2000 that she had in fact been sentenced to death and executed on 2 December 1992. The authorities had not informed her family about her execution or handed over her body. The authorities stated that she had been executed on charges of spying for the Israeli intelligence service in Cyprus and recruiting a Syrian officer to cooperate with the Israeli intelligence service. The Syrian officer, who according to Al's information was her husband, was also sentenced to death and executed. The authorities did not provide his name or the date of his execution.

### Political prisoners

Hundreds of long-term political prisoners, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab Communist Party (ACP) and the Democratic Ba'th Party (DBP), remained held in prisons since being arrested in the 1970s and 1980s. Many were held incommunicado without trial and others were serving long sentences passed after unfair trials.

Reports indicated that members of the ACP were particularly harshly treated while held in Sednaya Prison. They were said to be suffering from serious health and mental problems. They included Haytham Na 'al, a university law student arrested in 1975; Ghayyath Shima, a university science student; and Faris Murad.

Scores of people, including women taken as "hostages" in the early 1980s and in recent years instead of relatives suspected of links with the Muslim Brotherhood, remained detained incommunicado in Tadmur Prison and other detention centres.

☞ Midhat Munir Tayfur, a 46-year-old foreman, was reportedly arrested by the Syrian security forces at Dar'a at the Syrian-Jordanian border on 22 May 1998, despite having permission from the Syrian embassy in Jordan to visit his family. Midhat Munir Tayfur, married with five children, is the brother of a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Since his arrest, he has been held incommunicado, apparently at the Military Interrogation Branch in Damascus. There were serious concerns about his fate and fears that he may have been tortured to extract information about his brother.

### **Torture/ill-treatment**

There were fewer reports of torture during 2000, but the system allowing for its application remained intact and there were apparently no investigations into previous allegations of torture and ill-treatment. Torture and ill-treatment of political detainees continued to be systematically applied in Tadmur Prison and other detention centres, including Palestine Branch and the Military Interrogation Branch in Damascus and other centres operated by the Political Security Department.

☞ One prisoner, held incommunicado for seven days in December in lieu of his exiled relative, was reported to have been tortured by the method known as *dullab*, beating with sticks and cables while hanging from a suspended tyre.

According to reports reaching AI from Tadmur Prison during 2000, torture and ill-treatment, though decreased in intensity, continued to be routine. Political prisoners, including those who were ill, were reported to be held in solitary confinement in underground cells. They were reportedly subjected to *falaqa*, beating on the soles of the feet, and repeated kickings, especially on the back and hips, leading to fractured vertebrae. Political prisoners were also allegedly ordered to beat fellow prisoners, especially those from their own political parties. Political prisoners who refused to obey orders were reportedly tortured.

### **Deaths in custody**

At least one political prisoner died in custody.

☞ 'Attiyah Diab 'Attiyah died in February in Tadmur Prison, apparently as a result of torture and ill-treatment coupled with illness. 'Attiyah Diab 'Attiyah was arrested in Lebanon in 1989 for his involvement with the Fatah Movement and transferred to Syria.

### **Death penalty**

The death penalty remained applicable in law for a wide range of crimes but information on the number of death sentences and executions during 2000 was not available.

### **Government communications**

AI sent several letters to the authorities. Among the issues raised were cases of arbitrary detention.

The authorities responded, addressing some of AI's concerns.

### **AI actions**

AI submitted dozens of cases from Syria to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.