

# Syria

**Population:** 18,400,000

**GNI/capita:** \$1,160

**Life Expectancy:** 72

**Religious Groups:** Sunni Muslim (74 percent), other Muslim sects [including Alawite and Druze] (16 percent), Christian [various sects] (10 percent)

**Ethnic Groups:** Arabs (90 percent), other [including Kurds and Armenians] (10 percent)

**Capital:** Damascus

**Political Rights:** 7

**Civil Liberties:** 7

**Status:** Not Free

## Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Rating	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF

## Overview:

Syrian president Bashar Assad's diplomatic isolation deepened in 2005 amid mounting evidence linking members of his inner circle to the February 14 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, while internal opposition to his rule grew more strident and unified. In an effort to defuse dissent at home and project a positive image abroad, the regime freed hundreds of political prisoners and slightly relaxed restrictions on some civil liberties, but it continued to brutally punish dissidents who contravene its "red lines" of acceptable public discourse.

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Located at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, the Syrian capital of Damascus is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, once controlling a vast empire extending from Europe to India. The modern state of Syria was established by the French after World War I and formally granted independence in 1946. Syria's precarious democratic institutions functioned intermittently until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup and transformed the country into a one-party state governed perpetually by emergency law. During the 1960s, power shifted within the party from civilian ideologues to an ambitious group of army officers hailing mostly from Syria's Alawite minority (adherents of an offshoot Islamic sect comprising 12 percent of the population), culminating in General Hafez Assad's rise to power in 1970.

Although the regime cultivated a base of support from public sector employees, peasants, and select private sector beneficiaries that transcended sectarian and ethnic divisions, its grip on power rested squarely on Alawite domination of the military-security establishment and the suppression of dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern town of Hama to crush a rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood and killed as many as 20,000 insurgents and civilians. By the time of Assad's death in 2000, nearly four decades of stifling Baathist rule had made Syria one of the Arab world's poorest countries.

Assad's son and successor, Bashar, pledged to introduce sweeping political and economic liberalization in his inaugural speech. The first six months of his tenure witnessed the release of several hundred political prisoners, the return of many exiled dissidents, and a substantial expansion of civil liberties as informal reformist networks met openly to discuss the country's social, economic, and political problems. In February 2001, however, the regime abruptly halted the so-called Damascus Spring. Most of the country's leading reformists were arrested and sentenced to heavy prison terms; those who weren't grew accustomed to constant surveillance and frequent intimidation by the *mukhabarat* (secret police). Economic reform fell by the wayside, as dozens of reform laws remained unimplemented, were put into effect half-heartedly, or lacked supporting regulatory changes. 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.

The toppling of Iraq's Baathist regime by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 reinvigorated the Syrian opposition. For the first time, secular and Islamist dissidents began coordinating and pushing for a common set of demands, including the release of all political prisoners, the cancellation of the state of emergency, and legalization of political parties. Apparently inspired by the political empowerment of Iraqi Kurds, Syria's historically quiescent Kurdish minority erupted into eight days of rioting in March 2004. At least 30 people were killed as security forces suppressed the riots and arrested some 2,000 people.

Internal opposition to the regime was strengthened by growing international outrage over Syria's failure to combat terrorist infiltration into Iraq and its continuing occupation of Lebanon. In September 2004, UN Security Council Resolution 1559 explicitly called on Damascus to immediately end the occupation altogether. As a result of widespread suspicions of Syrian involvement in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, international pressure for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, including mass anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut, quickly intensified.

Although Assad pulled Syrian troops out of Lebanon in April, Syrian relations with Western and Arab governments alike remained strained by his refusal to fully cooperate with the UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) probing the killing of Hariri. On October 20, the UNIIC issued an interim report containing circumstantial evidence and anonymous witness testimonies implicating Assad's brother-in-law and military intelligence chief General Assef Shawkat and other senior Syrian officials. Shortly afterwards, the Security Council passed Resolution 1636, calling on Syria to cooperate unconditionally with the investigation under threat of "further action."

In the face of growing internal opposition, the regime released hundreds of political prisoners during the year, though none of the six remaining "Damascus Spring detainees" arrested in 2001 (Aref Dalilah, Riad Seif, Mamun al-Humsi, Walid al-Bunni, Habib Isa, and Fawaz Tello) were freed. Syrian officials repeatedly hinted that sweeping political reforms would be drafted at a major Baath Party conference in June. According to state-run media reports, party leaders issued a set of vague recommendations to legalize political parties, reform the electoral system, permit greater press freedom, and relax emergency law, but no substantial measures were undertaken to implement the recommendations.

While the government allowed pro-democracy activists to speak freely with the international media—something that was very rare a few years ago—those who openly communicated with the Muslim Brotherhood courted danger. In May, prominent Kurdish cleric Sheikh Muhammad Mashuq al-Khaznawi was kidnapped and tortured to death after meeting

with Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni in Belgium and publicly calling for the group's inclusion in Syrian political life. A few weeks later, security forces arrested nine members of the Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue, a secular nationalist political salon, after a statement by al-Bayanouni reiterating the Brotherhood's commitment to nonviolence and democracy was read aloud at one of its meetings (most were released several months later only after pledging to cut off communication with the group).

Rather than discouraging the opposition from uniting, however, the government's obstinacy encouraged secular liberal, Kurdish, and Islamist dissidents to work together. In October, representatives of all three opposition currents signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic and National Change, which explicitly called for the regime to step down and endorsed a broad set of liberal democratic principles.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Citizens of Syria cannot change their government democratically. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by a popular referendum. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime, as are elections to the 250-member, unicameral People's Council, which holds little independent legislative power. The only legal political parties are the Baath Party and its six small coalition partners in the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF). All 167 of the NPF's candidates won seats in the 2003 parliamentary elections, while heavily vetted independent candidates took the remaining 83 seats. The ruling party pledged to legalize political parties not based on religious or ethnic identity (a condition that would exclude the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish opposition groups) at its June 2005 conference, but no legislation implementing this pledge was forthcoming.

Key regime officials and their offspring monopolize many lucrative import markets and benefit from a range of other illicit economic activities. Syria was ranked 70 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Vaguely worded articles of the penal code, Emergency Law, and 2001 press statute criminalize the publication of material that harms national unity, tarnishes the image of the state, or threatens the "goals of the revolution." Muhammad Raadun, the head of the Arab Organization for Human Rights-Syria was arrested in May 2005 and held for nearly six months on charges of "disseminating false information" about a government crackdown on Islamists. Habib Salih, one of the Damascus Spring detainees who had been released in September 2004, was arrested in May after writing two articles on the internet criticizing the government; he remained in detention throughout the year. Another previously released activist, Kamal al-Labwani, was arrested in November on charges of spreading information "harmful to national unity" after meeting with U.S. officials in Washington.

Apart from a handful of non-news radio stations, all broadcast media are state-owned. However, satellite dishes are widespread, giving many Syrians exposure to foreign news broadcasts. While more than a dozen privately owned newspapers and magazines have sprouted up in recent years, only one (owned by the son of Syria's defense minister) is allowed to publish serious criticism of the government. The 2001 press law permits the authorities to arbitrarily deny or revoke publishing licenses—at least four were rescinded in 2005—and compels privately owned print media outlets to submit all material to government censors. Syrians are permitted to

access the internet only through state-run servers, which block access to a wide range of websites. E-mail correspondence is reportedly monitored by the intelligence agencies.

Although the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion in Syria, and freedom of worship is generally respected. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the military and security forces. The government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim clergy. Two major outbreaks of violence between Alawites and Ismaili Shiites (a heterodox Islamic sect comprising roughly 1 percent of the population) erupted in the towns of Qadmous and Misyaf in mid-2005.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. University professors have frequently been dismissed from state universities for expressing dissent, and some have been imprisoned.

Freedom of assembly is heavily circumscribed. Public demonstrations are illegal without explicit permission from the Interior Ministry, which is typically granted only to pro-government organizations. Several unlicensed demonstrations were forcibly dispersed by the authorities in 2005, though a few took place with little interference. Increasingly, the authorities have relied on plainclothes agents to intimidate activists. In March, activists staging a sit-in in Damascus were dispersed and beaten not by police, but by hundreds of pro-government “demonstrators” wielding clubs. When protests erupted in Kurdish regions following al-Khaznawi’s death, the police stood by while Arab tribesmen looted shops belonging to Kurds.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. All nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist groups. Although a handful of unlicensed human rights groups have been allowed to organize, they are prevented from publishing material inside Syria and placed under such heavy (and often visible) surveillance that most citizens who suffer abuses at the hands of the authorities are reluctant to communicate with them. Leaders of these organizations have frequently been jailed for publicizing government human rights abuses. Authorities closed down the Tharwa Project, an NGO focused on minority rights in the region, in October. In October, prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni was beaten by two unidentified assailants.

All unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). Although nominally independent, the GFTU is used by the government to control all aspects of union activity in Syria. Strikes in nonagricultural sectors are legal, but they rarely occur.

While regular criminal and civil courts operate with some independence and generally safeguard defendants’ rights, politically sensitive cases are usually tried by the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC)—an exceptional tribunal established under emergency law that denies the right to appeal, limits access to legal counsel, tries many cases behind closed doors, and routinely admits as evidence confessions obtained through torture.

The state of emergency in force since 1963 gives the security agencies virtually unlimited authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Many of the estimated 2,500 to 3,000 remaining political prisoners in Syria have never been tried for any offense. The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining members of their families. There were scores of credible reports of torture by the security services in 2005. According to local human rights groups, dozens of suspected Islamists who returned from exile in 2005 were arrested and detained upon their arrival. At least 40 students at Tishrin University in Latakia were arrested between February and April 2005 for setting up an underground Islamist group called Sunaa al-Hayat (Makers of Life).

The Kurdish minority in Syria faces severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. The 2001 press law requires that owners and editors in chief of publications be Arabs. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates, which in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. Suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and public sector jobs. The authorities relaxed enforcement of cultural and linguistic restrictions in the wake of the 2004 riots. Once-unthinkable activities, such as blaring Kurdish music on car stereos and publicly celebrating Kurdish holidays, evoked relatively little attention from the authorities in 2005. In March, the government released 312 Kurds who had been detained since the 2004 riots, but continued to detain dozens of members of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and arrested hundreds of other Kurdish activists during the year. At least 60 Kurds who took part in a June 5 demonstration protesting al-Khaznawi's death were detained for nearly two months on charges of "fomenting riots and sectarian rifts." On September 15, a Kurdish woman was beaten to death during clashes between police and demonstrators attempting to stop the demolition of illegally built, mostly Kurdish, homes in al-Dimas, west of Damascus. At least seven Kurdish activists were sentenced by the SSSC in 2005 to prison terms of two or more years for peaceful political activities. The government began taking a census of stateless Kurds in early 2005, but no formal measures were taken to naturalize them.

Although most Syrians do not face travel restrictions, prominent opposition figures and relatives of exiled dissidents are routinely prevented from traveling abroad, and stateless Kurds lack the requisite documents to leave the country. Equality of opportunity has been compromised by rampant corruption.

The government has promoted gender equality by appointing women to senior positions in government and providing equal access to education, but many discriminatory laws remain in force. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women are generally barred from leaving the country with their children unless they can prove that the father has granted permission. Violence against women is common, particularly in rural areas. Syrian law stipulates that an accused rapist can be acquitted if he marries his victim, and the law provides for reduced sentences in cases of "honor crimes" committed by men against female relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. Personal status law for Muslim women is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters.