



Freedom in the World: 2007

Syria

Population: 19,500,000

Capital: Damascus

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6 ↑

Status: Not Free

Ratings Change: Syria's political rights rating improved from 7 to 6 because of small improvements in personal autonomy.

Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
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	7,6,NF

Overview:

The Syrian government continued its repression of political rights and civil liberties in 2006 and renewed its crackdown on dissidents. In May, Syrian political and human rights activists formulated and signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for a change in Syrian-Lebanese relations and the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty; many of the signatories were arrested and in some cases jailed. Syria that year continued its public support for the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and its close alliance with Iran's hard-line government. There were small improvements in personal autonomy in areas such as travel, residence, and employment.

The modern state of Syria was established by the French after World War I and formally granted independence in 1946. The country's new democratic institutions functioned intermittently until the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a 1963 coup and transformed Syria 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 al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.

Although the regime cultivated a base of support among 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 al-Assad's death in 2000, nearly four decades of stifling Baathist rule had made Syria one of the Arab world's poorest countries.

Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his late father as leader of the country, pledged in his inaugural speech to introduce sweeping political and economic liberalization. The first six months of his tenure featured 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 lengthy prison terms, while others 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. Syria under Bashar al-Assad proved to be less free than under his father and equally resistant to political change.

The toppling of Iraq's Baathist regime by the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 reinvigorated the Syrian opposition. For the first time, secular and Islamist dissidents began cooperating 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 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. Syrian troops had entered Lebanon in 1976, during the latter country's civil war, but they had stayed on after peace was restored in 1990. In September 2004, UN Security Council Resolution 1559 explicitly called on Damascus to immediately end the occupation. 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 al-Assad pulled Syrian troops out of Lebanon in April 2005, Syrian relations with countries in the region and abroad remained strained by his refusal to fully cooperate with the UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) probing the killing of Hariri. In October 2005, the UNIIC issued an interim report containing circumstantial evidence and anonymous witness testimonies implicating al-Assad's brother-in-law and military intelligence chief, General Assef Shawkat, as well as other senior Syrian officials. Shortly afterward, the UN 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 in 2005. Syrian officials repeatedly hinted that sweeping political reforms would be drafted at a major Baath Party conference. According to state 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. Al-Assad openly stated that there would be no major constitutional reforms or loosening of Baath Party control of the state. In October of that year, representatives of all three opposition currents—the Islamists, the Kurds, and secular liberals—signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic and National Change, which explicitly called

for the country's leaders to step down and endorsed a broad set of liberal democratic principles. Secular and Kurdish figures who openly communicated with the Muslim Brotherhood faced harsh retribution by the state.

In 2006, the government reversed its partial leniency on personal freedom with a renewed crackdown on dissidents. A number of political and human rights activists were arrested or detained over the year. In May, exiled Syrian opposition leaders announced the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) to bring about regime change. A Syrian military court charged former vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam, a leader of the NSF, in absentia with inciting foreign attack against Syria.

Progovernment forces, trying to control the pace of reform so that it did not lead to their removal, enacted slow, mostly economic reforms. However, there was a major cabinet reshuffle in February 2006 that introduced 14 new ministers and replaced the foreign, interior, and information ministers. In May, the parliament announced that it would begin drafting a new electoral law to implement a system of proportional representation before scheduled balloting in 2007.

A number of Syrian political and human rights activists formulated and signed in May 2006 the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for a change in Syrian-Lebanese relations and the recognition of Lebanese sovereignty. Many of the signatories, including prominent political activists Anwar al-Bunni and Michel Kilo, have been imprisoned or briefly arrested as a result.

Syria deepened its international isolation in 2006 by failing to stem attacks on the Danish and Norwegian embassies by Muslims upset over the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. Syria continued its public support for the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and maintained its close alliance with Iran's hard-line government.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Syria is not an electoral democracy. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by popular referendum for seven-year terms. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime, as are elections for the 250-member, unicameral People's Council, which serves for four-year terms and 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). Independent candidates are heavily vetted. 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 at year's end.

Key regime officials and their offspring monopolize many lucrative import markets and benefit from a range of illicit economic activities. Corruption is widespread, and bribery is often necessary in order to navigate the government bureaucracy. Equality of opportunity has been compromised by rampant graft. Syria was ranked 93 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Vaguely worded articles of the penal code, the Emergency Law, and a 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." Syrian writer and activist Habib Saleh was sentenced in August 2006 to three years in prison for

“disseminating false news” after he published an article that was critical of the president and his family. Many other journalists, writers, and intellectuals have been arrested or harassed for similar reasons.

Apart from a handful of non-news radio stations, all broadcast media are state-owned. However, satellite dishes are common, giving many Syrians access 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 and compels privately owned print media outlets to submit all material to government censors. It also imposes punishment on reporters who do not reveal their sources in response to government requests. Since the Kurdish protests in 2004, the government has cracked down on journalists calling for the expansion of Kurdish rights. In June 2006, a military court sentenced Ali al-Abdullah and his son Mohamed for publishing an article calling on the Baath Party to end its repression of Kurds. 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.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. University professors have frequently been dismissed from state universities for expressing dissent, and some have been imprisoned. Between January and March 2006, eight Syrian university students were arrested on unknown charges, but the detentions were apparently related to the students’ attempts to develop a youth movement on campus and their publication of articles calling for political reform.

Freedom of assembly is heavily circumscribed. Public demonstrations are illegal without explicit permission from the Interior Ministry, and permission is typically granted only to progovernment organizations. Increasingly, the authorities have relied on plainclothes agents to intimidate activists. Freedom of association is severely restricted. All nongovernmental organizations 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 are 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.

The security services intensified their ban on public and private gatherings in 2006, forbidding any group of five or more people from discussing political and economic topics. This rule has been enforced through surveillance, wiretapping, and informant reports. Syrian security forces broke up private meetings of activists belonging to the Committees for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights in Syria conducted in private homes. The attendees were searched, their documents were seized, and they were forcibly removed from the gatherings. Syrian security services even arrested a 70-year-old man for voicing his views on the current situation in Syria with his friends in a cafe.

All labor 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. Only the president and interior minister may alter the verdicts.

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 2006. After serving prison time, political activists are routinely monitored and harassed by Syrian security services upon their release. The Syrian Human Rights Committee has reported that hundreds of government informants are rewarded for or coerced into writing reports on relatives, friends, and associates who are suspected of being involved in "anti-regime" activities.

The Kurdish minority in Syria faces severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. The 2001 press law requires that owners and top editors 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.

In 2005, the government released 312 Kurds who had been detained since the 2004 riots. However, it has continued to detain dozens of members of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), arrested hundreds of other Kurdish activists over the past few years, and prevented many from traveling to Iraqi Kurdistan.

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. In July 2006, the government issued a new list of activists under travel ban that included signers of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, former Damascus Spring detainees, human rights lawyers, and their family members. Aside from travel bans on political dissidents, Syrians were generally allowed freedom of movement, residence, and employment.

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.