

The Human Rights Situation in Syria

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1 Introduction to Syria

To foster a comprehensive understanding of what is going on in contemporary Syrian society, it is necessary to gain a brief overview of Syria in its economical, geographical, political, cultural and historical context.

1.1 Short overview of Syria's history

Located at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, archaeologists agree Syria to be one of the most ancient civilizations on earth. Throughout its rich and long ancient history, Syria was occupied, inter alia, by Phoenicians, Hebrews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. From 64 BC to 636 AD, Syria was a Roman province. In the early Middle Age, Syria was also the destination of Crusaders as Damascus, nowadays capital city of Syria, had a strong link to Christianity. Damascus, settled about 2500 B.C., is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Having come under Muslim rule in 636 AD, the city's power and prestige reached its peak. Damascus was mostly destroyed in 1400 by Tamerlane, the Mongol conqueror. Rebuilt in 1402, Damascus continued to be an influential city throughout the region in the Middle Age. In 1517, Damascus fell under Ottoman rule. The Ottomans remained for the next 400 years. This period is also referred to as "Ottoman Syria".

The Arab Kingdom of Syria was established under King Faysal of the Hashemite family in 1920. Nevertheless, King Faysal's rule over Syria ended after only a few months, as his accession was not recognized by France or the United Kingdom, the two new imperial powers in the region. What followed was the collision between his Syrian Arab forces and regular French forces at the battle of Maysalun on 23 July 1920. French troops occupied Syria later that year, after the League of Nations, which is considered to be the predecessor of today's United Nations, put Syria under French mandate. The French mandate phase brought almost every domain of Syrian life, particularly the political and cultural domains, under French control. This fact mobilized educated, wealthy Muslims against the French. Among their grievances were the suppression of newspapers, political activity, and civil rights. The period of Syria under French mandate ended in July 1940. Syria came under the control of the Vichy Government, or better known as "Vichy France", until the British and the Free French forces (Forces Françaises Libres) occupied the country in July 1941. Despite French opposition, the Soviet Union and the United States granted Lebanon and Syria recognition as sovereign states in 1944. The British recognition followed in 1945.¹ On May 29, 1945 French troops attacked the Syrian Parliament building in Damascus. France was put under pressure to quit Syria. The freshly established United Nations Security Council discussed the topic of Syria's independence. Consequently, France was demanded to leave. On April 17, 1946 the last French soldier withdrew from Syria. Being independent from France, this day is celebrated as Syria's National Independence Day.

The modern Syria was involved in the Arab-Israeli War in 1948. During the 1950s and 1960s, Syria remained a state of political instability. In a coup of 1970, Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) and his conservative Baath Party seized power. Syria was ruled autocratically by Hafez al-Assad from 1970 to 2000, and after Hafez al-Assad was deceased in 2000, he was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad whose regime is heavily involved in the ongoing Syria Uprising of 2011.²

¹ <http://www.un.int/syria/mhistory.htm>

² <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/History/Syria-history.htm>

1.2 Syria's geography and demography

The Syrian Arab Republic is one of the bigger states in the Middle East with a surface area of 185170 km². Syria is bordered on the north by Turkey, on the east by Iraq, by Jordan and Israel on the south, and by Lebanon on the south-west. In addition, the country has a short coastline on the east Mediterranean Sea. Syria is divided into fourteen governorates, or *muhafazat*. The governorates are divided into a total of sixty-one districts, or *manatiq*, which are further divided into sub-districts, or known as *nawahi*. The Golan Heights was occupied by Israel in 1967 and formally annexed in 1981. However, the Golan Heights are claimed by Syria until today. The annexation is not recognized by the United Nations. A small part of land was transferred back to Syria in 1974. Syria consists mainly of arid plateau, although the northwest part of the country bordering the Mediterranean is agriculturally useable. The Euphrates, Syria's most important river, crosses the country in the east. Most people live in the fertile Euphrates River valley and along the coastal plain; some of the remaining parts of Syria consists solely of desert.



Map of Syria (Source: U.S. Department of State³)

As of 2009, Syria's population consists of 21 906 000 people, of which approximately four million are inhabited in the capital city Damascus. With a percentage of 90%, the population of Syria is predominately Arab, with large minorities from other ethnic groups: Kurds, Armenians, Circassians and Turks. The official language spoken in Syria is Arabic. The Syrian Republic is officially secular. The main religion practiced in Syria is Islam with 74% of Sunni Muslims and 16% of other Muslims, Alawites and Druze. There is a large Christian minority that amounts up to 10% of the population. Tiny Jewish communities exist in larger cities like Damascus or Aleppo. The life expectancy in Syria

³ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>

averages 69.8 years for the male and 72.68 years for the female. Some 5.5 million of employed people are divided into services branch including government (26%), agricultural branch (19%), industry (14%), commerce (16%), construction (15%), transportation (7%), and finance (3%). The unemployment rate estimated in 2008 was 9.8%. Education is free and obligatory from ages 6 to 12. Schooling consists of 6 years of primary education followed by a 3-year preparatory or vocational training period and a 3-year secondary or vocational program. The second 3-year period of secondary schooling is required for university admission. The illiteracy rate of Syrians aged 15 and older is 9.3% for males and 17.8% for females.⁴ With a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.589 in 2010, Syria is ranked as medium at the 111st place worldwide out of 162 total evaluated countries.⁵

1.3 Economy

Syria is a country with moderate income primarily based on agriculture, oil, industry, and tourism. Nonetheless, Syria's economy faces serious problems and impediments to growth. Wide scale corruption, high rates of unemployment, rapid population growth, water pollution, and weak financial and capital markets are some aspects to mention. Syrian economic growth remained in the 4-5% range in 2008-2010 even though the international economic crisis affected oil prices as well as the economies of Syria's key export partners and sources of investment. Damascus has introduced modest economic reforms in the past few years, which include cutting lending interest rates, consolidating all of the multiple exchange rates, opening private banks, and raising prices on some subsidized items, most notably cement and gasoline. However, the economy remains highly controlled by the government.⁶ In 2010, GDP in Syria was US\$59.4 billion. Natural resources in Syria include petroleum, phosphates, iron, chrome and manganese ores, asphalt, rock salt, marble, gypsum and hydropower. Agricultural products in Syria mainly consist of wheat, barley, cotton, lentils, chickpeas, olives, sugar beets, and other fruits and vegetables.

With regard to trade, Syria exports crude oil, minerals, petroleum products, fruits and vegetables, cotton fiber, textiles, clothing, meat and live animals, wheat with the major markets in 2007 being Italy 22%, France 11%, Saudi Arabia 10%, Iraq 5%, Egypt 4% and Jordan 4%. Syria imports for example machinery and transport equipment, electric power machinery, food and livestock, metal and metal products, chemicals and chemical products, plastics, yarn, and paper. Major suppliers of Syria's import are Russia 10%, China 8%, Saudi Arabia 6%, Ukraine 6%, South Korea 5%, and Turkey 4%.⁷

The official currency used in Syria is the Syrian pound (SYP).

1.4 International relations

The primary goals of President Bashar al-Assad's foreign policy include ensuring regime survival, increasing influence among its Arab neighbors, and achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement, which stipulates the return of the Golan Heights.⁸ Arab nationalism is a fundamental doctrine of Syrian state policy, and as such, Syria doesn't consider inhabitants of other Arab states as 'foreigners'. Syria tries continuously to strengthen and to improve the historically tight relations with

⁴ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm#people>

⁵ http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Table1.pdf

⁶ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

⁷ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm#econ>

⁸ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm#foreign>

the neighboring countries such as Israel, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. Relations with other states have improved slightly or stagnate.

Syria is member of a large number of international organizations including for example G77, IMF, WHO, FAO, Arab League, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). Syria's last two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council ended after 31 December 2003⁹. In the United Nations Security Council history, Syria was non-permanent member from 1947 – 1948 and 1970 -1971.

1.5 Politics and government

1.5.1 Constitution

Syria is formally a republic. On 13 March 1971, the Constitution of Syria was adopted. It defines Syria as a secular socialist state with Islam recognized as the majority religion. The constitution gives the president the right to declare war and in state of emergency, to appoint ministers, to issue laws that, except in the emergency case, require ratification by the People's Council and to amend the constitution. The president is approved by Syrian citizens in a referendum. According to article 154 of the constitution of 1971, "The term of the incumbent President of the Republic expires after 7 years [...]".¹⁰ Syria's legislative branch is the unicameral People's Council with 250 members elected for a four year term. Syria does not hold multi-party elections for the legislature. Two thirds of the seats are automatically allocated to the ruling coalition.¹¹

1.5.2 The judicial branch

Syria's judicial branches consist of the Supreme Constitutional Court, the High Judicial Council, the Court of Cassation, and the State Security Courts with Islamic legislation characterizing the main source of jurisprudence. In addition, due to its historical background, Syria's judicial system has elements of Ottoman and French laws. Syria has three levels of courts: courts of first instance, courts of appeals, and the constitutional court representing the highest tribunal. Religious courts handle questions of personal and family law. The Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) was abolished by President Bashar al-Assad by legislative decree No. 53 on 21 April 2011 due to the recent uprising.¹² The court, founded during the state of emergency declared in 1963, is the pre-eminent instrument in Syria's persecution efforts, continues to incapacitate the rule of law in Syria. The SSSC is utilized as political tool to suppress the opposition and political minorities through the use of unfair trials. Coupled with Syria's emergency decrees, the SSSC is authorized to take any civilian into its military-style system, where any rights the defendant may technically have had quickly disappear. In fact, the SSSC has been utilized almost exclusively to attack and punish political opponents through the exercise of arbitrary justice. First and foremost, the SSSC has been used to target "Islamists", but newly the state has set its sights on political activists, including journalists and bloggers.¹³

⁹ http://www.un.org/sc/searchres_sc_members_english.asp?sc_members=148

¹⁰ http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html

¹¹ <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2008/08/22/syria-elections-without-politics/4vh>

¹² <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2011/04/22/pr-342711.htm>

¹³ <http://blog.freedomhouse.org/weblog/2009/04/the-sssc-syrias-rule-of-law-black-hole.html>

1.5.3 The President

In fact, Syria is an authoritarian regime that shows merely the forms of some democratic components. The President of Syria is Bashar al-Assad, who replaced his father Hafez al-Assad soon after his death on 10 June 2000. Hafez al-Assad had been in power for 30 years. Immediately after Hafez al-Assad's death, the Parliament amended the constitution by reducing the obligatory minimum age of the President from 40 to 34. This allowed his son, Bashar al-Assad, who was at that time 34 years old, to become legally eligible for nomination by the ruling Baath party. On 10 July 2000, Bashar al-Assad was elected President by referendum in which he ran unopposed¹⁴, garnering 97.29% of the vote, according to Syrian Government statistics.¹⁵



Bashar al-Assad

Having studied to become an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) in Damascus and London, Bashar was groomed for the presidency after the unexpected car accident in 1994 of his elder brother Basil. As a result, he joined the army and became colonel in 1999. Bashar's modernizing credentials were somewhat boosted by his role in a domestic anti-corruption drive. However, after an initial phase of increased openness, Bashar's position as head of the Syrian state rests on his presidency of the Baath Party and his command-in-chief of the army.

1.5.4 The Party System

The Baath Party is a Syrian political party consisting of a mixture of Arab nationalist and Arab socialist interests, calling for the renaissance or resurrection and unification of the Arab world into a single state free from any foreign dominance¹⁶. Western imperialism and capitalism were thought as the key obstacle to Arab unity.¹⁷ Contrary to the split People's Party, the Baath Party is dedicated to a clear organized ideology. Baath means literally "rebirth".

Although Syrian citizens ostensibly vote for the president and members of parliament, they do not have any possibility to change their government. President Hafez Al-Assad was confirmed by unopposed referenda five times. His son, Bashar Al-Assad, also was confirmed by an unopposed referendum in July 2000 and May 2007. The President and his senior aides, in particular those in the military and security services, ultimately make most basic decisions in political and economic life, with a very limited degree of public accountability.¹⁸

Political opposition to the President is not tolerated. Syria has been under a state of emergency since 1963. Syrian governments have justified martial law by the state of war that continues to exist with Israel and by continuing threats posed by terrorist groups. Syria's Emergency Law effectively means suspending most constitutional protections for citizens. The Emergency Law was rescinded on 21 April 2011 during the protest (details later).

¹⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/27/AR2007052701117.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm#history>

¹⁶ <http://www.baath-party.org/eng/constitution1.htm>

¹⁷ Moubayed, Sami M. (2000) *Damascus Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, University Press of America, Introduction, p. 15

¹⁸ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm#gov>

Nine smaller parties in Syria are allowed to exist and, along with the Ba'ath Party, make up the National Progressive Front, abbreviated as NPF, which is a grouping of parties that represents the sole framework of legal political party participation for citizens. Created to give the appearance of a multi-party system, the NPF is in reality predominated by the Ba'ath Party and does not change the essentially one-party character of the political system. Non-Baath parties included in the NPF represent small political groupings of a few hundred members each and conform rigorously to Ba'ath Party and government policies. Reports in the wake of the June Ba'ath Party Congress stated that the government was considering legislation to permit the formation of new political parties and the legalization of parties previously banned. However, these changes have not taken place. In addition, some 15 small independent parties outside the NPF operate without government sanction.

1.5.5 The Parliament

The Ba'ath Party dominates the parliament, also known as Syria's People's Council. With members elected every four years, the Council has technically no independent authority. The executive branch retains ultimate power over the legislative process, although parliamentarians may modify draft laws and criticize policies. Referring to the constitution and its bylaws, a group of ten parliamentarians can propose legislation. During 2001, two independent members of parliament, Ma'mun al-Humsy and Riad Seif, who had advocated political reforms, were stripped of their parliamentary immunity, tried and convicted of charges of "attempting to illegally change the constitution."¹⁹ Seif was released from prison in early 2006, but was detained and sentenced to prison again in January 2008.

1.5.6 Developments since Bashar al-Assad assumed power

After Bashar al-Assad assumed power in 2000, there was a surge of interest in political reform. Human rights activists and other civil society advocates, as well as some parliamentarians, became more outspoken during a period from July 2000-February 2001, which is also known as "Damascus Spring". Assad appointed several reform-minded advisors to formal and less formal positions, and appointed some people with similar orientation in his cabinet. The 2001 arrest and long-term detention of the two reformist parliamentarians and the apparent marginalizing of some of the reformist advisors in the past ten years indicate that the pace of any political reform in Syria is likely to be much slower than the short-lived Damascus Spring promises. A crackdown on civil society in 2005, in the wake of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, and again in the late winter and spring of 2006, coupled with the early-2011 mobilization of security forces to prevent protests and demonstrations have reinforced the perception that any steps toward political reform were likely to be piecemeal and halting at best.

In October 2008, twelve members of the Damascus Declaration National Council were sentenced up to two years in prison. The Damascus Declaration is a civil society reform document written in 2005 and signed by a confederation of opposition parties and individual activists who aspire to cooperate with the government to achieve more civil liberties and democratic political reform. The government has shown no hesitation in suppressing those who advocate for legal, human, or minority rights.²⁰

1.5.7 Freedom of the media

Assad's regime and the Baath Party control and own the vast majority of Syria's media. Criticism of the president and his family is not permitted. The press, both foreign and domestic, is heavily censored for material deemed threatening or embarrassing the government. A brief period of

¹⁹ <http://globaledege.msu.edu/countries/Syria/government>

²⁰ <http://www.avvo.com/legal-guides/ugc/us-department-of-state-government-and-political-conditions--syria>

relative press freedom arose after Bashar became president in 2000. A later crackdown, however, imposed a range of restrictions.²¹ Owing to the fact that these matters are largely beyond possible government control, many Syrians have gained access to foreign television broadcasts, usually via satellite, as well as few state-run networks. The government set out conditions for licensing private, commercial FM radio stations. Nonetheless, those radio stations may not broadcast news or political subject. It has newly permitted access to previously blocked websites, including YouTube.com, Amazon.com, and Facebook.com. However, due to the fact that many Syrian computer users had already learned to go around these restrictions, the move is substantially cosmetic.²²

2 Human rights situation in Syria and the 2011 Syrian uprising

2.1 Definition of Human Rights

Human rights advocates commonly agree that, six decades after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the implementation of human rights is still more a vision than a real-world situation. Human rights violations exist overall on the globe²³.

A human rights violation can be defined as an act done unlawfully and not in accordance with the valid and effective regulations codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted on 10 December 1948 in Paris. The utmost features of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are for instance that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. [...]” (Art. 1), “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.[...]” (Art. 2), “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” (Art. 3) and “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” (Art. 5).²⁴

2.2 Suppression of political opposition, minorities and unfair trials

With reference to the Amnesty International annual report of 2011, Syria’s authority remained intolerant to dissidents. The government failed to clarify the fate of some missing, particularly political prisoners. The Kurdish minority are denied equal access to social, economic and cultural rights. The most serious human rights violations in Syria are repression of dissent, torture and other ill-treatment in police stations and security agencies’ detention centers, Suspected Islamists and suspected members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood faced arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention and torture, discrimination and violence against women and girls, discriminations against Kurdish minority, refugees and asylum-seekers, death penalty, absence of rule of law and lack of legal protection. In Syria, the national bar association and human rights lawyers reported trials to be unfair. According to them, Kurds faced permanent discrimination and restrictions on use of their language and cultural expression.

Since 1963, the emergency rule has given security forces cumulative powers of arrest and detention. From 2 to 28 February 1982, Hafez al-Assad answered to an insurrection in the city of Hama by

²¹ <http://www.squidoo.com/damasucs-syria>

²² <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm#political>

²³ <http://www.humanrights.com/what-are-human-rights/violations-of-human-rights/article-3.html>

²⁴ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

sending a paramilitary force to blindly kill between 10,000 and 20,000 civilians including children, women, and the elderly, known as “Hama massacre”.²⁵

For many years, the Washington based NGO “Freedom House” has rated political rights in Syria as “7” — the “least free” rating on its scale of 1 to 7 — and has given Syria a rating of “Not Free”.²⁶ Freedom House also remarks that the freedom of expression in Syria is extensively restricted. It is unlawful to publish material that harms national unity and damages the image of Syria.

Syria is home to 1.7 million Kurds that constitute 9% of the population, forming the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in the country.²⁷ The Kurdish minorities were denied citizenship until April 2011.²⁸

Corresponding to the Human Rights Watch, Syria has a long history of unfair trials, arbitrary arrest, systematic torture and prolonged detention of suspects. Thousands of political prisoners remain in detention, with many belonging to the banned Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party.²⁹ The Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) is the largest political opposition organization in many Arab states and is considered as President Bashar Assad’s arch-nemesis. The level of popular support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria today is difficult to gauge.³⁰ Membership in the Syrian Brotherhood became a capital offence in Syria in 1980 under the Emergency Law.

Article 520 of the Syrian penal code of 1949 prohibits having homosexual relations, i.e. “carnal relations against the order of nature”, and provides for at least three-year imprisonment.³¹

Concerning the freedom of movement, the secret police prevents people from even approaching foreign embassies to get a visa to travel abroad. Furthermore, Syrians may not leave the country without an “exit visa” granted by the authorities.³²

2.3 Poverty

In September, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food expressed “concern that an estimated two to three million people in Syria were living in “extreme poverty” and urged the government to develop a comprehensive national strategy to realize the right to adequate food.”³³ According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW) world report³⁴, the human rights in Syria have been classified as “poor”.

2.4 Media and Internet

With reference to a report by Reporters without Borders in 2008, “journalists have to tightly censor themselves for fear of being thrown into Adra prison (in suburban Damascus) where most political prisoners, including dissident journalists, are held.”³⁵

²⁵ <http://www.meforum.org/683/syrian-reform-what-lies-beneath>

²⁶ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/pdf/Charts2006.pdf>

²⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/16/syrian-human-rights-unchanged-assad>

²⁸ <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2011/04/08/pr-340560.htm>

²⁹ http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=OZ3a4M_oZccC&pg=PA486&dq=%22Human+Rights+Watch+World+Report+2005+Events+of+2004%22+syria&hl=en&ei=3g91TNjTB9mXOJ_C2M4G&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false

³⁰ http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0604/0604_2.htm

³¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4a16a9d92.pdf>

³² <http://www.economist.com/node/17155868>

³³ http://files.amnesty.org/air11/air_2011_full_en.pdf

³⁴ <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/wr2010.pdf>, p.555

³⁵ <http://en.rsf.org/syria-syria-07-02-2008,25441>

Internet censorship in Syria is harsh. The number of news media has increased in the past decade, but the ruling Baath Party continues to maintain control of the press.³⁶ Journalists and bloggers have been arrested and tried.³⁷ In Syria, websites such as Wikipedia in Arabic, Youtube and Facebook have been intermittently blocked in the past without explanation³⁸. Syria has been on Reporters Without Borders' *Enemy of the Internet* list since 2006 when the list was established.³⁹

2.5 Statements by the UN and Human Rights Organizations

During the 2011 Syrian uprising, a UN report considered actions taken by the Syrian security forces as being "gross violations of human rights".⁴⁰ The UN report documented shooting recruits that refused to fire into peaceful crowds without warning, brutal interrogations consisting of elements of sexual abuse of men and gang rape of young boys, staking out hospitals when wounded sought assistance, and shooting of children as young as two. Even children in Syria were tortured, exposed to arbitrary detentions and violations by Syrian authorities. As of 9 November 2011, a released UN Human Rights Council's report stated that "256 children had been killed by state forces."⁴¹

The country is governed by a single party without democratic and free elections. The authorities harass and imprison human rights activists and other critics of the government. Freedom of expression, assembly and association are rigorously controlled. Ethnic minorities and women face discrimination. According to Human Rights Watch, President Bashar al-Assad failed to ameliorate Syria's human rights situation in the first ten years of his rule⁴², and in 2011, Syria's human rights situation had deteriorated to one of the worst in the world.⁴³ According to Amnesty International, the government may be guilty of crimes against humanity based on "witness accounts of deaths in custody, torture and arbitrary detention," during the crackdown against the 2011 uprising.⁴⁴

2.6 The outbreak of the 2011 uprisings

The 2011 uprising has its roots in an ongoing domestic conflict in Syria. On 26 January 2011, the first public demonstrations took place.

Mass protests erupted in Daraa, a city in southwestern Syria on 17 March.⁴⁵ The situation rapidly changed into a utterly nationwide revolt, with protesters demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad and the overthrow of the government.

The 2011 Syrian uprising became a part of the Arab Spring, a movement spanning the entire Arab World demanding greater political freedom and an end to autocracy. Inspired by the successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, Syrian



³⁶ <http://en.rsf.org/syrie-ten-years-after-bashar-el-assad-s-15-07-2010-37959.html>
³⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/16/syria-human-rights-unchanged-assad>
³⁸ <http://www.economist.com/node/11792330>
³⁹ <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-syria,39773.html>
⁴⁰ http://articles.cnn.com/2011-11-28/middleeast/world_m-east_syria_un_report_1_human-rights-security-forces-syrian-forces?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST
⁴¹ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052976208995804577060613669457032.html>
⁴² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/16/syria-human-rights-unchanged-assad>
⁴³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/24/us-syria-rights-idUSTRE70N5S620110124>
⁴⁴ http://articles.nydailynews.com/2011-07-06/news/29762944_1_rights-group-president-bashar-assad-amnesty-international-s-middle-east
⁴⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/23/daraa-protests-syria>

protesters have made use of strategies such as marches, rioting, hunger strikes and vandalism.

The unrest and civil resistance primarily aimed at ending nearly five decades of Baathist rule. The uprising has been described as "unprecedented" by several⁴⁶ political experts.⁴⁷

2.7 First reactions by the Syrian government

As the uprising did not come to an end, the Syrian government began deploying tanks and snipers as methods to combat the protesters. The Syrian Army has besieged the cities of Daraa, Duma, Baniyas, Hama, Homs, Aleppo, Talkalakh, Rastan, Jisr ash-Shughur, Deir ez-Zor, and Latakia, among other towns.⁴⁸ With regard to witness accounts⁴⁹, soldiers who have refused to open fire against civilians were summarily executed by the Syrian Army.⁵⁰

The government of Syria has denied the reports of defections and blames "armed gangs" for causing trouble.⁵¹

As of 13 December 2011, at least 3500 civilians and 1500 security forces have been murdered⁵², many more injured, and thousands of protesters have been put into prison. About 12000-15000 people were detained in Syria. Torture has been widespread over many years and it has become particularly rough during the 2011 uprising.⁵³ The number of killed people in the 2011 Syrian uprising is not precisely determinable as depending on sources different statistics are stated. As of 22 December 2011, Syrian government claimed that 2000 security forces⁵⁴, only 700 civilians⁵⁵ were killed during the Syrian uprising in 2011.

Since the start of the uprising, the Syrian government has conceded few times: On 21 April 2011, the emergency law in Syria was rescinded after forty-eight years of enactment, which had granted the government sweeping authority to suspend constitutional rights. Additionally, on 24 July 2011, a draft law was presented in parliament to allow for the introduction of more political parties under the conditions that they would not be based on tribal, religious or ethnic beliefs and does not discriminate against gender or race. Nonetheless, these concessions were widely seen from trivial, "largely symbolic", "superficial" to "useless" by protesters who wish more meaningful reforms.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5imPTFixkG47Y44ZniAQVv4wC6UGw?docId=CNG.301dc17b5d60dc6790da1726987ffe7d.c71>

⁴⁷ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704461304576216761028539214.html>

⁴⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/05/201151722757252901.html>

⁴⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/06/201168175624573155.html>

⁵⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/07/us-syria-soldier-defection/idUSTRE7561R720110607>

⁵¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/06/201161064328691559.html>

⁵² <http://in.reuters.com/article/2011/12/13/syria-idINDEE7BC00720111213>

⁵³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14726294>

⁵⁴ <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-12-22/syria-arab-league/52159302/1>

⁵⁵ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2011/Sep-16/148923-syrian-forces-kill-six-villagers-near-hama-activists.ashx#axzz1cFlfrpX0>

⁵⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/26/world/middleeast/26syria.html?_r=1&hp

2.8 Reactions to the action by the Syrian government

The Arab League⁵⁷, the European Union⁵⁸, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon⁵⁹, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation⁶⁰, the Gulf Cooperation Council⁶¹, Saudi Arabia⁶², Turkey⁶³ and the United States⁶⁴ have condemned the use of violence against the protesters, among others. After a crowd attacked the US embassy in Damascus in July 2011, Hillary Clinton said, that “President Assad is not indispensable and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power.”⁶⁵ The government of Iran, Assad’s primary regional and political ally, initially assumed the demonstrations were a foreign plot⁶⁶, but President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has since then called for reforms and for both sides to reach an understanding⁶⁷, and stated that neither side has the right to kill others.⁶⁸ The Arab League has suspended Syria's membership over the government's response to the crackdown. On 18 August 2011, the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton made a statement on behalf of the EU regarding the Syrian uprising: “[...] The EU has repeatedly emphasized that the brutal repression must be stopped, detained protesters released, free access by international humanitarian and human rights organizations and media allowed, and a genuine and inclusive national dialogue launched. The Syrian leadership, however, has remained defiant to calls from the EU as well as the broad international community including Syria's own neighbors. This shows that the Syrian regime is unwilling to change. The President's promises of reform have lost all credibility as reforms cannot succeed under permanent repression. The EU notes the complete loss of Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people and the necessity for him to step aside. [...]”⁶⁹ A United Nations Security Council resolution drafted by France in co-operation with Britain, Germany and Portugal in October 2011 condemning Syria over its crackdown on anti-government protesters was vetoed by China and Russia, making the US “outraged”.⁷⁰ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, France, Gabon, Germany, Nigeria, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States voted in favor of the resolution; India, South Africa, Brazil and Lebanon abstained. No support for the draft resolution from the so called BRIC nations⁷¹ - i.e. Brazil, Russia, India and China - was received.

A statement by the President of the United Nations Security Council at its 6598th meeting, held on 3 August 2011, was made concerning the ongoing conflict in Syria. Parts of its wording sounds as following:

⁵⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/world/middleeast/arab-league-votes-to-suspend-syria-over-its-crackdown-on-protesters.html>

⁵⁸ <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=45066>

⁵⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011318231622114396.html>

⁶⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/14/us-syria-idUSTRE77D0LP20110814>

⁶¹ <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/06/161072.html>

⁶² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8687912/Syria-unrest-Saudi-Arabia-calls-on-killing-machine-to-stop.html>

⁶³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/08/2011828132644450754.html>

⁶⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/08/2011828132644450754.html>

⁶⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14115762>

⁶⁶ <http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2011/08/15/162473.html>

⁶⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15416410>

⁶⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/08/201182582619939913.html>

⁶⁹ <http://www.eurunion.org/eu/2011-News-Releases/EU/NR-29/11-STATEMENT-BY-HIGH-REPRESENTATIVE-CATHERINE-ASHTON-ON-BEHALF-OF-THE-EU-ON-EU-ACTION-FOLLOWING-THE-ESCALATION-OF-VIOLENT-REPRESSION-IN-SYRIA.html>

⁷⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15177114>

⁷¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/05/us-syria-un-idUSTRE7937M220111005>

“The Security Council expresses its grave concern at the deteriorating situation in Syria, and expresses profound regret at the death of many hundreds of people.

The Security Council condemns the widespread violations of human rights and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities.

The Security Council calls for an immediate end to all violence and urges all sides to act with utmost restraint, and to refrain from reprisals, including attacks against state institutions.

The Security Council calls on the Syrian authorities to fully respect human rights and to comply with their obligations under applicable international law. Those responsible for the violence should be held accountable. [...]”⁷²

2.9 The demands and further developments

The leading figures in the 2011 Syrian uprising are members of the Syrian government, particularly president Bashar al-Assad and Syrian Baath Party loyalists as well as armed forces of the Syrian Army. The Syrian National Council, anti-government protesters and further groups are forming the opposition. Dictatorship, lack of an effective constitution, government corruption, unemployment and particularly inspiration from Tunisia and Egypt revolutions in early 2011 can be seen as triggers for the current situation. Demanded by the protestors in Syria are inter alia resignation of Bashar al-Assad, democratic reforms⁷³, regime change⁷⁴, more civil rights and recognition of Kurdish rights.

After the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian uprising, as of November 2011, 7600 people fled to Turkey⁷⁵; as of 4 October 2011, approximately 6000 people to Lebanon⁷⁶ and as of 17 December 2011, additional 4500 refugees arrived in Lebanon⁷⁷. Some other destinations of refugees are notably Jordan⁷⁸ and Libya⁷⁹.

On 1 December 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay called for international intervention to protect Syrian civilians from the government’s crackdown and warned “the Syrian authorities’ continual ruthless repression, if not stopped now, can drive the country into a full-fledged civil war.”⁸⁰

On 23 December 2011, two suicide car bombings occurred in Damascus. Over 40 people were killed and at least 165 injured.⁸¹ The Syrian government blamed Islamist militants for this tragedy, whilst the Syrian opposition accused the government of staging the attacks to justify its crackdown on the uprising. Immediately afterwards, the Syrian government agreed for the first time to let observers of

⁷² http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_pres_statements11.htm

⁷³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/08/us-syria-idUSTRE72N2MC20110408>

⁷⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2011/s3174120.htm>

⁷⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/15/world/middleeast/refugees-from-syria-settle-in-for-long-wait-in-turkey.html?pagewanted=all>

⁷⁶ <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/04/170187.html>

⁷⁷ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/Dec-17/157156-nearly-5000-syrian-refugees-in-north-lebanon.ashx#axzz1hIn5MchC>

⁷⁸ <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/12/14/182645.html>

⁷⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8947419/Syrian-refugees-seek-shelter-in-Libya.html>

⁸⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/03/world/middleeast/un-says-action-needed-to-prevent-civil-war-in-syria.html>

⁸¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16324598>

the Arab League into the country. Due to the resistance of China and Russia in the United Nations Security Council, regional organization will play a vital role in this conflict.

3 Conclusion & Challenge

As of 11 January 2012, the uprising in Syria is still not finishing and the human rights situation has not improved at all. The United Nations Security Council must review and re-discuss the conflict occurring in Syria and Syria's alarming human rights situation. Optimally, a drafted resolution will be passed unanimously which then will have the legally binding character exclusively reserved to the Security Council and unmistakably expresses the Council's concern about Syria's ongoing conflict and human rights situation. It is of the utmost importance to find a solution to put an end to Syria's human rights violations, uprising, hostilities and regional frictions as soon as possible, while balancing international community's interests and the core value of the Council to maintain global peace and security.

4 Further reading suggestions

- Statements by the President of the United Nations Security Council, on 3 August 2011: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/442/75/PDF/N1144275.pdf?OpenElement>
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>
- United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Seventeenth special session, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic of 23 November 2011: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/A.HRC.S-17.2.Add.1_en.pdf
- Amnesty International annual Report 2011. The state of the world's human rights: http://files.amnesty.org/air11/air_2011_full_en.pdf pp. 313-315 (Syria)
- Human Rights Watch World Report 2011: <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/wr2011.pdf> pp. 584-590 (Syria)
- Charter of the United Nations: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/index.shtml>
- UNSCR archive: <http://www.un.org/documents/scres.htm>

Pictures

- Map of Syria, U.S. Department of State: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm> (24 December 2011)
- Bashar al-Assad: <http://www.straight.com/article-539316/vancouver/gwynne-dyer-arab-league-has-changed-sides> (25 December 2011)
- The 2011 Syrian uprising – protest: http://cdn9.wn.com/pd/49/2e/33caca174c8139e83e7a5a471ff1_grande.jpg (25 December 2011)