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## 2009 Human Rights Report: Syria

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR  
[2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#)  
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Syria, with a population of approximately 20 million, is a republic under the authoritarian presidential regime of Bashar al-Asad. The president makes key decisions with counsel from a small circle of security advisors, ministers, and senior members of the ruling Ba'ath (Arab Socialist Renaissance) Party. The constitution mandates the primacy of Ba'ath party leaders in state institutions and society. President al-Asad and party leaders, supported by security services, dominated all three branches of government. In 2007 President al-Asad was confirmed for another seven-year term in a "yes or no" referendum that local and international human rights advocates considered neither free nor fair. Civilian authorities maintained effective control of the security forces.

During the year the government and members of the security forces committed numerous serious human rights abuses, and the human rights situation worsened. The government systematically repressed citizens' abilities to change their government. In a climate of impunity, there were instances of arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life. Members of the security forces tortured and physically abused prisoners and detainees. Security forces arrested and detained individuals--including activists, organizers, and other regime critics--without due process. Lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention remained a serious problem. During the year the government sentenced to prison several high-profile members of the human rights and civil society communities. The government violated citizens' privacy rights and imposed significant restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and travel. An atmosphere of corruption pervaded the government. Violence and societal discrimination against women continued, as did sexual exploitation, increasingly aimed at Iraqi refugees, including minors. The government discriminated against minorities, particularly Kurds and Ahvazis, and severely restricted workers' rights.

### RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

During the year there were reports of arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life.

In early January Yusuf Jabouli died in custody. On January 1, state security officers arrested him at his home in al-Baab, Aleppo province, and on January 7, officers delivered his body to his family, according to human rights observers. His family reportedly was not allowed to open his coffin or to invite friends and extended family to attend his funeral. Intelligence services monitored the burial. Jabouli reportedly taught Islamic studies at public schools in Aleppo and was the founder of an e-mail group called "al-Mishkaat" (The Lamp). The reasons for his arrest and cause of death remained unknown at year's end.

Also in January Muhammad al-Shawa died in custody. In August 2008 authorities arrested al-Shawa along with a number of other individuals in Deir az-Zawr, Aleppo, and Hama, reportedly because authorities suspected they were members of unauthorized Islamic groups. On January 10, according to human rights observers, military intelligence agents returned his body to his family but allowed his family to see only his face. Human rights groups alleged that state intelligence agents tortured him to death.

On June 2, according to the Day Press news Web site, police killed three persons and injured 30 in a violent clash in the town of Ruhaybeh. According to *Day Press*, the conflict erupted when municipal officials, accompanied by police, attempted to destroy 71 houses allegedly constructed without appropriate government approval. Residents were reportedly unarmed. According to local daily newspaper *Al-Ba'ath*, the People's Assembly formed a committee to "discuss" the causes behind the incident; at year's end there had been no further developments in the case.

During the year at least 18 Kurdish soldiers died under mysterious circumstances while performing their required service in the military, bringing the total number of Kurdish conscript deaths over the last five years to at least 36. Authorities frequently attributed the deaths to suicide or accidents, but Kurdish human rights activists and victims' families asserted the deaths were deliberate government killings and demanded the government investigate them. In many cases security agents reportedly monitored preburial proceedings and prevented autopsies. In at least one case, according to a Kurdish human rights organization, authorities warned the family not to ask questions about the soldier's death or to discuss it publicly. Authorities failed to provide documentary evidence to families of the men who reportedly committed suicide.

Suspicious Kurdish conscript deaths during the year included the January 19 death of Barkhadan Khaled Hamo; the February 5 death of Mahmud Hanan Khalil, who reportedly accidentally shot himself while on watch; and the May deaths of Ahmad Saadun, Ahmad Abdulrahim Moustafa--who military authorities claimed died in a traffic accident--and Khabat

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