

SYRIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE (SHRC)

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INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian situation in Syria over the past year, saw a dramatic deterioration unseen since the late eighties. March of this year signalled the fortieth anniversary of the declaration of Emergency Laws in Syria, which have gone far in preventing Syrians from enjoying their basic rights, lead to the suspension of the Constitution and offered infinite authorities and unlimited powers to security forces.

The President, in his address to the new Parliament last March, reneged on his promises of reform which he announced in his inauguration speech in July of 2000 before the Parliament; promises which never came into effect.

During this year, Syrian groups who had not been part of the puppet Progressive Front, intensified their efforts inside Syria as well as abroad. Many of the individuals associated with these groups were subject to interrogation and detention, whilst the unconstitutional Supreme State Security Court was dedicated to handing out its unjust sentences on the remaining ten civil dialogue forums activists and parliamentary members who had called for more freedoms to be given to the people, and who were arrested in the Summer of 2001.

The opposition in exile meanwhile, succeeded in convening a national conference in London in August 2002, called by the Muslim Brotherhood. The conference represented the majority of the Syrian political, ethnic and religious spectrums, and the convenors approved an advanced humanitarian and political-based document which proposed to take the Syrian nation forward.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

FIRST: PRESS AND MEDIA: TIMID STEPS AND SIGNIFICANT OPPRESSION

Syrian authorities pursued to pass a bill of publications in September 2001, which would tighten the control and censorship of Press and media personnel, especially those who are employed on a free-lance basis.

It is notable that press and media sources remain state-owned, and are not free to express anything but the Regime's perspective on all issues pertaining to current affairs, economy, society and culture. However, the authorities carried out timid steps during the past year in issuing permits for some magazines which do not address issues of public interest, as well as for a local advertising radio station.

In a regressive step, the Government suspended the publication of the privately owned 'Al-Doumari' weekly paper, whilst its proprietor, Ali Farzat, was subjected to a vicious harassment as well as a slander campaign, carried out by official press, using his background as a journalist and cartoonist as a pretext for their campaign.

A number of press, satellite TV and news agency correspondents who were employed by foreign outlets to cover Syrian news and events, came under significant pressure to restrict their reports to the official line. Indeed, the authorities delayed issuing permits to work in Syria to many of them, amongst whom were the late Tha'ir Salloum who worked as correspondent for 'Azzaman' in London and the late Ali Jaber of the Kuwaiti 'Asiyasah'. There are a number who remain without permits and of those, most do not wish to speak about their respective plights in hope that the Syrian authorities would eventually grant them permits, and also in fear that if they were to speak publicly, they would face punitive or reprisal measurements from the authorities.

A number of journalists were arrested because they were carrying out their duties, including the two sisters Sheren and Azeeza Sbini for a whole year, and were only released in late April, after an unjust sentence passed by the Supreme State Security Court to imprison them for eight months.

Ibraheem Hamidi, correspondent for the London based 'Al-Hayat', was arrested in Damascus after he wrote a report in mid-December 2002, regarding Syrian preparations on the borders with Iraq, in anticipation of an American lead attack on its neighbour. He was recently released under bail, awaiting sentencing by the Supreme State Security Court.

Restrictions on the usage of the World Wide Web (Internet) remain stringent, and the websites allowed in Syria are a few and their numbers are in decline. Syrian authorities actually banned more websites which address the Syrian situation such as 'Akhbar Al-Sharq' (Levant News), which was banned on in December 2002, and 'Ilaf' and 'Maktoob' which were both banned in April. The Government also continues to ban the official website of SHRC as well as sites published by international human rights organisations. It is strongly believed that Abdul-Rahman Ashaghouri from the village of Beir Ajam in Golan area was arrested some six months ago for accessing the internet and he is still in jail.

SECOND: FREEDOM TO CONGRESS AND PARTY FORMATION: THE ERODED RIGHT

Political and association activities outside the realms of the parties that constitute the Progressive National Front, remain outlawed and offences punishable by law. Despite the fact that government authorities and security forces have ignored some activities carried out by certain elements, such as the banned opposition parties of the Democratic National Gathering, restriction remain largely stringent and monitoring is extremely intensive. Authorities also turned a blind eye to the activities of Iraq and Palestine support committees formed by opposition formations in various Syrian provinces, but restrictions were re-imposed thereupon as strict as ever after war on Iraq came to an end. Authorities also eased restrictions on the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and allowed it to attend a Progressive National Front meeting in a monitoring capacity which may lead to the ban imposed thereon being lifted, however, if the Government continues to implement Law No. 49 of 1980, which stipulates that anyone who is found to merely carry an ideological affiliation with the banned Muslim Brotherhood may be punished by execution. It is worth mentioning that a number of elements were recently arrested in their entirety, for the simple reason that they based their ideals on religious backgrounds. Indeed, the country continues to suffer from the effects of implementing Article 8 of the Constitution which stipulates that the Ba'ath Party is the leading Party of state and of society.

Many reports have been received by the SHRC regarding the failings of non-Ba'athist syndicate members because syndicate laws compel party members to vote for the party candidate, regardless of any shortcomings or previous failures in his or her previous post. Furthermore, it is true that parties and unions have become virtually owned by the Government and the ruling party and therefore, it is impossible for an independent view to find any valid platform within this particular framework. After independent unions were disbanded in March of 1980, and unions loyal to the Government were appointed, union election laws were changed in order to effectively guarantee that the Ba'ath Party and Government loyalists can take over these unions.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND DIALOGUE FORUMS

Efficiency within civil society and dialogue forums have dramatically receded under oppressive restrictions imposed by the Government, despite witnessing a revival during the first year of Bashar Asad's presidency. Indeed, only a few unlicensed forums remain, and towards which the Government turns a blind eye, but which could be closed down at any moment, nevertheless. It is also imperative for these forums to obtain a permit for each and every activity it wishes to hold, with the details of these activities fully disclosed.

The Supreme Security State Court had passed sentences late last Summer on the final group of the detainees in the 'Spring of Damascus' case, who were arrested in the Summer of 2001. An unfair 10 year prison sentence was passed on the Economic Consultant Dr. Arif Daleela and two 5 year prison unjust sentences on Dr. Waleed Al-Binni and the Lawyer Habeeb Isa, whilst removing all their civil rights. In the latter part of last year, a special presidential pardon was issued on Riyadh Al-Turk (73 years old), the General Secretary of the Syrian Communist Party – Political Bureau, in a move which SHRC believes was the result of intense international pressure.

The nine are spending their prison term in Adra prison, north of Damascus. The Supreme State Security Court had also sentenced the following at a later stage of last year: Habeeb Saleh (3 years), Fawwaz Tello (5 years), Kamal Allabwani (5 years) and Hassan Al-Sa'doon (2 years), whilst the Penal Court sentenced the two Members, Mohammed Ma'moon Al-Humsi and Riyadh Seif to 5 years each. The verdicts consisted on a number of ambiguous offences including criticising Constitution and encouraging the amendment thereof, fabricating and promoting news which lead to weakening the nation's resolve and armed disobedience. The Court, which had prevented the defendant's families and media from attending any of the hearings, failed to prove any of these charges, and prevented their representatives from defending them. In fact the court dismissed the lawyer Anwar Al-Binni from the hearing upon attempting to represent his clients, and subsequently disbarred him from his profession.

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

Human Rights organisations operating inside Syria, which the Syrian Government refuses to license, were subject to immense pressure in an attempt to prevent them from carrying out their work. Members of 'Committees for Defending Human Rights in Suriyya', which is headed by the lawyer Aktham Na'isa, was subject to intense harassment and numerous security summons, particularly their active members in Hama province.

Activists in 'Human Rights Society in Syria' also came under intense pressure in the form of harassments and security force summons, as the Association's president, the Lawyer Haitham Al-Maleh, was suspended from the Bar Syndicate for 3 months and summoned to appear before a Military Judge and was recently prevented from travelling outside Syria. The Association's secretary, Razan Zaitouni came under considerable security harassment and was prevented from travelling outside the country, whilst other members were summoned before a Military Judge charged with printing and publishing the Society's publication 'Tayyarat'.

The Lawyer Anwar Al-Bunni was barred from working in any court for three years and was also dismissed from a Court hearing because he was attempting to defend his clients Arif Daleela and Mohammed Ma'moun Al-Humsi. Mr. Al-Bunni also received a number of serious warnings and threats from Syrian security sources.

Abdul Majeed Manjouna, also a Lawyer and a leading figure within the banned opposition party, The Socialist Union Party, also had his membership of the Aleppo chapter of the Lawyers' Society rescinded, because he had defended the 'Spring of Damascus' suspects, and was recently prevented from travelling abroad after participating in a seminar held in Paris on the 40th anniversary of the imposition of the State of Emergency in Syria.

The family of Nazar Nayyounf, the Human Rights Activist, also suffered harassment and cordon by the security authorities and Party elements in the Syrian Coastal region. Mr. Nayyounf's father and his three brothers were all sacked from their civil service jobs, and were asked to disown Mr. Nayyounf and his statements and to label him with obscene attributes. However, their commitment to family values and ethics made them victim to a series of punishment procedures at the hands of regional security authorities and Party elements.

UNLAWFUL DETENTION FILES

Due to the absence of the rule of law and its replacement with a martial law and a rising number of security elements, Syrian citizens have been subject to the horrifying prospect of being detained at any time and from any location. This prospect is by no means limited to those who live inside Syria, whether citizens or residents, but also befalls tourists and visitors, Syrian and otherwise. Indeed, this year was littered with huge numbers of people who were harassed and detainees who were treated badly both on the physical and psychological fronts.

FIRST: THE UNRESOLVED FILE: DETAINEES AND MISSING PERSONS.

The Syrian Human Rights Committee managed to account for more than 17,000 political detainees arrested during the late seventies and early eighties of the previous century. The majority of those were members of the Muslim Brotherhood or sympathisers therewith. None of those detainees have been released nor has the SHRC managed to find any trace of them in Syrian prisons through its numerous investigations and gathered information. The SHRC believes that many of those were killed in the massacres that were carried out in a number of Syrian prisons, including the infamous massacre of Palmyra (Tadmur) prison carried out by the ex-Vice President Rif'at Al-Asad, in which almost 1,000 Muslim Brotherhood detainees were killed, and the mass execution processes carried out by security forces also in the infamous Palmyra prison over the course of ten years, where each group would consist between 20 to 50 detainees. Therefore, security authorities found no alternative but to close down Palmyra prison, which became renowned for the atrocities committed within its walls, in Autumn of 2001 by presidential decree, in an attempt to bury the horrific and gruesome events that occurred in all its corners, including brutal torture and murder. Whilst no news of any further releases appeared this year, a report was published carrying worrying news of the re-detention of three Air Force officers whom the Supreme State Security Court had sentenced to twenty years in 1982. After serving the full sentence, Sednaya prison authorities informed them that they would be released, only for an Air Force Security personnel to arrest them all over again and transfer them to the Air Force Intelligence prison. Reports have indicated that they have been tortured and suffered severe mistreatment. The three officers are: Mohammed Rafeeq Omar Al-Hamami, Mahmoud Ahmed Hamdi Kiki and Mohammed Bashar Al-Ashi.

It is noteworthy that the Syrian Government failed to carry out any steps which may lead to revealing the fates of the missing detainees, who either died in their prison cells due to torture, malnutrition or disease or were killed in the massacres that were carried out. Indeed the Government suppresses and rejects any application made by detainee parents or families, to reveal any information in this regard. Furthermore, the authorities have failed to carry out the most basic need to inform the families of those who have died, of the whereabouts of the bodies, so that they may be registered as demised with the relevant civil authorities so that their respective civil and financial affairs can be finally settled.

On another level, the SHRC managed to account for and record the names of almost 600 detainees in Sednaya prison near Damascus, most of whom are considered members of the Muslim Brotherhood and others who are members of the Arab Ba'th (National Leadership), Hizb-ul-Tahrir. There are also a few who are considered members of Communist and left-wing parties.

Syrian authorities had released Haitham N'al in August of last year, after spending 27 years in prison because of his membership of the Arab Communist Organisation.

SECOND: A NEW FILE: COLLECTIVE DETENTIONS

SHRC has learnt that a wide detention operation of suspected opponents of the Government, was carried out by the security forces, has led to the deterioration of security in Syria to levels unseen since the eighties, when the same authorities carried out extensive search and detention operations in all Syrian cities, and carried out numerous massacres in various places.

Indeed, SHRC revealed in April the names of 24 detainees in Al-Zabadani, in rural Damascus, who have been detained for the past 2 and a half years, and only disclosed recently. These detainees were kept in 'Palestine Branch for Military Interrogation' in Damascus, where they were severely tortured and subject to immense physical and psychological abuse, and were then reported to have been transferred to an unknown location, thought to be Sednaya prison. The detainees are Mohammed Al-Khateeb, Sameer Al-Athma, Ihsan Al-Athma, Ahmed Kan'an, Abdul Salam Al-Dalati, Ahmed Abdullah, Basil Al-Habalati, Hasan Al-Agha, Khaled Al-Fawwaz, Mohammed Khareeta, Abdul Lateef Al-Mweel, Abdul Ra'of Al-Mweel, Husam Al-Mweel, Bilal Al-Dalati, Salahuddin Al-Dalati, Qasim Mohammed Al-Dalati, Mohammed Al-Dalati, Mohammed Abdul Raheem Al-Dalati, Husam Sheikh Deeb, Hisham Harran, Jameel Abu Hamad, Ali Ahmed Al-Teenawi, Raed Al-Teenawi and Husam Al-Teenawi. No one knows precisely what the charges made against the detainees are, although reports indicate that the detentions were made on some religious activity background.

Reports to SHRC have also indicated that more than 35 people from Aleppo province were detained without any information as to the reasons for these detentions. These people are locked away and kept completely from the outside world and are expected to have been tortured and physically abused. Reports that have reached SHRC also claimed that non-Syrian personnel took part in the interrogation of the detainees. SHRC has become aware of the names of some of those detained, who are: Mohammed Husam Dabash, Ahmed Idlibi, Jameel Sallo, Mohammed Bakri Haider, Abdul Ghani Al-Mohammed, Abdul Qader Armanazi, Abdul Wahhab Da'as, Shareef Dhalam, Ahmed Abu Allam, Abdul Rahman Al-Husari, Mohammed Abu Daqqa, Hussein Kallo, Husam Karbooj, Mustafa Saqqal, Abdul Razzaq Haj Ahmed, Abdul Lateef Ishaq, Badr Zwein, Ahmed Haj, Sulaiman, Mohammed Khaled Hameedo, Mazin Tarmaneeni, Mu'awiya Sadiqlali, Khaled Sulaiman and Mahmood Al-Omar.

More than 20 people were detained recently in areas in rural Damascus, and reports claimed that they were disciples of Shaikh Jawdat Saeed. One of the reports received by SHRC stated that the following were arrested: Mohammed Osama Nassar, Abdul Kareem Al-Saqqa, Sariya Al-Shourbaji, Osama Al-Shourbaji, Yahya Al-Shourbaji, Tareq Al-Shourbaji, Mohammed Qreitim, Ahmed Qreitim, Haitham Al-Hamwi, Mohammed Ali Khoulani, Akram Khoulani, Hasan Al-Kurdi, Bashar Ma'admani, Mu'taz Murad, Sulaiman Shahada and Mohammed Shahada, and no information as to the location where they are being detained or their possible fate.

THIRD: THE FORCIBLY DEPORTED

Security Forces continue to hold Maher Arrar, who is also a Canadian national, and who was forcibly deported by American Immigration Authorities to Syria whilst passing by a Transit lounge on his way back to Canada. SHRC had received confirmed reports that Mr. Arrar has been subject to severe torture and intensive interrogation and charged with cooperating with Al-Qaeda.

The Security Forces also detained a number of Syrians whom had been forcibly deported from Pakistan and delivered to Syria, including the student Bara' As'ad Abdul Lateef who was deported by Pakistani authorities last summer. Reports received by SHRC indicate that he has been subject to torture and physical abuse in an attempt to force him to offer information as to his friends and acquaintances.

In late November of last year, Mohammed Saeed Al-Sakhri (A member of the Muslim Brotherhood) and his family were arrested in Damascus Airport after Italian authorities had refused his application for asylum and forcibly deported him to Syria only days after arriving in Italy. Al-Sakhri has been subjected to severe torture, whilst some reports state that he may have died under torture. Security Forces released his wife and 4 children after several weeks of imprisonment.

Reports received by SHRC also indicated that Syrian Security Forces have arrested Syrian and Palestinian nationals deported by Iran who suspected that they may have been in Afghanistan. SHRC has learnt that amongst them are: Ahmed Hamza, Ayman Yahya, Firas Ghannam, Mazin Nazzal, Jihad Mustafa and Mohammed Kheir Najjar, whom SHRC believes had all been severely tortured and abused.

FOURTH: SYRIANS IN IRAQ

Hundreds of Syrian families who fled Syria in the 60s, 70s and 80s as a result of oppression, persecution and absence of freedoms in Syria, reside in Iraq. Those consist of an array of Syrian political affiliations, including the Ba'ath Party Wing (National Leadership) which consists of the historical leadership of the Party which Hafez Asad toppled finally in 1970. These also consist of hundreds of families who are affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood who fled to neighbouring countries during the 80s, and found opportunities for a decent life, shelter and sanctity from death by virtue of Law No. 49, which stipulates that every person found to being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood is to be executed. Also among those in Iraq is the Socialist Union Party led by Mohamed Al-Jarrah as well as other left-wing and patriotic elements.

Following the American-led war on Iraq and the subsequent state of chaos and lack of security throughout Iraqi towns and cities, some families tried to return to Syria. However, Security Forces prevented them from doing so and only allowed a limited number of individuals and families to cross the borders into Syria. News reports stated that the former Syrian President Ameen Al-Hafez had headed towards the Syrian borders with 300 families and requested their right to return, only to be refused by Syrian authorities. The convoy then returned to Baghdad and other cities awaiting an unknown outcome, after giving up hope of being allowed back into Syria.

Whilst Syrian authorities allowed a number of women and children to return to Syria, it used this opportunity to punish opposition figures and their families. As a result, Security Forces arrested Mohammed Jamal Al-Wafa'i, whom it had lured into returning through his wife, after convincing her that it was safe for him to return to Syria. Al-Wafa'i disappeared immediately after being arrested and nothing is known of him till now. The brothers, Omar and Ridwan Darweesh, as well as Fayza Ali Shihab, Maha Ahmed Qaraqash, Mayyada Mohammed Ghassan Banaqsali Fathiya Rajab Damour and Mohammed Ahmed Qashoush, were all detained and apart from Fathiya Rajab Damour, no one has been released.

Furthermore, many whom had arrived in order to offer humanitarian, financial and moral aid for Iraq, or had travelled to Iraq during the American-led war, were subject to harassment and security interrogations. Some were even arrested and tortured upon their return from Iraq, despite the Government's initial approval of their actions.

FIFTH: DETENTIONS OF THOSE SEEKING SETTLEMENT OF PERSONAL STATUS

The Syrian Government is adamant on settling the circumstances of some opponents, particularly Muslim Brotherhood members, through the security venue which carries extreme risks and dangers. Personal and general circumstances of many who reside outside Syria, forced them to apply for their status' to be settled with the Syrian Government. After waiting for lengthy periods and then being requested to write reports which would bring great harm to their relatives and other acquaintances, whilst some were financially blackmailed, those whom then returned to Syria found themselves subject to being detained either temporarily or indefinitely. SHRC has managed, over the past few years, through its various and numerous reports, to document many of such incidents where Syrian authorities reneged on its undertakings and forsake its own credibility.

Arwad Al-Bushi (from Damascus who is also a Canadian National) was arrested in Damascus Airport upon his return from Jeddah following the death of his mother. Despite him settling his status with the Syrian consulate in Jeddah, he remains detained and very little information is know of him.

Mousa Al-Zein, (from Horan) who worked as a teacher in Saudi Arabia for 25 years, was arrested despite writing to the Ministry of Presidential Affairs and receiving a response which stated that he may safely return to Syria at his convenience without anyone causing him any difficulties. Mr. Al-Zein was arrested upon his arrival at the Syrian land borders and remained in prison for more than 3 months during which he was subject to abusive treatment despite suffering from Diabetes and Rheumatism.

Also, Ahmed Midlij, who referred to the Syrian Embassy in Jordan and Abdul Hameed Idris, who had returned from Iraq, were detained and remain imprisoned.

Saffouh Al-Qouj was released after spending two years in prison, despite settling his status and being able to visit Syria for the first time without being detained. However, in his second visit in early 2001, he was arrested and was only released on 11th of June, 2003.

Rafeeq Shakir Shoullar (Abu Shakir - 83 years old) from Homs was arrested upon his arrival at Damascus Airport in the first week of June.. Mr. Shoullar had left Syria in the early eighties after Security Forces pursued his entire family and arrested his wife for more than 15 years. It is worth mentioning that Mr. Shoullar is not affiliated to any political activity and suffers from senility and various illnesses caused by old age.

SIXTH: DETENTIONS RESULTING FROM PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Syria remains a country where freedom of expression, forming political parties and electioneering remains prohibited. Therefore, and during the elections of Parliament in March, Osama Ali, a university student and Bassam Yunis, a teacher, were both arrested and charged with distributing a statement published by the banned opposition Democratic National Gathering prior to the elections taking place. Reports confirmed that both were severely abused which caused a serious deterioration in Mr. Ali's health condition.

SEVENTH: DETENTION AMONG KURDS

Syrian authorities released the Kurdish dissident Hussein Dawood last December, after detaining him for two years following his forced deportation from Germany which refused him asylum. However, the authorities arrested dozens of Kurdish activists who had been demanding their banned

cultural rights and more freedoms for the Kurdish ethnic minority. Last summer, the Kurdish politician Musallam Sheikh Hasan was detained for several months. In addition, two prominent figures within the Kurdish Yeketi Party ; Marwan Uthman and Hasan Saleh after they led a peaceful demonstration in front of the Parliament building demanding more freedoms for Kurds in Syria. Reports indicate that they have been severely mistreated, tortured and their relatives have been prevented from visiting them. They continue to await a ruling to be passed by Supreme State Security Court after being charged by the Prosecutor with conspiring to separate a part of Syria. Ibraheem Na'san continues to be imprisoned after a year and a half after promoting material which pertains to Kurdish culture. SHRC also learnt that two students at Aleppo University were arrested recently; Sarhard Hussein and Anwar Ibraheem, after being suspected of having links with Yeketi Party. Security authorities also detained Farhat Abdul Rahman Ali, Ahmed Qasim and Nooh Ahmed for similar grounds. SHRC has recently received information that Sarhard Hussein and Anwar Ibraheem have been released .

EIGHTH: DETAINED HOSTAGES

Amongst the many barbaric methods used by the Syrian regime is to take the relatives of political dissidents as hostages, in pursuit of their surrender or in order to gain another form of advantage. SHRC learnt that Bara' ibn Badi' Khalbous (22 years old) was imprisoned for two years during a regular visit to Syria, as a hostage in pursuit of his father who resides abroad and is allegedly a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Muhammed Abdul Haleem Abboush (18 years old) disappeared from his family home in Jordan three years ago, and recent reports received by SHRC confirm that he is currently being held in a Syrian prison. It is yet to be confirmed whether Syrian Intelligence agents had abducted him as a hostage in pursuit of his family which has been living in Jordan since 1982, although the young man is described by his family as having no ideological or political affiliation, and had left Syria with his family when he was only a few months old.

NINTH: OTHER DETENTIONS

The authorities recently arrested Dr. Muhammed Munther Karrad from Aleppo, and then released him after interrogation. Reports also state that Hussein Hamwi was arrested in late March and has been physically abused, leading to the deterioration in his health condition. Last October, Syrian authorities also arrested the American Syrian Suria Qattan and detained her for a period of time without charging her. On the 30th of October, Isra' Al-Tash was detained in 'Palestine Branch' in Damascus, after her return from Jordan where she has been living with her husband for three years. Reports confirm that Mrs. Al-Tash has no political activity whatsoever, but was arrested in order to obtain information regarding her paternal uncle, Ahmed Al-Tash, who is, according to the reports, affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, a fact yet to be confirmed by the SHRC.

CIVIL RIGHTS: LOST FREEDOMS AND COUNTLESS DEPRIVED

Thousands of released political prisoners and prisoners of conscience have been deprived of their civil rights, and continue to suffer as a result of this inhumane act. Most of those cannot travel outside the country and are deprived of any chance of employment within the public sector, and even from establishing their own respective private businesses. SHRC has managed to document many cases of true suffering which comes as a result of confiscating civil rights. A businessman who was released over 10 years ago and remains without any civil rights, told how his company is registered in the names of other partners, and is often subjected to embezzlement and theft which he cannot report. He also informed us of an incident where members of the Intelligence Authorities conspired with one of his partners to steal his private car. Once again, he was unable to report the incident and file a complaint against the perpetrators as he has no right to register a car under his name whilst being stripped of his civil rights.

The case of those who have been living in forced exile is another tale of extreme inhumanity. Tens of thousands of Syrians who were forced to leave Syria for a variety of reasons spanning over a considerable period of time, particularly the 80s. Those, now spanning across three generations, all remain without any civil and citizenship rights. It is extremely difficult to prove their personal identity or register new births or deaths as they are deprived of personal documents as well as travel documents and passports. This has caused great difficulties for them in their countries of residence and in their respective employments and therefore many were forced to live in remote countries in pursuit of safety on the one hand, and in order to obtain papers that would prove their identities and those of their spouses and children, on the other. SHRC has documented the migration of more than 500 people to Western Europe this year and a further 100 to Canada. Although Syrian authorities ban these citizens from their civil rights, by no means does it stop harassing them, through officials who work in the respective countries and relent to bribes and free tourism gifts offered by Syrian Embassy security officials in order to make the lives of those Syrian exiles unbearable. Last year, a number of prominent Syrian officials labelled the Syrian exiles as terrorists, in an attempt to bring their respective countries of residence to take unfavourable action. Thankfully, none of the countries paid attention to these attempts, realising that it was merely a cheap and clear attempt to harm the Syrian exiles. Indeed, such statements were made by the President, Foreign Minister, Minister for Media and Speaker of the Parliament as well as others.

SHRC has documented many cases where entire families suffered the unbearable consequences of not having any civil rights, whilst Syrian authorities continue to attempt to bring as much pain and anguish upon its victims as possible, through various brutal and inhumane means. The authorities had prevented the former President Ameen Al-Hafez and almost 300 families accompanying him from their right to return after the outbreak of the American war on Iraq. A number of those stripped from their citizenship rights seek alternative documents issued by unauthorised sources, in a desperate attempt to survive and enjoy the most basic human rights for themselves and their children, a fact which has borne numerous and significant problems for them.

The third category of those who are stripped of their civil rights are the Kurds. Kurds constitute the second largest ethnic community in Syria at 9%, whilst Arabs constitute 90% and 1% is made up of Turkmans, Sharkas, Assyrians and others. Whilst Syrian authorities allow all other ethnic groups to exercise their cultural traditions and speak their respective languages, they prevent the Kurds from speaking their language or possessing any material which pertains to their national or cultural identity, and are also prevented from celebrating their festivities. Indeed, the Kurdish poet and author;

Ibraheem Al-Na'san was arrested and charged with promoting cultural and educational material in Kurdish language. As a result of the forced Arabising policies throughout Kurdish areas, tensions have heightened and a separatist call which never existed before found fertile ground upon which to rise. The authorities' response to the peaceful demonstrations which took place in Aleppo during this year, and recently the demonstration held in front of the Parliament in Damascus, was to arrest the leaders of those demonstrations and to have them stand trial before the Supreme State Security Court charged with conspiring to separate part of a the country, which is punishable up to life imprisonment, as was the case with Marwan Uthman and Hasan Saleh. Quarter of a million Kurds remain until this day stateless (without Syrian nationality), despite being born in Syria from parents who were born in Syria, due to the biased census which was carried out in 1962, and which was adopted by the Ba'th regime, which intrinsically carried a forceful Arabising agenda. Indeed, this stateless Kurdish sector lives without any right to education, employment, personal identity papers and all other basic civil rights. Whilst communities living under similar circumstances in other countries are called 'Budoon', or 'Stateless', but in Syria, their situation is far more severe and inhumane.

Recently, a law was passed banning military personnel from performing religious acts of worship in military barracks or from participating in dialogue forums, in a move which also prevents this sector of Syrian society from practicing their basic civil rights. Such actions continue to occur throughout Syrian society today.

Syrian authorities moved to confiscate all transferable and non-transferable funds that belonged to political prisoners, and especially property. This prevents the families and relatives of the respective dissident from using their estate, as the Government would eventually confiscate the dissident's share therein. Indeed, a number of Security Officers took over properties that belonged to political dissidents and either used them as places of residence or sold them. SHRC published a report in which it shed light on the case of Michelle Saadi who was arrested in mysterious circumstances almost 26 years ago, and whose house, where his family lived, was then forcefully taken over by a Security officer. SHRC holds dozens of reports and incidents which offer testimony to similar barbaric and inhumane practices in which dissidents' properties were forcefully seized by Security officers, amongst others, and consequently either used for their personal abode, or sold off with revenues going to the confiscator. Such properties are in their thousands throughout Syria, and despite SHRC not having an accurate account of all these, it continues to receive countless reports in this regard.

ARAB DETAINEES: SETTling REGIONAL AND SECTARIAN ACCOUNTS

Also detained in Syria's prisons are individuals from various Arab nationalities, particularly neighbouring countries. SHRC believes that there are prisoners who are mainly Lebanese, Jordanian, Palestinian, and Iraqi, as well as others from other countries.

The relatives of the missing Lebanese individuals formed a committee last year and met with the Syrian Minister of Interior on the 22nd of July 2002. The Minister promised to pursue their queries regarding their missing relatives within three months. However, and following the expiration of the agreed period, he refused to meet with the committee again and failed to provide any of the information he undertook to provide. It is believed that there are more than 172 detainees and missing individuals according to the lists submitted by the said committee.

Jordanian sources estimate that more than 120 Jordanian individuals are currently held prisoners in Syrian cells, and hence the Jordanian Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb and the President of the Jordanian Detainees Committee, Imad Al-Sharqawi, demanded that Syria releases all Jordanian political prisoners and named a number of those, including the students Hani and Wafa' Ubeidat and Imad Al-Kanani, who is a businessman.

There are also a large number of Palestinians detained in Syria, some sources put there number at 600. This is largely due to the historical animosity between the Syrian regime and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Some Palestinian prisoners have been locked up for more than 25 years and since the Lebanese Civil War. This issue became to the fore once again in 2001, when prospects of a visit to the Syrian capital from Yaser Arafat grew. However, once the idea of a visit was shelved, so was the file of Palestinian detainees. It is worth mentioning that according to eye witnesses, including the statement of the Iraqi athlete Hilal Abdul Razaq to SHRC on his detention in Palestine Branch, the Palestinians suffer far severer treatment and torture than any of their Arab compatriots.

As for Iraqis, there are a large number of Iraqis, and particularly members of the Ba'ath Party wing that is an adversary of the Syrian Ba'ath trend, as well as supporters of the former Iraqi President. Many Iraqis were also detained as a result of fabricated reports and statements made by former Iraqi opposition elements based in Damascus. One of those who was released from imprisonment made a statement to SHRC on the 14 month horrific saga he endured at Palestine Branch, until he paid a bribe of \$15,000 for his own freedom, which lead to his release and departure from Syria.

It is important to note that the Syrian authorities played a vital role in detaining many Arab nationals whom it suspected to have connections or who may merely sympathise with Al-Qaeda, as it previously used to facilitate their travels and was considered a main hub for those who wished to travel to Afghanistan through Iran. The authorities carried out severe interrogation sessions with these individuals and submitted its findings to the American Administration and attempted to coordinate its efforts in this regard with other Security Forces, particularly in Pakistan, Iran and with the CIA. Unfortunately, numerous innocent victims were claimed as a result of the Regime's historic enmity towards Islamic and religious groups.

TORTURE AND ABUSE: OPPRESSIVE METHODS TO PUNISH DISSIDENTS

Numerous reports and recent news confirmed that torture and maltreatment of detainees remain common practice in all detention centres and prisons, particular Palestine Branch for Military Interrogation. These reports indicated that Muhammed Jamal Al-Wafa'i has been subject to severe torture, Osama Ali was tortured until his health condition seriously deteriorated and that Arwad Al-Boushi, Mousa Al-Zein, Marwan Uthman, Hasan Saleh and many others, had all been tortured. A number of reports which were received by SHRC indicated that Mohammed Saeed Al-Sakhri had suffered severe torture which lead to his death in late 2002, however news of his death could not be verified by SHRC from another source.

It is notable that torture and mental and physical abuse are all banned in modern civil societies, and stipulated by international treaties to which Syria is a signatory. Indeed, the Syrian Constitution also bans such practices, as stated in the third paragraph of Article 28: "It is prohibited to torture any person either physically or mentally or to treat them in a degrading manner, and all these practices are punishable by law." However, it seems that those who carry out these inhumane practices realise that there are new laws which have been initiated by the Security Forces, which protect them from the arm of the law.

The most common torture methods can be listed as follows:

- a. **Beating:** on all regions of the body, using all methods possible, including slapping and kicking, using belts, cables and batons.
- b. **The Wheel:** where the detainee's body is bent so that his head and feet are placed in the wheel in an arch shape, and then his feet, legs and entire body are beaten with all imaginable methods and means, until severe bleeding.
- c. **German Seat:** A metal seat with movable parts to which the detainees feet and hands are tied. By bending the chair's main frame to the rear so that immense pressure is exerted on the neck and joints. This creates great difficulty in breathing and may lead to unconsciousness. One version of these chairs is called the Syrian Chair, where the metal parts are fixed at the front chair legs, to which the detainee's legs are tied. This leads to the bleeding of the ankles, and is accompanied with beating.
- d. **Hanging:** Tying the detainee's hands behind his back and suspending him from them or from his feet. In either case, beating is used as well as applying electrical shocks.
- e. **Electrical Shocks:** By attaching electrical cables to sensitive areas of the body, including the ear-lobes, nose, tongue, neck, hands, backside, feet and genitals.
- f. **Total Isolation** from the outside world in a small damp dark cell, without any human contact for lengthy periods of time, sometimes several months.

Added to all of the above, abusive treatment and psychological torment, such as deprivation from sleep, food, water or fresh air, as well as depriving the detainee from passing water or stools or the use of hygiene equipment and clean water. Detainees are mostly deprived also from being visited by their relatives or from any necessary medical treatment.

**PRISONS, DETENTION AND INTERROGATION CENTRES: THE MOST
WIDESPREAD AND THE MOST TERRIFYING**

There remain many prisons and interrogation centres throughout the country which are run in a non-centralised manner. Each security force supervises its own detention centres, to the extent that the prisoners of the Military Intelligence in Sednaya prison are kept by a special force, and are treated differently from those who are supervised by the State Security Force.

According to a previous report published by the SHRC, more than 14 prisons and 16 Detention and Interrogation Centres in Damascus and Aleppo, the most famous of which is Sednaya, Adra, Qutna, Kafr Sousa, Palestine Branch Centre, Customs Branch and Air Force Intelligence Branch in Damascus and Military Intelligence Branch, State Security and Political Branch in Aleppo.

These prisons and branches all house severely depleted facilities which are deliberately made to reach this condition, in an effort to pile the suffering of the detainees. Obviously these conditions help in spreading illness and disease amongst the detainees.

SECURITY BODIES

There are several security bodies in Syria, the most terrifying of which is the Military Intelligence, presently headed by Hasan Khalil, General Intelligence headed by Hisham Bukhtiyar and Political Security Force headed by Ghazi Kan'an. In addition there are a number of bodies, including the Air Force Intelligence and Republican Guards, amounting to more than 13, which have full authority to arrest and detain any citizen for whatever reason. Needless to say that the entire Syrian people have become an easy prey for any one of those numerous security elements and bodies.

As a result of events relayed by these statements, reports and witness statements, there can be little doubt that severe corruption has become rife, especially over the recent past, where these elements all have very little to do. Therefore, a number of high ranking officers have resorted to arresting Syrian citizens and then demanding a substantial ransom to be paid in exchange for their freedom. In light of the absence of law and accountability, any officer or interrogator may accuse any person of anything he so wishes, and considering that any accusation may possibly lead to one's detention for the rest of his her life, this is far from any promising prospect.