

SYRIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

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PREFACE

Syrian Human Rights Committee(SHRC) releases an annual report after the passage of one year since President Bashar Assad was sworn into office.

Despite promises of political openness and transparency made by President Bashar Assad in his inaugural speech, human rights conditions did not witness any improvement, especially under the shadow of Emergency Laws into place since the March 8th 1963 coupe, and the continuation of total dominance of the security forces over all forms of life in the country.

SHRC has observed that the limited “relaxing” on the issue of liberties, that lasted for roughly the first half of the first year of the era of President Bashar Assad was not an outcome of a genuine directive of the ruling authorities, but rather some improvisations and “solo” attempts from some cultural and political activists, that misread and misinterpreted the inaugural speech of President Assad as a birth announcement of a brand new era in Syrian politics. However, soon, those activists realized that any such “openness” is meaningless unless law decrees were issued to protect it and a recognition of the role of the legislative / judicial authorities and civil society institutions was reinstated. That made the sudden “coupe” in the regime’s attitude towards those shy reform steps and the ensuing return to the intimidating speeches –March 2001- with the infamous “security-first” and criminalizing threatening tones an easy seamless task.

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THE DETAINEES

A beneficial result of the presidential pardon issued by President Bashar Assad on the anniversary of the “Corrective Movement” on the 16th of November 2000, was the release of 600 political prisoners, out of which, 400 were inmates in the Palmyra (Tadmur) detention camp where they served their time, many in excess of two decades. The prisoners belonged to several political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, members of a restricted communist party, and some citizens of neighboring Arab states. The decree excluded from the pardon several hundred detainees, mostly members of the Muslim Brotherhood group, members in the Arab Communist Organization, and the Democratic Baath Party.

Journalist Nizar Nayyoub, who was sentenced to ten years beyond bars, was released after a plea by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Syria. Mr. Nayyoub was placed, though, under house arrest and he was excluded from obtaining a passport to travel for desperately needed treatment. Soon afterwards, there was news about his abduction and subjection to threats, then eventually, permitting him to travel after an intermediation by France.

The security apparatus of the regime continued to detain citizens without any due paperwork or legal process, then subject detainees to systemic torture, which claimed the lives of at least two detainees. SHRC has received credible information about the death of the Syrian citizen Muhammad Shukri Alloush (born 1983), who was detained as a witness to a robbery crime, while undergoing torture on the evening of May 2nd 2001. These sources affirm that there were no official charges against Mr. Alloush, rather he was detained as a first-hand witness to a robbery that took place just outside his ironsmith workshop. While his family soon recognized the deformities and signs of violent torture all over the face and body of his corpus, the initial official report issued by the authorities and signed by resident doctors on hand referenced suicide as the cause of death.

As of July 25th 2000, SHRC has become aware of the disappearance of British Citizen (Iraqi-born) Hilal Ali, who is married to a Syrian Citizen after he was arrested by the Syrian Intelligence forces. SHRC was notified of his release in the last week of June 2001 under pressure exercised by Humanitarian Organizations and his friends and relatives.

Syrian Security Forces continued its conduct of intimidating family members of dissidents chased by the Syrian authorities. Direct relatives (brothers and sisters) and/or spouses of those dissidents were detained as an attempt to extract information about the dissidents, especially the ones residing abroad in exile. Those relatives were apprehended, detained or were instructed to report to interrogation centers run by the Syrian intelligence upon arriving to visit Syria.

SHRC observed the continuation of the arrests under inhumane conditions in the basements of the Syrian Intelligence branches and in the notorious Palmyra (Tadmur) prison, which is considered a “stigma of shame on the forehead of humanity” as referenced to by recently released prisoner Faraj Biraqdar during an interview with An-Nahar Daily Newspaper, where systemic torture and demeaning treatment accompanied by the absence of adequate health care and the spread of diseases has wasted the lives of several hundred prisoners throughout the last twenty years.

THE MISSING

SHRC received several hundred letters from families of missing citizens who were arrested but whose existence is still unacknowledged by the security forces. Most of those disappearances are of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters who were detained during the early eighties of the twentieth century. There was no hint of any search action by the Syrian authorities in regards to this sensitive humanitarian file/issue, which has made the lives of thousands of Syrian families impacted by this issue an unbearable living hell. Recently released Journalist Nizar Nayyof stated that he has credible information that vanished detainees, who were killed then buried in mass graves in the Palmyra desert, number between 13,000 and 17,000 persons.

GENERAL FREEDOMS AND LIBERTIES

The Syrian Authorities overlooked a meeting by the Committee for Defense of Human Rights in Syria (CDF) and met its activism with silence, but fell short of issuing the group an official license. Beside this, the authorities shut the doors of the Civil Society Advocacy and the Elite Forums by issuing restricting, and paralyzing instructions for their activities. In the midst of this, several physical assaults took place against hosts and organizers of such forums as reported in the Syrian cities of Latikia and Homs.

Despite issuance of licenses for three newspapers owned by political parties that belong to the National Progressive Front that presumably takes part in ruling the country, the Syrian authorities did not recognize the laws under which those licenses were issued and it restricted the printing of two pages of the privately owned “El Domari” newspaper that contained criticism of the performance of the Syrian government.

SHRC observed as well a number of threats against some independent members of the Syrian Parliament who asked for liberal changes in the policies of the government. Some of those members were subjected to uplifting their parliamentary immunity, and interrogation for baseless fabricated accusations against them, as in the case of MP Riad Seif.

SHRC detected complications against the work of some reporters by banning the issuing or renewing of reporter identification cards to them, which obstructed them from performing their journalist duties, as in the case of Mohammad Abdullah from Aljazeera.net Satellite Station.

CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS

Despite the inadequacy of the instructions issued to Syrian Embassies in regards to issuing passports good for only one year to Syrian citizens residing abroad, SHRC welcomed warmly such news on March 9th 2001. But those instructions were soon enough “frozen” and issuance of such passports was ceased till the time of this report. Several citizens who were checking-in with Syrian embassies in the countries where they reside were told of their “disqualification” for a passport or travel documents. Some other Syrian embassies attempted to collect the largest sum of information and data about Syrian citizens and promised in return to issue them travel documents, then it refrained from issuing the documents awaiting new presidential instructions. Financial and intelligence-gathering extortions were dominant among the dealings between Syrian embassy employees and the affected Syrian citizens. One citizen reported having to pay five thousand Dollars for a passport good only for six-months from a Syrian embassy in a Gulf State, but there was no shortage of similar stories and experiences reported accordingly to SHRC.