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Resurrecting the Wall of Fear: The Human Rights Situation in Syria

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Over the past several months, Syrian authorities have engaged in a harsh campaign of repression against leading dissidents and human rights activists. The crackdown, overshadowed by developments elsewhere in the region, has received scant media coverage in the U.S. and Europe. To shed light on recent developments in the Syrian political scene, USIP recently convened a [public discussion](#) on human rights in Syria, featuring the Institute's [Radwan Ziadeh](#), [Mona Yacoubian](#), and [Steven Heydemann](#), and Joe Stork of Human Rights Watch. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes their presentations and the subsequent discussion.

USIP Senior Fellow Radwan Ziadeh's account of the current situation in Syria underscored that the regime often uses national security concerns as a pretext to silence all forms of dissent. Placing recent repression in historical context, Ziadeh noted that government repression of political and human rights activists has come in several waves in the past decade. While political activism briefly flourished after the death of longtime Syrian president Hafez al-Assad in June 2000, the so-called Damascus Spring ended within months, after a severe government crackdown. Another wave of detentions followed the May 2006 "Beirut-Damascus Declaration," which called for improved relations between Syria and neighboring Lebanon. (Lebanon is a sensitive subject for Syria, which claims historic title to the Mediterranean nation and has long played an active role in Lebanon's internecine political struggles. Complicating matters further is a U.N. tribunal convened to investigate Syria's suspected involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.)



From right to left: Panelists [Mona Yacoubian](#), [Radwan Ziadeh](#), Joe Stork, and [Steven Heydemann](#) discuss the human rights situation in Syria at February 29, 2008 event.

The latest regime crackdown followed a December 1, 2007, meeting of 163 activists who gathered in Damascus to declare their support for democratization in Syria. These activists formed a new coalition—the National Council of the Damascus Declaration—that issued a unified call for freedom of association and speech, and the establishment and protection of human rights. Rallying around the Damascus Declaration for Democratic and National Change, written in October 2005, the Council comprised a wide-ranging coalition that included Islamists, secularists, and Kurds.

The government crackdown began in earnest eight days later, when Syrian authorities undertook a wave of arrests targeting meeting participants. Former parliamentarian Riad Seif was among those detained on charges of "weakening the national sentiment," illegal association activities, and "sectarian incitement." Seif suffers from prostate cancer and has been denied medical treatment by Syrian authorities. His health continues to decline in Adra Prison, where he is detained alongside the prominent writer and fellow Council member Ali Abdullah. Numerous international human rights organizations assert that Syrian political prisoners suffer harsh abuses at the hands of their prison guards and that torture is widespread ¹. Indeed, according to Abdullah's lawyers, he was beaten so severely that he sustained a hole in his trachea.

In his presentation, Joe Stork of Human Rights Watch discussed what he called "capricious cruelty on the part of the regime." Activist Kamal al-Labwani, sentenced to twelve years of hard labor for meeting with U.S. government officials and NGO representatives, is a case in point. Another is Fida' al-Hurani, one of the first Syrian women to be imprisoned for speaking out on the issue of human rights. Recent reports indicate that her husband was forcibly exiled to Jordan—according to Stork, the regime's first forced expulsion in many years. Hurani's case is all the more dramatic given that her father, Akram al-Hurani, was one of the early founders of the Syrian Baath Party.

Stork reiterated Ziadeh's assessment that national security is used as a catch-all excuse to silence critics of the Syrian regime. In another high profile case, Aref Dalila, former dean of the economics department at Damascus University, was arrested and jailed in September 2001. His detention came after a meeting of democracy activists, held at the house of Riad Seif. As with Seif, Dalila suffers serious health problems that a prolonged imprisonment, including months of solitary confinement, have exacerbated. Noting that Dalila was held on charges that include "holding gatherings aimed at causing disorder" and "forming a secret society," Stork surmised that Dalila's imprisonment had as much to do with an impassioned opinion piece that he wrote for the daily *Al-Hayat* in March of that year. Dalila wrote, "We live in a republic with a progressive constitution. ...What, then, are we missing?...You've shelved the constitution and the laws," and replaced them with "one law, composed of one line, unwritten, invisible."²

In this chilling environment, organizations such as Stork's Human Rights Watch have difficulty performing their work. Although the official ban on their presence in Syria does not prevent them entirely from doing investigative work, their interlocutors are under constant watch by the secret police. Stork argued that the tenuous state of diplomatic relations between Syria and Western powers hampers progress on the human rights front as well. Visits between Syrian officials and their EU and U.S. counterparts are rare. When such visits have occurred—as with Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's trip to Damascus in April 2007, and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana's visit the preceding month—opportunities to discuss the human rights situation have been missed, Stork contended. He stated further that while White House press statements have responded to particular cases, such as Labwani's, in a forceful manner, the Bush administration has been "extremely selective" and inconsistent in highlighting human rights abuses throughout the region. To raise the profile of individuals such as Labwani, Dalila, and Hurani, Stork concluded that more attention should be paid to regional repression in general and Syrian victims in particular.

Mona Yacoubian echoed Stork's assessment that more attention should be paid to human rights in Syria. It is difficult to gauge the intentions or mindset of the Syrian regime, but it seems that the lack of attention paid to their repressive measures emboldens them. However, if Syria has confidence that it can act with impunity, it is a shallow confidence. Syria exhibits vulnerability on several fronts. The economy is beset by soaring inflation, driven by rising petroleum prices, in combination with the influx of over 1.5 million Iraqi refugees. The U.N. investigations and tribunal could result in the indictment of high-level Syrian officials. According to Yacoubian, some in the inner circles of Syrian power believe the tribunal to be a "Trojan horse" for regime change. The continued activity of the Syrian dissident community in Lebanon, from which Syria withdrew its military in May 2005, compounds this concern. Finally, the December 1 Council meeting, drawing together such a broad coalition, signaled to the regime the growing strength, scope, and boldness of the domestic opposition.

President Bush's meeting with three exiled Syrian activists on December 4 may have further spooked the regime. Yacoubian underscored that such high-profile meetings with Syrian oppositionists may do more harm than good, having little impact on the ground in Syria, while giving the regime a pretext to crack down further. She characterized U.S. policy toward Syria as based largely on isolation, with some "episodic engagement," limited to specific issues such as Iraq.

Meanwhile, intensified sanctions, such as those placed in February on the assets of President Bashar al-Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlof, have little real impact on the corrupt autocracy they are intended to weaken (Makhlof has no known assets in the U.S.). Ultimately, the effect of U.S. sanctions has been largely symbolic, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty for U.S. business interests, but not having an appreciable impact on the ground. Currently, Yacoubian argued, the U.S. occupies a "muddled middle ground" on policy. The U.S. needs either to "supercharge" its isolation policy—strengthening it significantly by getting European allies and others (such as Russia, China, and Turkey) to agree to multilateral sanctions—or to engage the Syrian regime, laying the gamut of issues on the table for discussion, including human rights.

Moderator Steven Heydemann stated that the combination of verbal condemnation of Syrian behavior with the relative inefficacy of sanctions has led to growing Syrian disregard of external pressures. In 2003 the U.S. vocally pressed its case for a regional "freedom agenda"; by 2005, with the situation in Iraq spiraling out of control, U.S. rhetoric had become far more subdued. In this context, the Syrian regime seems to consider its anti-opposition activities to have a low opportunity cost. At the same time, said Heydemann, Syria sees little reward for steps taken to secure U.S. favor, as in the case of its increased surveillance of insurgent traffic across its border with Iraq.

In this low-risk, low-reward environment, tolerance for alternative perspectives within Syrian civil society has diminished—particularly regarding Syria's role in Lebanon. The scope and severity of the crackdown on the National Council of the Damascus Declaration underscores the sensitivity of the Lebanon issue. In short, Heydemann concluded, Syria's perception of the threat of internal opposition has become heightened at precisely the moment that the threat of external intervention has begun to appear empty.

With the human rights situation in Syria worsening, successfully confronting Syrian repression will require sustained

attention and carefully crafted policy. Cautious engagement with Syria, the panelists agreed, seems to be the best of the admittedly problematic options that the U.S. and the international community have at their disposal. While more constructive relations with Syria must never come at the expense of Lebanon, the Syrian role in Middle Eastern affairs is too important to ignore. None of the essential issues must be left off the table—least of all the issue of human rights.

Notes

1. For more on the situation faced by Council prisoners, see Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2008/02/05/syria17973.htm>.

2. Translation as cited by Stork in his presentation.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by **Robert Grace**, senior program assistant in the [Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention](#) at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies. The author would like to thank Mona Yacoubian, Radwan Ziadeh, and Steven Heydemann for their comments on draft versions of this USIPeace Briefing.

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