

January 1996

HUMAN RIGHTS IN SYRIA

ISSUE

For a quarter of a century, Syria, under the leadership of President Hafiz al-Assad and the Baath Party, has steered a course of secular nationalism, socialism and authoritarianism, leaving little room for basic political rights. Seeking a *rapprochement* with the West, Damascus has since 1991 begun to improve its human rights record.

BACKGROUND

While Syria has the structures associated with a democratic system, i.e. constitution, elections, national assembly, judicial system, all real power lies with President Assad, who enforces his policies through the Baath political party and an elaborate state security apparatus, which has wide powers under the prevailing state of emergency, which was declared in 1963 and which has never been rescinded. President Assad was re-elected by referendum in December 1991 with 99.98% support. Human rights are subordinated to President Assad's overriding preoccupation with stability.

The Syrian Constitution gives the Baath party a lead role in state institutions and government. Within the party, Alawites with close connections to the President predominate. Outside of the military/security organizations and the Baath party, there are no other governmental or non-governmental institutions capable of acting as a check on the arbitrary exercise of power.

The authorities justify their wide use of extraordinary powers by Syria's continued official state of war with Israel. The many branches of the security services operate independently of each other, quelling political dissent by arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and other forms of intimidation.

The state places severe restrictions on freedom of expression. The government owns all forms of media, imposing severe censorship. In the past year, there have been indications that the media has been given some flexibility to debate and even criticize government and Baath party actions, but no criticism of the President is tolerated. The security services also closely control freedom of association, although they have lately begun to permit grassroots democratic activity to occasionally challenge Baathist predominance in various labour and political organizations.

With the disintegration of the USSR, Syria has sought a *rapprochement* with the West, particularly the United States. Damascus opted to join the international coalition against Iraq in the Gulf War, and is actively engaged in US-sponsored bilateral peace negotiations with Israel. It appears that the regime is seeking to improve its human rights record as part of this effort.

Since 1991, Damascus has released thousands of political prisoners, including 500-600 last spring and, reportedly, another 1200 in December 1995. The December amnesty also

9

10

11