

@CHAPTER = SYRIA

The Bush administration, like the Reagan administration before it, has adopted a paradoxical position on Syrian human rights abuses. It has maintained a number of sanctions "in response to Syria's evident support for international terrorism." But apart from the State Department's annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* -- which was drafted by the Reagan administration and issued in February 1989 -- the Bush administration has taken no public action on the serious human rights situation *within* Syria or within Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon.

The United States imposed sanctions on November 14, 1986, after a British court implicated Syria in the attempted bombing in London of an El Al airliner. The U.S. also withdrew its ambassador to Syria, William Eagleton. At the same time, the British government broke diplomatic relations with Syria, and other members of the European Economic Community ("EEC") adopted sanctions as well. On September 2, 1987, however, the Reagan administration decided to return its ambassador and to cancel a key sanction -- the ban on U.S. oil-company activity. Of the sanctions still in force, the most important are: export controls on security-related goods, a ban on Export-Import Bank loans, and a ban on subsidized wheat purchases. Most EEC countries have now also lifted their sanctions, even though there has been no visible change in Syrian policy. The State Department claims that it has raised domestic repression and related human rights matters privately with the Syrian government, arguing that Syria would not respond to a more public campaign. It is not known what issues have been pursued privately or what results have been forthcoming. But in light of the gravity of Syrian abuses amply documented each year in the State Department's country report, it seems far from justified to have ruled out public diplomacy.

During 1989, the human rights situation in Syria remained grim. The government of President Hafez al-Asad maintained a State of Emergency (in force since 1963) which abrogates virtually all legal and constitutional protections. During the year, a dozen major security agencies are estimated to have arrested hundreds of political prisoners, many of whom remained in custody at year's end. Those arrested included government officials, military officers, security personnel, and those suspected of membership in the Muslim Brothers and the secular opposition. Since 1971, virtually no such prisoners have been formally charged, tried or sentenced, so nearly all are incarcerated without time limits. About 20 prisoners, including a former president, a former foreign minister and a number of other former government officials, have been held in custody for over nineteen years -- since November 1970.

In late April, the Syrian government released three lawyers who had been jailed for nine years. They had been arrested in April 1980 when a number of Syrian professional associations called for an end to the State of Emergency, the release or prompt trial of all prisoners, and other democratic reforms. The government reacted by arresting several hundred professionals, including at least 100 lawyers. Because of a campaign by the Arab Lawyers' Union, all the lawyers have now been released, but some 90 health professionals and 70 engineers are still in custody.

Syria now is estimated to hold over 7,000 prisoners, of whom at least 2,500 are held in Tadmur Military Prison and over 2,000 in Syrian detention facilities in Lebanon. Hundreds of other prisoners are also known to be held in al-Mezze Military Prison, al-'Adra Prison, Saydnaya Prison, Kafr Sussa Detention Center, Military Interrogation Branch, and other facilities in Syria.

The Syrian security services continue to use torture during interrogation, and it is believed that virtually all interrogation in Syria includes either

torture or severe mistreatment. During the past two years there have been a number of reports of prisoners dying under torture or suffering from permanent disabilities. Among the reported deaths are: Ishan 'Izzo, Muhammad al-'Arraj and 'Abd al-Razaq 'Abazied. Musa Khaife, a teenager who was tortured, is reportedly confined to a wheelchair due to partial paralysis. Other prisoners are suffering from loss of sight and hearing, kidney problems, spinal injuries, heart conditions and other serious health problems.

Torture and mistreatment is facilitated by the security forces' practice of holding most prisoners incommunicado during their interrogation, which may last for weeks or even months.

There are several legal political parties in Syria, but all are allied with the ruling Baath Party, within the National Progressive Front. These parties are not permitted to circulate newspapers openly or to organize among students and other sectors of the population, so their independence is marginal. All other parties are illegal, and membership in the Muslim Brothers is punishable by death.

The government and party own all the mass media and impose strict censorship on book publishing, filmmaking, writing and virtually all other areas of cultural expression. In 1988, the government detained a Syrian poet for reading a poem of which it did not approve, and in 1989 it banned a Syrian film that won international awards. The cult of personality of President Asad is a centerpiece of national life, and no criticism of him is tolerated.

Among Syria's many minority communities, three in particular face serious problems at the hands of the government. Kurds number 900,000 out of a population of about eleven million. They cannot freely express their Kurdish identity or publish in their language. Over 100,000 Kurds were deprived of their Syrian citizenship in the early 1960's. They still live in Syria, in difficult and marginal conditions, and are often denied access to schools, employment, social services and travel.

Syria's Jewish community of 3,800 faces an absolute ban on emigration and a number of other restrictions on travel and property, mostly related to emigration. Of seven Syrian Jews arrested in 1987 for alleged infringement of travel restrictions, four remain in custody without charge or trial. In November, the U.S. State Department announced that the Syrian government had said that it would take "a more flexible approach" to its Jewish population, including a trial for those imprisoned and a partial relaxation of the emigration ban. Such statements remain to be tested in practice.

The Palestinian community, which numbers some 300,000, faces serious risks. There are currently an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 Palestinians in jail and the government continues to make new arrests. In late 1988, the Syrian government spoke of 1,700 Palestinians in detention. At about the same time, Palestinian sources spoke of 4,000 prisoners and *The New York Times* referred to 3,000. There have been a few releases and some additional arrests since that time, so the overall numbers probably remain about the same today. Two special security services carry out this repression, which is linked to Syria's foreign policy. Although there have been reported releases in the past eight months, few Palestinians have actually been set free.

Many of the most serious human rights abuses for which Syria has been responsible in 1989 occurred in Syrian-occupied Lebanon. There, Syrian troops and Syrian-supported militias attacked unarmed civilians, carried out summary executions, and abducted Palestinian, Lebanese and other nationals. A number of Syrian security forces have arrested and brutally interrogated many hundreds, and probably thousands, of persons. Agents of Syria's Military Intelligence Agency and its Special Forces are primarily responsible, interrogating

prisoners at a number of facilities including al-Mafraza in West Beirut and Madrasa al-Amrican in Tripoli. Many prisoners are held in 'Anjar Prison, near the Syrian border, and the most important prisoners are brought to Damascus, where they are further interrogated and eventually imprisoned.

Because the U.S. government has supported a continuing Syrian role in Lebanon, it has been ready to ignore Syria's violations of human rights in its occupation. The State Department under Henry Kissinger formulated the 1976 "red-line agreement," which sanctioned Syria's original intervention in Lebanon, and that policy has largely continued to this day. Recently, there have been a number of high-level talks, including visits to Damascus by special Presidential emissary (and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations) Vernon Walters in July 1987, Secretary of State Schultz in late February 1988 and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Richard Murphy on several occasions in 1988 and 1989. Another State Department specialist, April Glaspie, was also involved in meetings during this time. Throughout the period, the United States, through what is known as the "Glaspie-Murphy Initiative," sought to widen discussions over Lebanon and to develop closer ties to Syria.

During 1989, several Bush administration officials spoke publicly of the importance of Syria's role in Lebanon and its potential contribution to a peaceful solution. This warming of relations came despite alleged connections between the Syrian-based and -supported Ahmad Jebril group and the bombing of TWA Flight 103. The administration has asked Syria to close down Jebril's group, which is headquartered in Damascus, but the Syrian government has refused. In early July, the Syrian Information Minister told a *New York Times* reporter: "We are quite optimistic in our understandings with the Bush administration and its policy toward the Middle East. The dialogue is proceeding at the highest level between the U.S. and Syria." In September, Secretary of State James Baker met with the Syrian Foreign Minister at the U.N. General Assembly and reaffirmed the warming relations between the two countries. All of this high-level diplomatic dialogue offered ample opportunity for human rights discussions. But there has been no public indication that U.S. human rights concerns were raised.

U.S.-Syrian relations are not those of two allies, but rather those of two parties with different interests that coincide under certain circumstances. In this way, the United States has developed a close working relationship with Syria, despite continuing Soviet aid and arms supplies and the Syrian government's reputation in some quarters as a "Soviet surrogate." In addition to the public diplomatic discussions, there have been many reports of high-level security discussions between Syria and the United States over the past year, especially discussions about Lebanon. The head of Syrian Military Intelligence in Lebanon reportedly visited Washington for unofficial talks with intelligence officials in September. Administration officials would not confirm this report, but they have said such a visit would not be uncharacteristic of the current dialogue. It is troubling that the administration might, as a matter of course, have discussions with the head of an agency known to be so deeply involved in gross human rights violations.

It is not as if the United States lacks leverage over Syria. U.S. oil companies have helped Syria export over \$700 million in petroleum in 1989 and there is an important new oil find in the Deir al-Zor area, discovered by U.S.-based Pecten; U.S. Middle East allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, have provided Syria with cash, oil and food aid amounting to over \$1 billion per year during the past ten years; and the U.S.-supported Syrian occupation of Lebanon has gained

Syria hundreds of millions of dollars in hard currency through drug sales, black-market activities and various kinds of expropriation. Without these revenues, the Syrian economy could not possibly function, nor could it have functioned over the past fifteen years.

Syria's economic vulnerability is underscored by its current debt problems with the World Bank and other foreign lenders. Syria's debt to the West totals at least \$6 billion, and it is said to be in arrears to the World Bank for over \$100 million. The Soviet Union is also pressing Syria for repayment of loans said to total \$15 billion for military hardware. The Soviet government has also made clear to Syria in recent months that it will be restricting arms sales and credits in the future. This financial pressure creates an opportunity for leverage on human rights.

But the Bush administration has opposed stiffer sanctions on human rights grounds, as demonstrated by its stance before Congress in the fall of 1989. Representative Robert Dorman introduced a bill (H.R. 2797) to embargo trade with Syria, citing human rights violations in Lebanon. This bill was opposed by the administration on the grounds that "effective sanctions are already in place."

Effective demands can and should be made for Syria to respect human rights in Lebanon as well as within its own national territory. But such demands depend on the existence of a policy which gives precedence to human rights. So far, the Bush administration, like its predecessors, has seemed little inclined to adopt this priority in the case of Syria.