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Syrian Arab Republic

The unforeseen events that are now shaking the Arab world have led to the overthrow of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and most likely will topple the ruling Gaddafi clan in Libya as well. They have also turned the eyes of the international community toward other countries in this region. It is not yet clear, however, whether the wave of protests will reach Syria, which clearly plays a key role in the regional structure. Experts' opinions differ widely on this point. While some feel that a change along the lines of what is happening in Tunisia and Egypt may be possible (calls have already been put out on the Internet for a *day of rage* in Syria), others warn that the Syrian population's fear of the secret service is too great. The rulers of Syria are certainly on alert, as indicated by the increased military presence of the state power in the cities. A number of examples from the past give an idea of how Syrian authorities would react to civil unrest; the brutal crushing of the revolt in 1982 led by the Muslim Brotherhood shows how they tend to deal with political opposition; the *Hama massacre* claimed about 30,000 lives; demonstrations by Kurds in Damascus in 2002 and 2003 were brutally suppressed. In March 2004, a dispute between supporters of Arab and Kurdish football teams led to rioting in the Kurdish areas of Syria, which later spread from Kamishli in the east to Afrin in the far west. The riots were triggered when supporters of the Arab team, cheering for Saddam Hussein, attacked Kurdish fans with weapons. There was even scattered rioting in the larger cities. The protests were brutally suppressed by the army, the police and the Ba'ath Party. Dozens were killed, hundreds injured, more than 3,000 arrests were made and a number of people went missing. Many Kurdish students were permanently expelled from the universities.

One of the most repressive regimes

The Syrian regime is still one of the most brutal and most repressive in the entire Arab world. Basic human rights are violated every day. Human rights activists and dissidents disappear, or are imprisoned and tortured. Last year alone, countless people died as a result of torture in Syrian prisons. Currently there are estimated 3,000 political prisoners being held. Hygienic conditions in the prisons are catastrophic; medical care is inadequate. The use of torture in prisons and police stations is a common practice. The victims of these attacks often suffer from physical and psychological effects of the violence for the rest of their lives. Not infrequently, victims die from the effects of physical abuse.

Syria has neither freedom of the press nor freedom of speech. All organs of the press are in the hands of the government and are strictly controlled. This applies to all radio and television stations as well as print media. The right to establish associations is severely restricted by the government. There is no freedom of assembly, nor an officially organized opposition. Again and again, "inconvenient" persons are arrested under reference to Syrian law and based on accusations of damaging the reputation of the Syrian government. Again and again, people disappear for months on end without a trace. Again and again, people are detained for months at a time without charge.

Dictatorship of the president and the party

The foundations of the Syrian regime, the power of which is concentrated in the hands of the president, are comprised of the Ba'ath party – the government party – and the various police and intelligence agencies. The ideology of the *Party of Arab renaissance*, de facto rulers of Syria since 1963 and widely regarded as the most significant political expression of Arab nationalism, has molded the Syrian state and its society for generations. At the core of this ideology is a pan-Arabism that places the nation, as a common feature of identity, above ethnic and religious differences. In fact, the founding principles of the party statutes designate differences between various members of the population as "incidental" and "wrong." The party's program pushes for Arabization of the Syrian population by declaring Arabic to be the official language of the state and the general public, and the only language of instruction, and at the same time states that every person who lives on Arab soil and speaks Arabic is an Arab.

The party maintains a 100,000-strong militia, which is the military arm of the organization and permeates society with mass organizations, such as the youth wing of the Ba'ath party, the *Revolution Youth Union*.

The secret service was zealously developed primarily under the rule of Hafiz al-Assad and is considered extremely effective. Under the emergency laws, which have been in force since 1963, the various branches of the security apparatus operate independently of one another and to some extent also monitor each other. The "security directorate" is probably the largest secret organization in the country, and has thousands of agents monitoring the daily lives of Syrians. This organization mainly sets its sights on political dissidents, foreigners and the media. According to Western intelligence, the Syrian military intelligence service, which is attached to Syria's defense department, supports terrorist groups. The state security court has jurisdiction for trials of political prisoners. Its methods are far below international standards.

Non-Arab minorities are brutally suppressed

In addition to opposition forces in general, victims of state repression in Syria include members of religious and ethnic minorities, in particular the Kurds. The population of Syria is around 20.4 million, mostly Arabs. The country's two million Kurds make up about ten percent of the total population, the largest ethnic minority. The Kurds live mainly on the Çiyayê Kurmênc massif (Kurd Mountain) and in the Kobani region (Arabic: Ain al-Arab), both north-west of Aleppo, as well as in the northern part of Djajira province (Arabic: Al-Hassake). There are also Armenians, Turkomans and Circassians. It can be said that religious freedom is respected in Syria to some extent; besides the Sunni majority (71%) and Alevi (12%), Syria has Christians (10%), Druze (4%), and Shia (2%), as well as Ismailis, Jews, Assyrian-Arameans, and Yazidis. However, Jews and Yazidis are denied freedom of religious practice. The members of these faiths are discriminated against, sometimes openly, and they are denied basic rights.

The situation of the Kurds

The situation of Kurds living in Syria is an example of the suppression of all non-Arab peoples and religious minorities in the country. The history of their oppression goes back many years. Early evidence of violence against Kurds is seen in an incident in 1957, when two hundred and fifty Kurdish children died in a cinema in Amuda, which had been deliberately set on fire. In particular since the Ba'ath Party took power in 1963, Kurds living in Syria have been massively repressed and their human rights systematically violated. The very existence of Kurds in the country has been officially denied for decades. Attempts are made to solve the "Kurdish problem" through aggressive assimilation and rigorous, racist Arabization. The Kurds have no legitimate political representation. Since the Syrian constitution does not allow ethnic or religious parties, Kurdish parties are de facto prohibited.

On 23 August 1962 the Syrian government enacted Decree No. 93, stipulating an extraordinary census in the province of al-Hassaka, which was conducted in October 1962. As a result of this census, 120,000 Kurds were deprived of Syrian citizenship. These expatriates and their descendants became foreigners in their own country. They are officially referred to as "foreigners" or "non-registered." Since then, the number those affected has increased to about 300,000 people. The denial of citizenship has far-reaching consequences for the people who are thus deprived of their civil rights. For example, these stateless people have no right to own property, no access to education, no right to enter into civil marriages, no right to participate actively or passively in elections, and no right to government employment. With the adoption of the Syrian government's Edict 49 in 2009, people without Syrian nationality were no longer allowed to work in the private sector. Those who violate the decree may be sentenced to a fine of 100,000 Syrian pounds (1609 euros) or a prison sentence of six to twelve months. The affected persons are completely deprived of their rights, with no access to education, and are therefore doomed to long term unemployment. Under these circumstances, a decent life is impossible. That is why so many Kurds – those who can – flee abroad.

The year 1965 marked the beginning of the racially motivated Arabization that continues to this day, which is directed against the Kurds. That year saw the maturation of the idea of an "Arabian belt" policy, an area to be set up in the Kurdish regions along Syria's borders to Turkey and Iraq. The goal of the project is to reverse the demographic situation in the northern part of the country and make the Kurdish majority in the region a minority instead. The planned and deliberate settlement of Bedouin Arabs in Kurdish areas began in 1973. Arab settlements built in these areas currently number more than 50. The Kurdish landowners, many of whom lived on agriculture, were expropriated for the most part without compensation. They now live in destitution on the edges of cities and urban areas, where they and their families are forced to eke out a living as day laborers, having been deprived of their livelihood. Arabization aims to eliminate the national and cultural identity of the Kurds. Historic Kurdish

names and the designations of cities, villages, mountains, valleys and landscapes have been replaced by Arabic names. The Kurdish language is prohibited. Speaking Kurdish in public is severely punished, as is possession of Kurdish literature or media of any kind. To this day, officials often refuse to register Kurdish names. The Ministry of the Interior issued an official decree in 1992 that forbids giving children Kurdish names. Due to the language ban, the number of illiterates has increased among Kurds. Many people who speak no Arabic are thus left with no access to education, because Arabic is the only approved language for education. Teaching in the Kurdish language is forbidden, as are Kurdish folklore and cultural practices. In 1994 the governor of al-Hasaka issued a decree stipulating that any business that did not have an Arabic name would have to take one on in future. These measures aim to distort historical realities as well as cultural identity and national characteristics. All of this adds up to an undeniable attempt to forcibly assimilate the Kurds and wipe out their historical and cultural heritage – their identity.

Continuous deterioration of the human rights situation

The human rights situation in Syria has been deteriorating in recent years. Systematic human rights violations against ethnic and religious minorities are documented daily, including arbitrary arrests, torture, disappearances and the killing of "undesirables." Every day members of religious and ethnic minorities, especially Kurds and Christian Assyrian-Arameans, are jailed for no apparent reason by the security services who terrorize the population. The state of emergency that has been continuously in force since 1963 allows the Syrian government to control and intimidate the population. Of particular concern are incidents within the Syrian army. Time and time again soldiers of Kurdish origin have been abused; some have even died under unexplained circumstances. In the past seven years nearly 40 Kurdish soldiers were killed under mysterious circumstances. The relatives are usually inadequately informed, or lied to outright, about the specific cause of death. Officials routinely ascribe such deaths to suicide or accident. Since access to military documents is supervised by the national security service, it is virtually impossible to investigate deaths and cases of human rights violations in the Syrian army in any detail. Independently conducted autopsies arranged by family members of the deceased often come to the conclusion that death was brought about by externally inflicted violence (e.g. based on gunshot wounds or signs of torture).

The Society for Threatened Peoples is currently in possession of the names of 170 known political prisoners. The examples of politically motivated arrests are numerous, and include the following:

In 2009, Kurdish human rights activist Mashaal Tamo was sentenced to three and a half years in prison because he had reported on the human rights situation in Syria.

Christian Assyrian-Arameans also disadvantaged

In September 2010, two young Christian Assyrian-Arameans, Gabriel Isa Iskandar and Hanna Nahir, were arrested by Syrian intelligence agents for waving the Assyrian flag at a concert, thereby allegedly violating Section 307 (incitement to ethnic and religious hatred) of the Syrian penal code. This allegation is absurd, as Assyrian-Aramean national symbols are not prohibited by Syrian law.

The 19-year-old Syrian blogger Tal al-Malluhi was sentenced on 14 February 2011 by the Syrian military court to five years in prison for allegedly spying in the service of the U.S. No concrete evidence of these allegations has been submitted.

On 25 January 2011, Kurdish folk singer Bave Salah was arrested. The singer, who appears regularly at public events, does not belong to any political organization or party. The artist has been working many years to preserve the Kurdish language by collecting and documenting Kurdish folk songs. After a worldwide campaign launched by the Society for Threatened Peoples, Bave Salah was released on 5 March 2011.

In August 2010, German-Syrian human rights activist and lawyer Ismail Abdi was arrested. He had taken a vacation with his family in Syria and was detained when he attempted to leave the country. For several months, his whereabouts remained unknown to his family. He is set to be sentenced under Sections 287 and 288 of the Syrian penal code.

Although a member of the United Nations, Syria does not respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The government of Syria continues to violate international treaties, such as the UN Convention Against Torture, which the Syrian parliament ratified in 2004. Syrian citizens are vouchsafed neither their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights nor the safeguards of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.