



Syrian Arab Republic

Last update:	26 April 2011
Author:	
Population:	22,198,110
Prime minister:	Adel Safar (since April 2011)
President:	Bashar Al-Asad (since July 2000)
Governemental type:	Republic under an authoritarian military-dominated regime
Ruling coalition:	One ruling party – National Progressive Front (NFP)
Last election:	Parliamentary April 22, 2007, Constitutional referendum May 27, 2007
Next election:	Parliamentary 2011
Sister parties:	None



The Syrian Arab Republic is a country in the Middle East bordering Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Israel. Officially, Syria is a parliamentary republic, but in reality it is an authoritarian regime, whereby the power is in the hands of President Bashar Al-Assad and the ruling Baath Party. Since mid-March, unrest and massive protests broke out in Syria, where political opposition is harshly being suppressed. On April 19, Al-Assad made an end to the 48-year-old emergency law which repressed the people, but demonstrations continue and protesters are still demonstrating against the regime.

INTRODUCTION

Syria first seemed immune to the wave of unrest that swept through a big part of the Arab world since the revolution in Tunisia in January 2011. However, from mid-March, protesters gathered and massive protests and demonstrations broke out in several cities in Syria. Syria had not seen such protests since the 1980s.

President Bashar Al-Assad, son of Hafez Al-Assad, is in charge since July 2000 and continued the policy of his father, who was president for three decades until his death in 2000. Syria can be seen as a republic under an authoritarian military-dominated regime, which harshly suppresses the opposition and lacks human rights and free elections.

POLITICAL SITUATION

The modern state of Syria is a formerly French mandate which became independent in 1946. After independence Syrian leaders established a parliamentary democracy, but the country lacked political stability. This led to a series of military coups during the following decades.

In 1958 Syria united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. The UAR was seen as a first step towards a pan-Arab state. Pan-Arab sentiment was very strong in Syria, and Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser was a popular hero-figure throughout the Arab world following the Suez War of 1956. But dissatisfaction among the Syrian people grew fast, because Egypt dominated the Union. This discontent led to a military coup on 28 September 1961, followed by the reestablishment of the Syrian Arab Republic.



From 1961 till 1963 was in a state of near anarchy. Coups and countercoups, street fighting between Nasserites, Communists, and Baathists and battles between rival army factions plunged the nation into chaos. In 1963, a group of Syrian senior officers joined forces with the Arab socialist Baath Party and staged a coup on 8 March, also known as the Baath Revolution. One day after the Baath party came to power in Syria, it declared a state of emergency. This was ostensibly designed to deal with the Israeli military threat but has instead been used to suppress internal political challenges.

In November 1970 Hafiz Al-Assad, a member of the Baath Party and belonging to the minority Alawite sect, seized power in a bloodless coup and brought political stability to the country staying in power for 30 years. After his death his son Bashar Al-Assad became president in July 2000.

Political system

According to the 1973 constitution, Syria is a Socialist Popular Democratic Republic. The charter allows for a multiparty, pluralist system and states that sovereignty is exercised by the people. In reality Syria is a single party state. The country is governed by an authoritarian military-dominated regime that exhibits only the forms of a democratic system.

The government structure is divided into three branches: the Chief of State, President Bashar Al-Assad; the Head of Government, Prime Minister Muhammad Najj al-Utri; and the legislature, the People's Council (Majlis al-Shaab). All three branches of government are guided by the views of the Baath Party, whose primacy in state institutions is assured by the constitution.

The presidential candidate is appointed by the parliament and needs to be confirmed for a seven year term by referendum. The president is also Secretary General of the Baath Party and leader of the National Progressive Front. He has the right to appoint ministers, to declare war and states of emergency, to issue laws, to declare amnesty, to amend the constitution, and to appoint civil servants and military personnel. Late president Hafiz Al-Assad was confirmed in office five times, standing unopposed in successive referendums and usually garnering 99 percent approval. Bashar ran unopposed following his father's death and was elected in 2000 and re-elected in 2007, also with a large majority of the votes. Political opposition to the president is not tolerated, except for that of the so-called "loyal opposition" within the parliament.

The Majlis al-Shaab is elected in 15 multi-member constituencies (single-member prior to the 1990 elections). The candidates are elected by simple majority, placed on party lists put forward by the member parties of the National Progressive Front. Members of parliament serve 4-year terms. 170 out of 250 seats are guaranteed for the National Progressive Front (NPF), a coalition of political parties. The remaining 80 seats are open for independent candidates. The NPF is dominated by the Baath Party and does not change the essentially one-party character of the political system.

Restrictions

The regime's prime method to suppress internal opposition is the State of Emergency Act (Decree 51), amended in 1963. The president is empowered to issue wide-ranging orders restricting freedom in all areas of life. The Syrian government also uses Decree 51 to exercise power over the judiciary. Via the court system the regime eliminates political opponents.

In 1968 Supreme State Security Courts were established. In principle defendants, almost exclusively political prisoners, have the same rights as they would have in normal court. But whereas in the normal legal process guilt must be proven, this is not the case in state security courts. The trials are closed to the public and suspects are often not allowed to see their families.

After a short period of more political and individual freedom called the Damascus Spring, that came into being after the death of president Hafez in 2000, the Ministry of Social Affairs announced in February 2001 that political forums, such as for example discussion groups, could not meet without permission of the government. Unauthorized demonstrations are prohibited, and protests or rallies for certain causes are often staged by the government.



A new law on political parties was passed by parliament in March 2006, which seemed to represent a step toward true pluralism, but the law contains a number of qualifications that appear to undermine its positive effect. Article 17 of the new law states that it is “prohibited to relaunch any party that was disbanded before the year 1963,” a provision that is aimed at the outlawed, but very popular, Muslim Brotherhood.

In the run-up to the 2007 elections the government altered the Election Law of 1973 to include strict regulations on campaign financing. The new law prohibits candidates from providing “services and financial assistance” prior to elections, limits campaign spending to 3 million Syrian pounds (about 37000 euro’s), and obligates candidates to use an accountant to supervise expenditures during the election campaigns. The official reason was to combat corruption and level the playing field for candidates, but critics suggest that it was intended to prevent opposition candidates receiving financial support from outside sources, such as the US government.

ELECTIONS

Parliamentary elections 22 April 2007

On 22 April 2007 parliamentary elections were held in Syria. The number of seats reserved for the parties in the NPF was increased from 167 to 170, decreasing the seats for independents to 80. The number of entrants to the parliamentary election race at the deadline reached 9,770, of whom 2,293 were approved, including 158 women. The entrants competed for 250 seats which are divided among the 14 governorates of Syria.

Governate	Seats	Percentage
Damascus	29	11.6 %
Rif Dimashq	19	7.6 %
Quneitra	5	2 %
Daraa	10	4 %
As Suwayd?’	6	2.4 %
Homs	23	9.2 %
Tartous	13	5.2 %
Latakia	17	6.8 %
Hama	22	8.8 %
Idlib	18	7.2 %
Aleppo	52	20.8 %
Ar Raqqah	8	3.2 %
Deir ez-Zor	14	5.6 %
Al Hasakah	14	5.6 %

According to the election results released by the Syrian government on 26 April 2007, the National Progressive Front won 170 seats. The independents won the other 80 seats. Official turnout was 56,12 percent of the 11.96 million eligible voters. Human rights activists and opponents of the government claimed election fraud and a turnout of at most 10 percent.

PARTIES	Seats	Seats inside NPF	Labours and peasants	Other categories of the population
National Progressive Front	170			
Arab Socialist Baath Party		134	74	60
Arab Socialist Union		7	4	3
Socialist Unionist Party		6	2	4



Communist Party of Syria (Wissal Farha Bakdash faction)		4	2	2
Democratic Socialist Unionist Party		4	3	1
Arab Socialist Unity Movement		4	3	1
Communist Party of Syria (Yussef Faysal faction)		4	2	2
National Vow Movement		3	2	1
Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party		3	1	2
Arabic Democratic Unionist Party		1	1	-
non-partisans	80		35	45
Total (turnout 56.12 %)	250	250		

Source : Dutch Embassy in Damascus

Irregularities

Following the parliamentary elections several demonstrations took place in Syria. Violent protests broke out in northern Syria. The army intervened to put an end to the demonstration. At least two people were killed and several were left seriously injured. In the north-eastern cities of Raqqah and Deir Ezour 700 tribesmen staged a sit-in and destroyed nearby poll centers. Protesting later spread to the centre of Raqqah when a further 3,000 people gathered near the Governor's home. Six people were injured and a temporary curfew was imposed on the city.

Presidential referendum 27 May

A presidential referendum in Syria was held on 27 May in 2007. After the People's Council proposed to re-appoint Bashar Al-Assad on 10 May, Bashar ran unopposed for a second term as president. He won the election with more than 97 percent of the votes. It was widely believed that the elections were neither free nor fair. Opposition figures and movements had called for a boycott of the presidential referendum. Due to the tight control imposed by the Syrian security apparatuses, observers for the Syrian Elector of the Tharwa Community (a portal for activists and bloggers in the Middle East) had difficulties making any real estimates of the actual size of turnout. However, they did notice a below average turnout, even in major cities like Damascus and Aleppo. The official turnout of almost 96 percent is highly questionable.

Option	Votes	%
Yes	11,199,445	97.62
No	19,653	0.17
Invalid	253,059	2.21
Total (turnout 95.86%)(11,967,611 eligible)	11,472,157	100.0

Total (Source: Syrian Arab News Agency)

Irregularities

The Syrian presidential referendum took place in the absence of any kind of approved independent observers. Except for voters and security officers no one was allowed access to the polling centres. Although official election observers were not allowed, a lot of people reported irregularities. Many voters stated that ballots have already been



filled on their behalf with a “yes” for Bashar. People were not asked for their electoral cards and numerous incidents of multiple voting took place. University students were reportedly coerced to vote by being told that failure to do so would result in them not being allowed to take their final exams for the year. Public sector workers said they were obligated to vote en masse and in the open, and were told that refusal to participate would have severe repercussions.

Consequences of the elections

It is widely assumed that the outcome of the legislative elections as well as the presidential elections was staged by the government. The people of Syria have no real power to change the regime. President Al-Bashar and his clique are still able to maintain all the power in the country.

The composition of the new parliament reveals no new faces. Even the ‘new’ figures are only new in the sense that they are elected for the first time, but they are not new to the political scene. Most are former mid- to high-level state employees, in a civic, military or security capacity. The independent candidates are mostly businessmen who are now serving their second or third term, and all are affiliated, one way or another, in business arrangements with members of the inner circle of the regime.

Participation of women and minorities

The Electoral Law grants women the right to vote in public elections and to stand as candidates in elections to the parliament, where they currently hold 10 percent of the seats. In 2006 Al-Assad appointed Syria’s first female vice president, former culture minister Najah Al-Attar. Two female ministers are represented in the government: Dr. Bouthaina Shabaan, minister of Expatriates and Dr. Diala al-Haj Aref, minister of Labour and Social Affairs. In the Central Committee of the Baath Party, 18 out of the 96 members are female.

In the parliament 30 female candidates were elected. Exactly as many as in the elections of 2003. Of those women, 17 participated in a regional project launched in 2005 by the United Nations Development Fund for Women entitled “Arab Women Parliamentarians”. The project is being implemented in nine Arab countries, and in Syria UNIFEM has been working in partnership with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and the General Women’s Union, two governmental organizations.

Women are guaranteed the same rights as men in the Syrian constitution. Article 45 of the constitution declares, “The state guarantees women all the opportunities that enable them to participate fully and effectively in political, social, cultural, and economic life.” Yet, personal status laws as well as the penal code contain provisions that discriminate against women and girls. The penal code allows a judge to suspend punishment for a rapist if the rapist chooses to marry his victim, and provides leniency for so-called “honour” crimes, such as assault or killing of women and girls by male relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. Wives require the permission of their husbands to travel abroad, and divorce laws remain discriminatory.

Syria is divided along religious and ethnic lines. Members of the Alawite sect of president Bashar hold most of the important military and security positions, but for maintaining stability the regime makes sure minorities are also represented in the parliament. This is in accordance with the secular socialist nature of the Baath Party. Sunni Muslims are the majority group in Syria, about 80 percent. Ten of fourteen positions of the Baath Parties Regional Command are in control of Sunnis. The prime minister Muhammad Najj al-Utri, as well as vice-president Al-Attar are Sunni Muslims. The Government also selects moderate Muslims for religious leadership positions.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Since mid-March, massive protests broke out in several cities in Syria. Protesters demanded the release of all political prisoners, more freedoms for individuals and an end to pervasive corruption. Despite these calls for reform, the Syrian security forces violently repressed the demonstrations and fired upon unarmed protesters. According to human rights groups, the number of deaths went up to 300 people in March and April 2011.

On 25 March, after online calls to a big demonstration called “Friday of Glory” on social media websites such as facebook and twitter, tens of thousands took to the streets in protest against Al-Assad’s regime. The day of 8 April became known as the “Friday of Resistance,” when thousands of protesters again took to the streets in several



cities in Syria. On 15 April Al Jazeera reported that up to 50,000 protesters tried to enter Damascus from the Douma suburb, but they were dispersed by security forces using tear gas.

In reaction to the massive protests, on 19 April 2011 the Syrian government made an end to the 48-year-old emergency law in order to restrict protests and demonstrations. The emergency law designated the prime minister as the martial law governor of the country and the interior minister as his deputy, and gave them extraordinary powers. These included, among other things, the ability to place restrictions on freedoms of individuals and to preventatively arrest anyone suspected of endangering public security and order.

Although many people saw the emergency-law as the most repressive law affecting the rights and freedoms of all Syrian citizens without exception, many protesters believed this would not change the regime. The same day, Syrian authorities arrested Mahmoud Issa, a prominent leftist opponent of the Syrian government, and demonstrations and violence in Syria continued.

On 22 April, the country experienced its biggest and bloodiest day in the series of protests. Tens of thousands took to the streets and according to the protesters' own reports; at least 70 people were killed nationwide after security forces opened fire on the demonstrators. Two MPs from Daraa, Naser al-Hariri and Khalil al-Rifaei, resigned on 23 April 2011 in protest against the killings. Two days later, the Syrian human rights group Sawasiah reported that over 500 pro-democracy sympathizers across Syria were arrested after the government sent in tanks to crash protests in the city of Daraa.

On 23 April Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, made the following statement:

"I condemn the use of brutal force against demonstrators across Syria, which is resulting in high numbers of victims. The Syrian authorities must immediately stop their violent response and fully respect citizens' right to peaceful demonstrations." Also Russia, Greece, France and the U.S. condemned the violence in Syria and asked for necessary reforms by the government. U.S. President Barack Obama said in a statement that "This outrageous use of violence to quell protests must come to an end now."

IMPORTANT POLITICAL ISSUES

Freedom of press

The constitution guarantees the right to a free press and freedom of expression, but since the Authoritarian Baath regime is in power Syria is functioning under a highly restrictive state of emergency. Political opposition has been almost impossible, as is any sort of free expression of opinion.

The situation slightly seemed to change when Bashar became president. During the first six months of his reign, an unprecedented political opening led to discussion salons, critical content in the newspapers, and releases of political prisoners. For the first time in 40 years, private newspapers were licensed and public criticism of the regime was permitted, even from state-controlled entities. However, this period, referred to as the Damascus Spring, came to an end in 2001. The regime fell back on its methods of repression and jailed political opponents and forced closure of the salons.

A further crackdown on journalism became evident with Decree 50 of 2001 that replaced the 1949 General Law on Printed Matter. Anyone wishing to establish an independent paper or periodical must apply for a license from the Ministry of Information. The Prime Minister's office can deny licenses for reasons related to the public interest. In addition, the decree prohibits articles and reports about "national security, national unity, and details of secret trials.

The media can criticize in general terms corruption, economic performance, and bureaucratic inefficiency because



these themes coincide with regime discourse; however, these criticisms must not go so far as to implicate high-ranking officials. Similarly, criticism regarding religion or political or foreign policy issues is usually off-limits.

Via Lebanese newspapers, pan-Arab satellite and the internet political discussion and criticism of the government continues. The authorities try to suppress freedom of expression on the internet. They block access to Arab-language opposition websites and those dealing with the country's Kurdish minority. Following arrests in 2005 and 2007 there are now 4 cyber-journalists in prison. The prisoners include a Kurdish blogger who was held in secret without access to a lawyer, according to human rights organisations.

Five principal security agencies serve primarily to monitor political dissent. A state of emergency is in place ever since 1963, with military courts applying martial law and special courts trying political cases with little regard for human rights or fair trial. Prisoners are routinely tortured and held in appalling conditions.

Damascus Declaration

On 16 October 2005 Syrian opposition groups released the "Damascus Declaration" demanding Syria's transformation through peaceful means from a "security state to a political state" based on free and regular elections, a democratic constitution, the rule of law, pluralism, and individual rights. The declaration calls for an end to Syria's emergency law, the release of political prisoners, and the return of exiles; it also endorses the cultural and political rights of Kurds and other minorities. The document brought together leftist and nationalist groups, Kurdish movements, secular dissidents, an imprisoned lawmaker, human rights activists, and the exiled leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

Syrian authorities launched a campaign of arrests against members of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change opposition coalition on December 9, 2007. Twenty-three leading members of the Declaration have been arrested as of December 11. The campaign came a week after the Declaration has held its first conference in Syria on 1 December, in which it elected its president and general secretariat, and issued a call for peaceful democratic change.

Minorities

The Syrian population is divided along both ethnic and religious lines. Almost 90 percent of the population is ethnic Arab. The largest ethnic minority group in the country is Kurdish. The 1.5 million Kurds, who represent about 12 percent of the total population in Syria do are denied the rights stipulated by the constitution. As a result of a census in 1962, an estimated 120,000 Kurds were expatriated, thus denying them their citizen's rights. Today around 200,000 stateless Kurds are unable to apply for a passport, register their children to attend school, or to have marriages registered.

Assyrians form a small minority group in Syria of around 500,000 people. They enjoy freedom of religion, but are not seen as a minority group by the Syrian Government. They refer to the Assyrians as Arab Christians. Assyrians want to be recognized as a minority group, in order to educate in their own language, Suryani, and to protect their cultural heritage. They are organized in two (forbidden) opposition groups, namely the Assyrian Democratic Organisation and the Assyrian Democratic Party.

Islam/ religion

Syria is the only Arab country other than Lebanon whose constitution does not establish Islam as the state religion, although it does require the president to be a Muslim. The secular philosophy of the ruling Baath party and dominant role played by members of the minority Alawite Muslim sect ensure better protection of religious freedom than in most Arab countries.

Syria contains several religious sectarian groups. The majority of people are Sunni Muslims, who comprise over 70 percent of the population. Furthermore there are three smaller Muslim sects, Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis (Shi'a denominations of Islam), several Christian denominations and a Jewish community.

Despite the secular nature of the Baathist regime, religious sects are important in Syria as symbols of group identity and determinants of political orientation. President Al-Assad belongs to the minority Alawite Sect. To maintain their power the Alawite community tries to cooperate with other religious sects. Many senior positions including that of Prime Minister are held by members of the Sunni Muslim majority. However, most key positions, particularly in the



security institutions, remain in Alawite hands.

There is mounting concern by the government over the spread of Islamist groups that oppose the regime and support jihadist insurgents in Iraq. The Government continues to hold an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists as political prisoners. Their arrests and, in some cases, convictions, are largely motivated by the Government's fear of militant Islam as a potential threat to regime stability.

It is difficult to assess the strength of Islamists in Syria because the state prevents most expressions of political dissent, such as demonstrations or protests. However, evidence of growing Islamism includes the appearance of more women wearing the veil, more muscular speeches by imams in mosques, and a few violent incidents.

Human trafficking

Syria is a destination country for women trafficked from South and Southeast Asia and Africa for the purpose of domestic servitude and from Eastern Europe and Iraq for sexual exploitation. These women face withholding of passports and other restrictions on movement, and physical and sexual abuse. Some displaced Iraqi women and children are reportedly forced into sexual exploitation. A new anti trafficking law is drafted and has been submitted to the Prime Minister's office for approval, but has not been taken in effect yet.

Refugees

Syria shelters refugees from its neighbouring countries Palestine and Iraq. An estimated 1.6 million Iraqi refugees live in Syria and about 40 thousand Palestinian refugees. With few prospects of legal jobs, the refugees are placing increased pressures on Syria's subsidized economy, the country struggles with skyrocketing rents, rising prices, and overburdened public services. There are also living 305,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) living in Syria, mostly exiles from the Golan Heights who fled after the Israeli occupation in 1967.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Middle East

Syria's foreign policy towards the western superpowers and its Middle Eastern neighbours continues to be driven by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Syria strives for withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories and restoring sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which Israel seized in 1967. Relations with Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian authorities strained after these countries signed separate peace treaties with Israel. However, after the Israeli-Palestinian peace broke off in 2000, Syria's relations with all three countries have improved.

Lebanon

Syrian Arab Socialists as well as Arab nationalists see Lebanon as one and the same country as Syria. Which is why Damascus never permitted an exchange of ambassadors. Syria maintained military forces and intelligence personnel in Lebanon since the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1976 and heavily influenced the foreign policy of the country.

Recently Syria seems to loose some of its power in Lebanon. After former prime-minister Rafik Hariri was murdered by a car bomb in February 2005, an UN inquiry into the assassination of Hariri showed many leads pointing to direct involvement of Syrian officials. Hariri firmly opposed Syria's domination in Lebanon. Damascus denied any involvement, but the international community put Syria under strong pressure to withdraw forces from Lebanon. Syria's troop left the country after a presence of 29 years. For the first time in years, an anti-Syrian government is in power in Lebanon. But due to longstanding political, economic, and social ties Syria still has a vast network of influence within Lebanon.

Iran

Iran is Syria's closest ally. Syria was the only country supporting Iran during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988, breaking from most other Arab countries. Recently the ties between the two states have grown stronger, after both Iran and Syria came under increasing international pressure. They are labelled by the United States as 'rogue countries' of the axis of evil and accused of sponsoring terrorism and disrupting the Middle East peace process. The US blames Syria and Iran also of interference in Iraq aimed at aiding the insurgency and obstructing security efforts.

Iraq



In 2006, Iraq and Syria decided to resume diplomatic ties after a break of nearly 25 years. The Iraqi Baath party was a bitter rival of the Syrian Baath party for years. When Syria decided to support Iran in the Iran–Iraq War in the 80s relations deteriorated even further. Although Syria's alleged support to the current Islamist insurgents and the allowance of arms trafficking across its border into Iraq still strains the relation between the two countries, it is in Syria's interest to continue strengthening of relations, in the hopes of reducing the refugee flow from Iraq.

United States

The relation between Syria and the United States are strained for years now. In 2004 the US banned US exports to Syria, except for food and medicine, allowed the US Treasury Department to seize the property of Syrians allegedly involved in terrorism, and banned flights between the United States and Syria.

Recently the US–Syria relations did seem to improve a little. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Damascus in May 2007 and the participation of Syria in the Middle East peace conference in Annapolis in November indicated a shift towards more engagement between the conflicting partners. However, in February 2008 the Bush administration ordered expanding sanctions against Syria, saying the nation's leaders have engaged in a pattern of violating human rights in their own country and harmed the peace and stability of other nations in the region.

EU

In March 2007 the European Union reopened its dialogue with Syria, after the EU suspended contacts in 2005, because of the alleged involvement of Syria in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Syria is a signatory of the 1995 Barcelona Declaration. The technical details of an EU–Syria Association Agreement were concluded in 2004, but political circumstances were so far not right for its ratification. The main areas of cooperation will be cooperation on economic, social and democratic reform, political dialogue and trade and investment relations.

Russia

Russia and Syria have been building a closer relationship during the last couple of years. Moscow hopes in this way to enlarge its role in the Middle East peace process and is also expanding its military presence in the Mediterranean by using its long time naval supply base in Syria. The bilateral ties focus on the development of economic cooperation. Syria purchases arms and military equipment from Russia, which worries the United States. Ties between the two countries go back to the Cold War, when Syria was within the Soviet sphere of influence and received strong military support from Russia.

PRO-GOVERNMENT POLITICAL PARTIES

National progressive Front

Although Syria officially is a parliamentary republic, democratic parties have no chance to operate freely in the country and lot of parties operate underground. Nine political parties are allowed to operate, as long as they conform strictly to Baath Party and government policies. Together with the Baath Party, they form the National Progressive Front (al-Jabha al-Wataniya al-Taquadumiya). Even though they are legally permitted to operate, information about their current political positions and programme priorities are hard to find. Websites of the parties are blocked on the internet.

The Front was established in 1972 by Syrian president Hafiz Al-Assad providing for a limited degree of participation in government by political parties to broaden his regime support. The Syrian constitution provides that the Baath Party controls 50 percent plus one of the votes on its executive committee. Below a description of the parties in the NPF.

Arab Socialist Baath party (al-Hizb al-ba'th al-'arabi al-ishtiraki)

Party leader: president Bashar Al-Assad

Since the Baath Revolution in 1963, the Arab Socialist Baath Party has all power in Syria. The party provides the Syrian president (who is also the party leader) and leads the National Progressive Front. The Baath Party is represented in parliament with 134 seats.

The Arab Baath Party was founded in Damascus in 1947 by two secondary schoolteachers, Michel Aflaq and Salah ad



Din al Bitar. They were inspired by the Arab nationalist renaissance movement that wanted to combat Western colonial rule. In Arabic, baath means renaissance or resurrection. As a pan-Arab movement, the Baath Party has branches in different Arab countries. At first, the party was mainly supported by students and intellectuals, but with the party's proposed program of social and economic reform it attracted the urban lower middle class. With the party's emphasis on Arab nationalism it received considerable support from the military's officer corps.

The motto of the Baath Party is "Unity, Freedom, and Socialism." It is seen as an integrated concept, whereby no element can be attained without the other two. Unity refers to Arab unity, freedom emphasizes freedom from foreign control and interference in particular, and socialism refers to what has been termed Arab Socialism. Especially in the 1950s and 60s, Arab Socialism represented an important political trend in the Arab world. The term was invented by Aflaq, in order to distinguish his version of socialist ideology from Marxist socialism and the other types of socialism that developed in either European or other non-Western countries. The ideology is an amalgamation of Pan-Arabism and Socialism. Arab Socialism was pictured as a 'third way' between 'egoist capitalism' and 'anti-spiritual' socialism.

Membership of the Baath Party is seen as a privilege. Party admission is highly selective, especially at higher echelons. You have to be a Syrian citizen and follow ideological courses to obtain membership. Young people in Syria join the party to improve their chances at university or on the labour market. Membership of the Baath party is for life, you can't resign from the party. It is strictly forbidden to become a member of another political party. According to the Baath Party, they have one million members.

Arab Socialist Union (al-ittiHad al-ishtiraki al-'arabi)
Party leader: Safwan al-Qudsi

The Arab Socialist Party (ASP) was founded in 1950 by Akram Hawrani as an outgrowth of Hizb al-Shabab (Youth Party). Hawrani's doctrine followed closely that of Aflaq and Bitar. In the 30s in Syria the country's agriculture was characterized by a feudal system. Landlords exercised complete control over the peasantry, backed up by what amounted to private armies. Al-Hawrani set about attacking this system, and called for agrarian reforms, which gained him considerable popular support.

In 1952, after initial successes, the ASU was banned, because the party was being considered as a too powerful political rival for Syria's de facto leader, Adib ash-Shishakli. Akram went into exile in Lebanon, and there agreed on a merger with the Arab Baath Party.

At a Baath Party conference in 1959 party members voted for a merger into the Arab Socialist Union within the United Arab Republic. However, dissent over the union grew, and another conference, a year later, revised the decision. This led to the fragmentation into a Nasserite pan-Arab ASU faction and the more nationalist Baath faction

In 1973, the Syrian branch of the international ASU, broke away to form the Arab Socialist Union (Syria) as part of the National Progressive Front. On orders of the government of president Hafez Al-Assad, ASU distanced itself from Anwar Sadat's policies in Egypt. Today's Syrian ASU has little independent existence. The nationalistic Baath faction of ASU is led by Safwan al-Qudsi and has 7 seats in the People's Council.

Socialist Unionists party(al-waHdawiyyun al-ishtirakiyyun) Party leader: Fayiz Ismail

The Socialist Unionists party (al-Wahdawiyyun al-Ishtirakiyyun) is the Nasserite political wing of the Arab Socialist Union. The party was founded in 1961, through a split within the Baath Party. The party strives for reunification with Egypt. The Socialist Unionists party is represented with 6 seats in the Syrian parliament.

Communist Party of Syria (al-Hizb ash-shuyu'i as-suri)Exists out of two factions with the same name led by: Wissal Farha Bakdash and Yusuf Rashid Faysal

The Syrian Communist Party has been active in Syria since 1944. The party is part of the world communist movement, and historically had a pro-Soviet orientation. The party evolved out of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon, founded in 1924 in Beirut. In 1936 Khalid Bakdash, a member of the Communist Party who studied at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow, took control as secretary of the party, and set about



building up its organisation. The party adopted a moderate programme and opened its ranks to all those accepting it, rather than functioning as a restricted Leninist vanguard organization. It built up a significant support base among the working class, Kurds and intellectuals. In the 80s it was the second-largest legal political party, after the Baath party.

In the late 50's the SCP was a bitter opponent of the Baath Party and was harshly suppressed. In 1972, faced with the choice between accepting these restrictions and the prospect of illegal operation, Bakdash and the majority of the party chose to join the National Progressive Front. The more radical elements in the party were unhappy about participation in the Front. However, the breaking point did not come until 1976 and the Syrian intervention in the Lebanese Civil War on the side of rightist, Maronite-led elements against the nationalist bloc and its allies in the Palestine Liberation Organization. This was too much for the radicals, and Riyad al-Turk led them into opposition. His faction was termed the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau).

In the early 1980s, the SCP was temporarily banned by Assad; however, in 1986 the faction of Bakdash was restored to favor, partially as a concession to the Soviet Union. During a party congress of the SCP, Central Committee members who had precipitated the rift with Assad through strident criticism of the regime were purged from the party.

Since a split in 1986, the name of the Communist Party has been used by two competing parties. Bakdash and deputy secretary Yusuf Faisal differed over the policies of perestroika and glasnost adopted by Soviet Communist Party general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Faisal was supportive of Gorbachev's reforms, while Bakdash was opposed. This led to another split in the party, with many of the party's intellectuals leaving with Faisal while much of its Kurdish base remained supportive of Bakdash. Both factions retained the name "Syrian Communist Party" and continued to participate in the NPF. Khalid Bakdash died in 1995. His wife Wissal Farha Bakdash became the new party leader.

The two parties now follow a similar political line, harshly critical of United States policy in the Middle East and supportive of the government's foreign policy. At the same time, the Faisal faction in particular has actively called for democratic reforms and has criticized maladministration and corruption as well as the liberal economic reforms implemented or proposed by the government in recent years. In parliament, the Bakdash faction has 4 seats, against 4 seats for the Faisal faction.

Democratic Socialist Unionist Party (al-Hizb al-waHdawi al-ishtiraki ad-dimuqraTi) Party leader: Fadlallah Nasr Al-Din

The Democratic Socialist Unionist Party was formed following a split from the Arab Socialist Union in 1974. The party is led by Fadlallah Nasr Al-Din and has 4 seats in the People's Council of Syria.

Arab Socialist Movement (Haraka al-ishtirakiyyun al-'arab) Party leader: Ahmed al-Ahmed

The Arab Socialist Movement is a socialist and Arab nationalist party with roots in the peasant movement. This movement originated from the Arab Socialist Union led by Akram Hawrani in the 1930s. The union split into several branches, some in opposition, others in parliament, including the Arab Socialist movement. Another branch has also gained legal recognition and parliamentary representation, but under the name National Vow Party. A third faction remains in opposition, seated in the National Democratic Gathering. The party has 4 seats in the People's Council.

National Vow (al-Ahed) Movement (Haraka al-'ahd al-waTani) Ghassan Abdel Aziz Osman

The National Vow Movement is a political party in Syria, which also sprung from the Arab Socialist Union. In the 22 April 2007 People's Council of Syria election the party was awarded 3 out of 250 seats in the parliament.

Arabic Democratic Unionist Party (Hizb al-ittiHad al-'arabi ad-dimuqraTi) Party leader Ghassan Ahmed Osman

This party was formed after separation from the Arab Socialist Union in 1981. It has one representative in parliament from the Northern city of Aleppo. The Secretary General of the Party Ghassan Ahmad Osman became member of the Central Direction of the NPF by presidential decree no. 4 for the year 2004.



Syrian Social Nationalist Party(al-Hizb al-qawmi al-ijtima'i as-suri)
Party leader: Issam al Mahayri

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (or SSNP) is a nationalist political party in Syria and Lebanon, founded in Beirut in 1932. It advocates the establishment of a Greater Syrian national state, including present Syria, Lebanon, the Hatay Province of Turkey, Israel, the Palestinian territories, the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt, Cyprus, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Cilicia of Turkey, and Ahwaz Khuzestan of Iran.

In Syria, the SSNP became a major political force in the early 1950s. It was a fierce rival of the Syrian Communist Party and of the radical Baath Party. Under pressure from their political opponents and their allies in the security forces the SSNP was practically wiped out as a political force in Syria, but the party remained organized.

The SSNP's stance during the Lebanese civil war was consistent with that of Syria, which facilitated a rapprochement between the party and the Syrian government. During Hafez Al-Assad's presidency, the party was increasingly tolerated. This process continued after the succession of Bashar in 2000.

In 2001, although still officially banned, the party was permitted to attend meetings of the National Progressive Front coalition as an observer. In 2005, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party was licensed and joined the NPF. It is the first legal party that is neither socialist nor Pan-Arab to be legalized. It is thought to be the largest legal party in Syria apart from the Baath, with about some 90,000 members. The party has 3 seats in the Syrian parliament.

OPPOSITION PARTIES

Syria has a considerable number of opposition parties operating in Syria on a clandestine basis, or in exile. While some socialist and liberal opposition parties enjoy a limited degree of toleration, political opposition in general is harshly repressed by the Syrian government. The ruthless government policy is quite effective and often movements and political parties seem no longer (visibly) active, this doesn't always mean they dissolved. Opposition movements constantly form different alliances and split into different branches. All parties aim for restoration of the constitution and lifting the state of emergency. Partitions of and differences between parties are often based on personal grounds, instead of ideological reasons. Because a lot of opposition movements are underground, it is difficult to determine the number of members and supporter of the various opposition groups. In this section the main Syrian opposition parties and movements are described.

Muslim Brotherhood (al-ikhwan al-muslimun)Party leader: Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni

The Muslim Brotherhood is an international Sunni Islamist movement and the world's largest, most influential political Islamist group. The Brotherhood is divided into national branches and is widely believed to be the largest opposition group in Syria, as well as in many other Arab nations.

Founded in the 1930s by Syrian students who had participated in the Egyptian Brotherhood, the Brotherhood in Syria played a major role in the mainly Sunni-based resistance movement that opposed the secularist Baath Party. Since 1980, the Brotherhood is banned after a failed attempt to assassinate president Hafez Al-Assad on 25 June that year. Membership of the party is a criminal offense and can lead to the death penalty. In 1982 the conflict between de Baath party and de Muslim Brothers developed into an armed struggle that led to bloody clashes with the military in the northern town of Hama that left tens of thousands of civilians dead.

In recent years the Brotherhood has renounced violence and adopted a reformist platform, calling for the establishment of a pluralistic, democratic political system. However, membership of the Brotherhood remains a capital offence in Syria, as specified under Emergency Law 49 of 1980. However, experts believe the Brotherhood has a large number of supporters in Syria.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has external headquarters in London and Cyprus. Party leader is Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, who lives as a political refugee in London. Bayanouni has steadily moderated the brotherhood's declared objectives and principles. The party has allied with the secular opposition, joining opposition groups in



drafting the Damascus Declaration in 2005 and in 2006 allying with the newly created National Salvation Front. In a January 2006 interview, the Brotherhood's leader said the Muslim Brotherhood wants "a peaceful change of government in Damascus and the establishment of a 'civil, democratic state', not an Islamic republic." Nevertheless, many Syrian Christians and Druze share Alawite fears about Sunni domination, even if a democratic system is put in place.

National Democratic Gathering (at-tajammu al-waʿanʿ ad-dʿmʿqr???) Party leader: Hassan Ismail Abdelazim

The National Democratic Gathering or National Democratic Rally is a banned opposition alliance in Syria, comprising five political parties of a secularist, pan-Arabist, Arab nationalist and socialist bent. Spokesman of the gathering is Hassan Ismail Abdelazim, leader of the Democratic Arab Socialist Union.

The Gathering took part in the opposition movement of 1980, a period of civil protest by leftist, Islamist, liberal and nationalist groups. This led to severe repression of the alliance by the Syrian regime. Several of its main leaders were given long prison. In 2000, the Rally was active in the Damascus Spring holding seminars and advocating political freedom.

However, despite their long history and active opposition, its member parties are now relatively marginal on the Syrian political scene. Most leaders and many members are today old men, and have had relatively poor success in appealing to younger generations of Syrians.

The National Democratic Gathering was formed in January 1980 by five political parties listed below:

The Syrian Democratic People's Party (Hizb Al-Sha'ab Al-Suri Al-Dimoqrati)
Party leader: Abdallah Hosha

The Syrian Democratic People's Party is a left-wing, democratic opposition party. It was formed from a split in the Syrian Communist Party in 1973, when radicals around Riyadh al-Turk objected to the leadership's decision to join the pro-government National Progressive Front.

In 1980, after a period of civil protests in Syria, Riyadh al-Turk was jailed as were numerous other party members. For the next seventeen years, Turk was held incommunicado without charge or trial. He was held in total isolation in an underground cell and tortured throughout his detention. Syrian President Hafez Assad repeatedly offered to free him on the condition that he publicly backs the regime, but the communist stalwart refused. In 1998, he was finally released. Three years he appeared in public again. His statement on al Jazeera television in August 2001 that "the dictator has died" was seen as a direct cause of renewed repression by an angered regime, and al-Turk himself was arrested some days later. Al-Turk was released after serving fifteen months of his sentence, and resumed his political activities. Another leader of the party, Faeq al-Mir, has been in detention since December 13, 2006.

In 2005, the party held a clandestine conference at which it adopted new rules and changed its name from the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) to the Syrian Democratic People's Party. Abdallah Hosha became the new chairman. The party is not thought to have much support now, and has only limited membership, although it benefits from the considerable prestige of Riyadh al-Turk.

The Arab Socialist Democratic Baath Party Hizb Al-Shuyu'i Al-Suri/ Maktbab Siyasi)
Party leader: Ibrahim Makhous

This party is a remnant of Salah Jadid's Marxist-oriented faction of the Baath Party. Jadid was the most influential politician in Syria from early 1966 to late 1970. In particular in the military wing of the Baath Party. He increasingly came into rivalry with Asad, who eventually seized power in 1970 and threw Jadid into prison, where he died in August 1993. Nowadays the party is led by Ibrahim Makhous, a former Foreign Minister of Syria.

The Democratic Arab Socialist Union (Hizb al-Ittihad Al-Ishtiraki Al-Arabi Al- Dimuqrati)
Party leader: Hassan Ismail Abdelazim

A splinter of the Arab Socialist Union, formerly the main Nasserist party in Syria. Members of the party are mainly



supporters of the late Syrian president Jamal Atassi. The Union is led by Hassan Abdelazim. Secretary General is Youssef Sayasinah.

The Workers' Revolutionary Party (Hizb Al-'Ummal Al-Twawri Al-'Arabi)
Party leader: Mohammad Sallam

The Workers' Revolutionary Party is a leftist-Marxist wing of the Syrian Baath Party. The group split from the Baath Party in the 1960s. Not much is heard from the Workers' party the last couple of years, but it is said the party still exists and is led by Mohammad Sallam.

The Movement of Arab Socialists Hizb Al-Ishtiraki Al-'Arabi)
Party leader: Abdelghani Ayyash

An Arab socialist group with roots in Akram al-Hawrani's pre-Baath peasant movement. This group has a legal wing in the National Progressive Front. Party leader of the opposition movement of Arab Socialists is Abdelghani Ayyash.

Communist Action Party (Hizb Al-amal Al-Shuyu'i)
Party leader: Fatih Jamus

The party of Communist Action was founded in 1976. A lot of party members were arrested by Syrian government, especially in the 80s. The party operates underground and rejects the use of violence. Party leader is Fatih Jamus. He faces a prison after accusations of promoting jihadist thought and spreading rumours to undermine the country. Jamus was arrested in 2006 and released after the charges were reduced to the milder accusation of spreading false information about the country abroad after a trip to Europe. But a court later ruled that he be tried for the initial criminal charges.

Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami)
Party leader: Sheik Ata Abu Rashta (international)

The Islamic Liberation Party is a radical Sunni movement founded in Jerusalem in 1953 by Qadi Taqi al-din al-Nabhani, a judge and senior religious figure who split off from the Muslim Brotherhood. The organisation has branches in different parts of the world, but is officially forbidden in most countries. The Islamic Liberation Party's mission is to institute Muslim religious law (Shari'a); and to form a Islamic state for all Muslims. The movement want to reach this goal by educating Muslims about its philosophies and goals. Muslims would then spread these words among others, especially members of the government. The party is supranational and refuses to be involved in politics, it does not want to go for elections or be part of any coalition government.

Syrian Free National Party (tahaluf Al-Wataniyin Al-Ahrar)
Party leader: Samir Nashar

The Syrian Free National party is a secular liberal party established in 2005. Samir Nashar is the spokesman for the party. He is also a member of the Committee for Reviving the Civil Society. He was arrested by Syrian authorities on March 25, 2006 in Aleppo by agents of the military secret service after he returned from a meeting of exiled opposition figures in Washington. The Syrian Human rights Organisation called for his immediate release. He was released from custody on 27 March 2006.

Reform Party of Syria
Party leader: Farid Ghadry

The Reform Party of Syria (RPS) is an external opposition party that has emerged as a result of the terrorist attacks of 11 September. It is founded and based in the United States. The RPS positions itself in the political spectrum as a liberal democratic organization. Its strives for a "New Syria", that embraces " real democratic and economic reforms and good relations with all neighbors," including Israel. Party's leader and founder is Farid Ghadry, an outspoken critic of Baathism and Radical Islamism.

The Syrian Reform Party is also a founding member of the Syrian Democratic Coalition (SDC), which was formed in



November of November 2003. The coalition lists 9 organizations and parties under its umbrella, including the Assyrian Movement and a number of Kurdish parties. Some parties want to remain secret, in fear of reprisals by the Syrian government.

Anti Globalization Activists in Syria (Al-Badil)
Spokesman: Munif Mulhem

AGAS, Anti Globalization Activists in Syria, is a Syrian-based collective of opponents to the neoliberal globalization. The organization was set up on 1 January 1 2003. Several of its leaders have spent years behind bars as prisoners of conscience. In Arabic the group uses the name Al-badil which means the alternative. AGAS focuses on political, social and economic rights. AGAS cooperates internationally with the Committee for the Abolition of the Third World Debt and ATTAC. AGAS also participates in the World Social Forum.

Damascus Declaration
Spokesman: Ibrahim Makhous

The Damascus Declaration is the largest opposition gathering in Syria, which was formally launched when five political groups and nine prominent opposition figures signed the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change in October 2005. The statement blamed the monopoly of state power in Syria for more than thirty years for creating “an authoritarian, totalitarian, and cliquish [fi’awi] regime that has led to a lack of [interest in] politics in society” and called for the opening of a representative political system which guarantees basic individual freedoms, calling, for the first time, for democratic change (as opposed to reform). The importance of the Declaration was the number and diversity of political groups that signed it – including Arab and Kurdish groups – and the backing it obtained from the Muslim Brotherhood (which endorsed it the day after it was announced). The grouping, which has grown to include more than twenty organizations and individuals (many of whom were imprisoned in 2006) established a formal National Council in February 2006 and coordinating committees and regularly issues statements.

National Salvation Front
Party leader: Abdel-Halim Khaddam

The National Salvation Front was founded in Brussels on 16–17 March 2006 with the goal of serving as an umbrella group for the “free Syrian opposition.” All opposition parties are invited to join the Front in achieving its goal of a modern democratic state in Syria, which is based on “ plurality, peaceful transfer of power, and system of institutions, where the free and fair ballot box is the expression of the general collective will of its people, without violation of the rights of any grouping; religious or ethnic minority, or sect.” Head of the Front is Abdel-Halim Khaddam, former Syrian Vice President from 1984 to 2005 when, after resigning at the Baath Party Congress (June 2005), he left Syria for exile in Paris. Months later, he openly accused Assad of ordering the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri.

The NSF has 67 founding members, and include a diverse group from across the political spectrum. In 2006, the Salvation Front hosted two major events. First, its founding conference in March, and in June a working session where it created a Final Statement including regulations, policies and future plans. In addition, it has fielded a number of delegations to visit government officials in Europe and the United States, and has opened an office in Washington.

Assyrian opposition groups
Party leader ADO: Bashir al-Sa’di

There are two Assyrian opposition groups active in Syria. They are the Assyrian Democratic Organization (Mtakasta) and the Assyrian Democratic Party. There is not much known about the ADP in Syria, it operates completely underground and is forbidden. ADO was founded in Syria in 1957. It is the largest Assyrian organization in Syria. Assyrians in Syria are defined as Arab Christians. ADO strives to gain the status of minority to promote their cultural heritage and language. The organisation is tolerated by the Syrian government, but in 2004 Syrian security authorities have banned the organisation from marking the 71st anniversary of an Iraqi government crackdown on Chaldean-Assyrians in northern Iraq.



Kurdish Opposition Groups

In Syria there are a lot of Kurdish opposition groups, but they are quite divided. There are at least fourteen Kurdish political parties and smaller ones continue the form. You can distinguish the following major players in the Kurdish political spectrum:

- The Kurdish Democratic Front in Syria (al-jabha, the Front) consists of three political parties: the Kurdish Democratic Party, the Progressive Democratic Party, and the National Democratic Party. The Front is led by Abdul Hamid Darwish.
- The Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria (attakhaluf, the Alliance) consists of four parties: the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, the Kurdish Left Party, the Progressive Democratic Party, and the Kurdish Democratic Party. The alliance has no designated leader.
- A small alliance comprises three independent parties: Yekiti (Unity), led by Hasam Sale. Azadi (Freedom), and the Future Movement led by Masha'l Tammo.
- Two parties have branched off the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): the Democratic Union Party and the Democratic Kurdistan Party.

The first two groupings (the Front and the Alliance) are signatories to the Damascus Declaration along with the Future Party. Although the Kurds are split into numerous parties, analysts of Kurdish politics say that the party cleavages are completely personal and have little to do with the platforms of each organization. All of the major parties advocate peaceful resistance in the hopes of securing democracy and freedoms within Syria and would like Kurdish self-administration. One of the axes of division between Kurdish parties is their ability to reach agreement with Arab opposition groups on language defining the status of Kurds in a future Syria.

BIOGRAPHIES

Bashar Al Assad President

Bashar Al Assad was born on 11 September 1965, in Damascus. He is the son of former Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad, who died on 10 June 2000. After Al Assad studied medicines at the Damascus University and graduated as a physician, he specialized in ophthalmology in 1988. He went to Britain in 1992 to continue his specialization and returned to Syria two years later. Bashar al-Assad went into politics in 1994 by the death of his older brother Basil (in a car crash), who was being groomed for the presidency. He entered the military academy at Homs, north of Damascus, and rose through the ranks to become a colonel in January 1999. Immediately following his father's death, the Syrian parliament amended the constitution, reducing the mandatory minimum age of the president from 40 to 34 years old, so Bashar would be legally eligible for nomination by the ruling Baath Party. On 10 July 2000, Bashar Al-Assad was elected President by referendum in which he ran unopposed, receiving 97.29% of the votes. He was inaugurated into office on 17 July 2000 for a 7-year term. On 27 May 2007 President Al-Assad was reaffirmed by a referendum for a second 7-year term with 97.6% of the votes.

In mid-March 2011 protests broke out against the regime of Al-Assad. Protesters called upon Al Assad to implement political reforms and to end the state of emergency which has been in place since 1963.

Adel Safar Prime Minister

Adel Safar is a Syrian politician and academic, serving as Prime Minister of Syria since 3 April 2011. Safar was born in the Damascus countryside in Syria. He studied at the University of Damascus in 1977, and received a diploma from the National School of Agronomy and Food Industries (ENSAIA) in Nancy in 1983. In 1987 he did his Ph.D. in Biotechnology from ENSAIA. From 13 September 2003 to 14 April 2011 Safar served as the Syrian Minister of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. After the resignation of Muhammad Naji Al-Otari as Prime Minister, Safar was asked by President Bashar al Assad to become Prime Minister and to form a new government.



Adel Safar is married and has four children.

Muhammed Naji Al-Otari
Former Prime Minister

Mohammed Naji Al-Otari was Prime Minister of Syria from 10 September 2003 to 3 April 2011. He was born in Aleppo in 1944 and studied architecture. He headed the city council in Aleppo from 1983 to 1987 and is a former governor of Homs. From 1989 to 1993 he was president of Aleppo's engineering association. In March 2000 he became a member of the Baath Party's Central Committee and in June 2000 of the party's influential Regional Command. In March 2000 he was also appointed Deputy Prime Minister for services affairs. He was elected speaker of the Syrian parliament, or People's Assembly, and became Prime Minister in March 2003. On 29 March 2011 the entire cabinet in Syria resigned. On 3 April 2011, President Assad appointed Adel Safar to succeed Al-Otari.