Asad’s Syria: Continuity and Change in the First Ten Years

Conference Program

Sponsored by:

Syrian Center for Political & Strategic Studies

The King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies
Asad’s Syria: Continuity and Change in the First Ten Years

January 27-29th, 2011
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701

[Table of Contents]

3
About the Centers

4
Conference Agenda

6
Speaker Biographies and Abstracts

16
Campus Map
Conference Sponsors

This event is co-sponsored by the King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Arkansas and by the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

The King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies is an interdisciplinary program in the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences, dedicated to the study of the modern Middle East and the geo-cultural area in which Islamic civilization prospered, and continues to shape world history.

Faculty members associated with the Center are rooted in degree-granting departments in Fulbright College and the broader University of Arkansas. We specialize in history and politics, literature and popular culture, religious and secular practice and interpretation, human engagement with the environment and ecosystem in contemporary times and antiquity. We work in diverse media: poetry and fiction, public archives, film and music, television and oratory, curricular instruction and cartography, the detritus of the past and the cultural production, classical and colloquial, artistic and vulgar, of the present.

The Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies (SCPSS) is an independent nongovernmental studies center. SCPSS mission is to educate readers and activists about the Syrian Arab Republic from political, economic, social and strategic perspectives, through sponsorship programs that tackle theoretical, applied and social science research, through studies, conferences, publications, symposiums, and seminars. SCPSS aims to translate major books and research papers which analyze the Syrian case in the various fields of economics, political and social science, and cultural studies. For more information regarding the Center’s activities please visit their website at scpss.org.
Conference Agenda

Thursday, January 27, 2011

1. Arrival

2. Public Forum: 7:00 - 9:00 pm  
   • Moderator: Joel Gordon  
   • Speakers:  
     1) Fred Lawson  
     2) Joshua Landis  
     3) Murhaf Jouejati  
     4) Najib Ghadbian

Auditorium Room 218  
Willard J. Walker Hall

Friday, January 28, 2011

1. Breakfast  7:00 – 8:45 am  
   • Hotel

2. Welcoming Remarks: 9:00-9:15 AM  
   1) Joel Gordon, Director of King Fahd Center for Middle East & Islamic Studies  
   2) Osama Kadi, President of the Syrian Center for Political & Strategic Studies

Executive Board Room 504  
Willard J. Walker Hall

3. Panel One: 9:15 - 10:30  
   • Politics of Continuity and Change Under Bashar  
     Chair: Ken Brown  
     Panelists:  
     1) Najib Ghadbian – Continuity and Change under Bashar  
     2) David Lesch – The Evolution of Bashar al-Asad

Executive Board Room 504  
Willard J. Walker Hall

4. Panel Two: 10:45 – 12:15  
   • The State of the Economy and Prospects for Economic Reform  
     Chair: Mounir Farah  
     Panelists:  
     1) Osama Kadi – The Syrian Economy 2000-2010: What Went Wrong?  
     2) Samer Aboud – Privatization, Private Authority, and Economic Reform in Syria

Executive Board Room 504  
Willard J. Walker Hall
1. Lunch 12:30 – 1:30  
   H.L. Hembree Room  
   Willard J. Walker Hall

2. Panel Three: 1:45 – 3:15  
   Executive Board Room 504  
   Willard J. Walker Hall
   - Religion and Human Rights under Bashar  
     Chair: Mohja Kahf  
     Panelists:  
     1) Radwan Ziadeh – Human Rights under Bashar  
     2) Ausama Monajed – The Political Aspirations of Religious Groups in Syria

3. Panel Four: 3:30- 5:30  
   Executive Board Room 504  
   Willard J. Walker Hall
   - Syria’s Foreign Policy under Bashar  
     Chair: Ted Swedenburg  
     Panelists:  
     1) Andrew Tabler – US Syria Relations under Bashar  
     2) Murhaf Jouejati – Syrian and Israeli Peace Negotiations under Bashar  
     4) Fred Lawson – Syria’s Relations with its Neighbors

4. Reception and Dinner: 7:00 – 9:30 pm  
   Boyer Hall  
   Janelle Y. Hembree Alumni House
   - Poetry: Mohja Kahf reads Nizar Kabbani

Saturday, January 29, 2011

1. Breakfast 7:00 – 8:15 am  
   Hotel

2. Wrap up session: 8:30 – 10:30 am  
   Executive Board Room 504  
   Willard J. Walker Hall

3. Departure
“Privatization, Private Authority, and Economic Reform in Syria”

As an economic policy, privatization typically refers to the transfer of public assets to the private sector, which engenders and strengthens different forms of private economic authority. Indeed, one of the defining features of the global political economy in the last thirty years has been this shift from public to private economic authority. However, Syrian privatization policies have not transferred public assets to the private sector; rather, privatization has been pursued in other ways that have, nevertheless, increased the power of private economic authority. The model of privatization pursued in Syria is expansionary, maintaining public sector ownership while liberalizing opportunities for private sector investment and thus creating the space for the entry of private capital into the economy. This strategy is complemented by public sector restructuring that aims at transforming public sector institutions into market actors.

In this paper, I will assess the dynamics of this model of privatization in Syria within the context of economic reforms pursued there since 2000. My first goal is to address the specific social, political, and economic factors underpinning the commitment to this model of privatization and how it has contributed to particular economic policies, outcomes, and patterns. In the last decade, there has been a growth in the size of the private sector and its contribution to national economic activity relative to the public sector. Across the board in Syria, it is assumed that the private sector is now an equal, if not dominant partner in national development. Thus, my second interest is to consider what the rise of private economic authority has meant for social and economic development in Syria and how this has occurred within the context of the Syrian approach to privatization. Economic reforms in the last ten years (2000-2010) have been justified as necessary to address negative social patterns, yet these negative patterns have persisted and, in some cases, have been aggravated. In this context, it is important to critically assess how the diffusion of authority to the private sector has addressed economic reform goals. Thus, my final aim is to evaluate the changing relationship between the private sector and the state generated by the diffusion of authority.
Najib Ghadbian  
University of Arkansas

Najib Ghadbian is Associate Professor of Political Science and Middle East Studies at the University of Arkansas. He is the author of *Democratization and the Islamists Challenge in the Arab World*, (English 1997 & Arabic 2002). His second Arabic book, *The Second Asad Regime: Bashar of Lost Opportunities*, was published in 2006. Dr. Ghadbian has published articles in English and Arabic in several edited volumes and journals including: *New Political Science*, *Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, and *al-Mustaqbal al-`Arabi*. He has contributed political commentaries to several US, European, and Middle East media outlets. Ghadbian’s research interests include democratization & leadership in the Arab world, Syrian politics, Islamic movements, and US-Mideast relations.

“Continuity and Change in the First Ten Years”

More than ten years have passed since the death of Hafez Asad and the recommencement of his son Bashar to the presidency. This period is equal to two-and-half US presidential terms. Bashar al-Asad inherited a weighty legacy from his father. In his first inaugural speech in 2000, Bashar raised people’s expectations, when he spoke of the need for *tahdith* and *tatwir* (“modernization” and “renovation”) and he almost recognized the legitimacy of dissent when he referred, very guardedly, to *al-rai al-akhar* (“the other viewpoint”). Bashar also began his tenure with a lot of goodwill from the international community. Before becoming president, he was received by former French President Jack Chirac, in what amounted to a de facto recognition of his succession. Former secretary of state Madeline Albright represented the US at his father’s funeral and met with him to announce afterword that the new leader was interested in pursuing peace talks with Israel.

Despite the euphoria associated with the rise of Bashar to power, the new president has not done much to deliver on his promises and the expectations of his countrymen. Mindful that the consequences of Gorbachev’s perestroika had been the dismantling of the Soviet regime, Syrian regime officials—Bashar included—spoke of pursuing instead the “Chinese model” of reform. Their understanding of the Chinese model centers on improving the living standards of people and using that as a legitimizing tool for the new regime. The result has been, to quote the title of Alan George’s book about Syria, that Bashar has achieved “Neither Bread Nor Freedom.”

Under Bashar’s tenure, the main political change was replacing many of the older officials in the formal and informal regime structures with younger members. By one estimate, three-quarters of the top sixty political, administrative, and military office holders were replaced in the first three years of Bashar’s rule. The regime succeeded, however, in withering the external pressure associated with its policies in Iraq and Lebanon. How can we explain the lack of reform and the sluggish pace of change in the country compared with other countries? What are dynamics of continuity and change in Syria since the departure of Hafez Asad?
This paper analyzes the process of continuity and change in Syria over the last ten year period. The main focus is on examining progress, stagnation, and retrogression in the political and economic change in the country. The paper argues that there has been more continuity than change during the first ten years. Continuity will be analyzed in terms of four dynamics: the structure of the regime and the primacy of political survival, the nature of its political economy, the willingness to use repression against its domestic opponents, and finally the tactic of applying diversion from domestic challenges by focusing on foreign policy challenges/threats.

Murhaf Jouejati
National Defense University

Dr. Murhaf Jouejati is an expert on Middle East affairs with some three decades of experience researching and working on the Middle East’s political, social and economic dynamics. He is currently Professor of Middle East Studies at the National Defense University’s Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies. In addition, Dr. Jouejati is a Professorial Lecturer in Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University, as well as adjunct Scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington. He has taught Middle East politics at American University, and lectured at the Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, Yale University, and Columbia University.

Before assuming these positions, Dr. Jouejati served as the Director of the Middle East Studies Program at The George Washington University’s Elliott School for International Affairs (2004-06); resident scholar at the Middle East Institute (2000-02); advisor to the European Commission Delegation in Damascus and focal point for several EU-funded regional development programs, including civil society projects (1998-2000). Dr. Jouejati also served with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), first as the National Program Officer in Syria, and later as an advisor to the UNDP’s Bureau of Arab States in New York. He was the Information Officer of the U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce in Washington (1981-85).

As an advisor to the Syrian delegation to the Middle East peace talks (1991-94 and 1996), Dr. Jouejati commands an in-depth knowledge of the Syrian government as well as Syrian foreign policy. He is the author of a large number of articles and book chapters on Middle East Politics, and his book “The Burden of History: Why Assad Did Not Emulate Sadat” is forthcoming.

Dr. Jouejati is a frequent analyst on TV and radio, including the Jim Lehrer Newshour, CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, Voice of America, and Radio France International. His commentaries have appeared in several newspapers, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, the International Herald Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, and the Christian Science Monitor. He provided expert testimony before the 9/11 Commission and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.
“Syrian and Israeli Peace Negotiations under Bashar”

That Syria seeks peace with Israel is not the product of any love Syrian leaders have for Israel – they have none. Rather, Syrian leaders are acutely aware that Israel is militarily superior to any combination of Arab power. They therefore understand that if Syria is to recover its Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, it can do so only through peace talks.

Although at first glance there is little difference in the position the two Assads (father and son) held regarding peace with Israel, one important nuance is discernible: Whereas the late Hafez Assad sought a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, there are hints that his successor, Bashar Assad would make peace with Israel in return for the Golan Heights. What explains the change?

With the gradual decline of Syria’s Arab nationalism – once a major predictor of Syria’s external action – and the simultaneous rise of statism, Syria crossed the distance from idealism to realism. Put differently, whereas Syria’s self-image (the champion of Arab rights) shaped its foreign policy, time, circumstances, and growing differentiation within Arab states trimmed Syria’s objectives to more realistic limits. The emergence of a purely Syrian identity now provides Syria’s leaders more leeway in the conduct of foreign policy.

Osama Kadi
Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies

Osama Kadi is co-founder and president of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Dr. Kadi served as an adjunct professor for undergraduate students teaching macroeconomics and microeconomics at the Dearborn campuses of Davenport University and the University of Michigan. He also taught economics and business management for Baker College.

He has worked in Syria as an economic consultant for the Syrian Agency for Combating Unemployment ACU and wrote an Impact Assessment for the ACU detailing how to deal with unemployment in the country. He has also worked as an economic consultant for the United Nations Development Program UNDP in Syria to write a study about Syrian Development Trajectories for 2025. He has authored and co-authored several notable articles and books including The Anticipated Role of Islam and Dialogue and Democracy in the Middle East. In 2004, He was invited by the Syrian Expatriate Ministry as a speaker to present his paper titled, Democracy as an introduction to Economic Development in Syria. He also regularly contributes to Al-Arab newspaper in Qatar.


One decade after the inauguration of Bashar Al-Asad as president in July 2000, it seems that the Syrian government, including the economic advisors to the president have been unable to envision the necessary strategy to reform the Syrian economy, and to move it from a planning, protection-based, and socialist economy to a full-fledged market economy and democracy.
The practical impacts of the recent legislative revolution led by president Bashar are significant when compared to the preceding three decades of conservative economic governance by his father. Nonetheless growth of the Syrian economy has remained stunted by a variety of factors.

Over the last decade 2000-2010, the Syrian economy has experienced many major problems, including stagnation or low real economic development growth compounded by an extensive bureaucracy, and pervasive corruption. These problems have effectively widened the gap between the rich and poor classes, and contracted of middle class and produced high inflation rates.

The Syrian government claimed to adopt a Social Market Economy SME as its main economic strategy in its 10th Five Year Plan (2006-2010); this paper will go over the SME with a little elaboration, which was part of German package that was responsible for the German economic miracle of the sixties, exposing the strength and the weaknesses of Syrian economic policy during the first decade of the new millennium.

The Syrian administration deserves credit for the number of laws and acts adopted in an effort to facilitate the liberalization of the Syrian economy. Unfortunately these laws produced negligible economic development and failed to increase general economic prosperity because of the attempt to isolate the SME from the rest of the successful components of the German package.

The Syrian economic policy team ignored full enforcement of good governance. They have continued to insist on applying the SME without pursuing requisite political and judicial reforms or guarantee freedom of the press as part of a comprehensive liberal strategy. That situation has translated economically into a malfunctioning of market mechanisms, and other economic problems including high unemployment, pervasive poverty, and a weak taxation system.

Mohja Kahf
University of Arkansas

Mohja Kahf, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Arkansas, is the author of three books, including poetry, Emails from Scheherazad, and novel The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf. Her essay about her family history, "Damascene Horse Dealer's Daughter, or How I Came to America," was recently published in The Arkansas Times (Dec 7, 2010).

Nizar Kabbani (1923-1998), famed Syrian poet, with over fifty books of poetry.

Joshua Landis
University of Oklahoma

Joshua Landis is Director of the Center for Middle East Studies and Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma. He writes the blog “Syria Comment,” which is read widely by
Asad’s Syria: Continuity and Change in the First Ten Years

...ten years, and that there has been an apparent mass migration of these religious groups towards various forms of political involvement, whether in the form of integration into the state, opposition to policies, or political opposition to the regime itself. The study also reveals that governmental policies have played a central role in this.

Domestic policies have been linked to the requirements of the regime, and its need to ensure its own continuity, rather than domestic, national demands. This has pushed the religious groups into the sphere of the international, political contentions and transformations at play in the region. These international and regional changes have also contributed significantly to the formation of many of these religious groups, and towards fuelling their political orientations. The study concludes that the movements towards political aspirations among these groups range in strength. This is sometimes explained by the intellectual and social structure of the emerging religious group itself, and at other times by the type of aspirations that drive it, and the extent of the achievable objective possibilities available to it.

The study clarifies that the continuation of current government policies may lead to unpleasant outcomes for Syrian society in the near future, which could have far reaching effects if these aspirations continue to grow at the rate at which they have grown over the past ten years. Ethnic and sectarian violence are the most significant dangers facing the state, and they are likely to escalate seriously under the current policies. In this connection, the main scenarios for the future are also discussed in this study, and proposals are made in each case for how these risks can be countered. The study observes that a historical comparison of the development of religious groups indicates that an increase in political crises is accompanied by an increase in the political aspirations of religious groups, and in the strength of the movement towards them. The historical experience of political life in Syria indicates that political stability and democratic change go hand in hand with a decline in aspirations of this kind within the religious groups.

Andrew J. Tabler
The Washington Institute

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on how the United States can engage with Syria in a way that best advances U.S. interests.

A journalist and researcher, Mr. Tabler has achieved unparalleled qualitative and long-term access to Bashar al-Assad’s Syria. He is the cofounder and former editor-in-chief of Syria Today, Syria’s first private-sector English-language magazine, and has been a media consultant for Syrian nongovernmental organizations (2003-2004) under the patronage of Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad. His articles and opinion pieces on Syrian and Lebanese affairs and U.S. foreign policy have appeared in the New York Times, the New York Times Magazine, the International Herald Tribune, Newsweek, and Foreign Policy. He has also appeared in interviews with CNN, NBC, PBS, NPR, and the BBC.
In fourteen years of resident consultancy, research, and journalism in the Middle East, Mr. Tabler served, most recently, as a consultant on U.S.-Syria relations for the International Crisis Group (2008) and as a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs (2005-2007), writing on Syrian, Lebanese, and Middle Eastern affairs.

Mr. Tabler is author of the forthcoming book In the Lion's Den: Inside America’s Cold War with Assad’s Syria (I.B. Tauris, 2010) and the 2007 Stanley Foundation report The High Road to Damascus: Engage Syria’s Private Sector.

U.S.-Syrian Relations under Bashar

Relations between the United States and Syria took a steep decline following the coming to power of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. What were the developments and dynamics that led to what can be described as a “Cold War” between the Bush Administration and the Assad Regime? And why, despite the coming to power of an Obama Administration that ran on the electoral platform of “unconditional engagement” with Syria and Iran, do relations between Washington and Damascus remain strained? This presentation and paper is based on the author’s upcoming book “In the Lion’s Den: Inside America’s Cold War with Asad’s Syria” (I.B. Tauris: 2011), an insider’s account of the eight-year struggle between the Bush Administration and the Assad Regime.

Radwan Ziadeh
Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies

Radwan Ziadeh is a Visiting Scholar at The Institute for Middle East Studies (IMES) at the Elliot School of International Affairs at George Washington University. He was most recently a Prins Global Fellow at Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University and Visiting Scholar at The Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS) at Georgetown University. Before that he was Reagan–Fascell Fellow at National Endowment for Democracy (NED) at Washington D.C. and Visiting Scholar at the Center for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University in New York City. He was also a Visiting Fellow at Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs) in London and a visiting scholar at Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard University (2008–2009). In 2007–2008 he was a Senior Fellow at United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington, D.C.

He is the founder and director of the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies in Syria and co-founder and executive director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Washington, D.C. He is also the managing editor of the Transitional Justice in the Arab World Project.

His most recent book is Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East (I.B.Tauris, 2010). He is a frequent political commentator on several U.S., European, and Middle Eastern media outlets such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, B.B.C. and Al-Hurra. He also writes a bi-monthly op-ed for the leading Arab daily, Al-Hayat.
Asad’s Syria: Continuity and Change in the First Ten Years

officials in Washington, London and Damascus and by over 2,000 readers a day. He is a frequent analyst on TV and radio. Most recently he has appeared on the Jim Lehrer News Hour, Charlie Rose Show, CNN, BBC, NPR and is a regular commentator on al-Jazeera. He travels frequently to Syria and Lebanon and has lived over 14 years in the Middle East.

Recently published articles have been on Bashar Al-Assad’s first ten years, economic reform in Syria, Islamic education in Syria, the political opposition in Syria, and Syria’s role in the 1948 Palestine War. He has spoken at many Washington think-tanks, most recently at the Council on Foreign Relations. He was educated at Swarthmore (BA), Harvard (MA), and Princeton (PhD). He recently won OU’s Excellence in Teaching Award, has received four grants from Fulbright and the SSRC, and is finishing a book on the first years of Syria’s independence.

“US - Syrian Relations: Why Syria and the US Cannot Cooperate on Al-Qaida and Iraq because of the Arab-Israeli Conflict”

Despite promises to engage Syria, President Obama has been unable to alter US-Syrian relations in any meaningful extent. I will explore the many diplomatic cables printed by Wikileaks to explain why and where the impasse comes.

Fred H. Lawson
Mills College

Fred H. Lawson is professor of government at Mills College. He is the author of Why Syria Goes to War (Cornell University Press, 1996) and the editor of Demystifying Syria (Saqi Books, 2009), along with other studies of foreign policy and political economy in the Arab world. In 1992-93 he was Fulbright lecturer in international relations at the University of Aleppo. He is currently president of the Syrian Studies Association.

“Dilemmas of Syrian Security”

Syria’s foreign policy exhibits a puzzling mix of seemingly contradictory postures. Relations with long-time adversary Turkey have improved markedly; bonds with the Islamic Republic of Iran continue to strengthen; ties to Iraq, which had blossomed in the late 1990s, remain lukewarm; and a pronounced frostiness characterizes dealings with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, despite periodic glimmers of comity. Explaining this pattern of interactions requires a careful look at the basic dilemmas that confront policy-makers in Damascus as they try to maximize Syrian security in the current regional environment. In no instance has Syria’s leadership been able to gain the outcome that would be most advantageous, but it has managed to parry the most severe threats while minimizing the secondary consequences of its own initiatives. This represents no mean feat, particularly for a regime whose key figures took office with little experience in diplomacy.
David W. Lesch
Trinity University


"The Evolution of Bashar al-Assad"

The political and personal growth of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will be examined, from an unsure beginning amidst regional turmoil, to the low point of the post-Hariri assassination period when Syria was pressured and isolated by a US-led conglomerate of Western powers and their allies in the Middle East, to a period of survival and even advancement by the Asad regime from 2008 onward, effectively breaking out of isolation and consolidating his hold on power.

Ausama Monajed
Strategic Research and Communication Center

Ausama Monajed is currently the director of London based Strategic Research and Communication Center. The center provides high-quality research and media services to Western media outlets, governments, departments, academic institutions and research centers through its web-based gateway for information, analysis and commentary on the most important stories and topics. The center processes data gathered both from open media and its own exclusive sources. The data is then analyzed and presented in research papers and weekly briefs all available through email subscription and its website.

Mr. Monajed previously served as the director of Barada TV and an economist and projects manager with the European Commission and the United Nations Development Program. He earned his postgraduate degree in Politics and Management from the University of Salford in the UK and his undergraduate degree in Economics from the University of Damascus in Syria.

“The Political Aspirations of Religious Groups in Syria”

This paper deals with the political aspirations and tendencies of ten religious groups in Syria. Essentially it monitors their formation and development over the years 2000 to 2010. The study reveals that the political aspirations of these groups have grown rapidly over the past
“Human Rights under Bashar al-Asad”

Bashar al-Asad tried, from the beginning of his term, to avoid confronting the power structure he had inherited from his father. In fact, Bashar did not want to destroy the foundations of the regime that had allowed him to rise so meteorologically; he appeared to want to keep in with the regime’s former idols and stalwarts. Then, gradually and through two government changes and the tenth Ba`th Party national conference (June 2005), he managed to replace all former icons, including his deputies ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Khaddām, Zuhayr Mashārīqah and other members of the Ba`th party’s leadership, with new men who were close to him and who had worked with him in the Syrian Computer Society.

When he became president in 2000, Bashar al-Asad spoke of his desire to modernize the state and actively combat corruption. May be to legitimize his position; But, the image of Bashar as a reformist was severely shaken by the repression that was exercised against the so-called ‘Damascus Spring’ movement. This period lasted only less than a year, when the authorities started in September 2001 a crackdown on the movement.

These waves of repression continued in 2006 and 2007, On May 2006, when the State Security Services arrested twelve of the signatures of Damascus – Beirut Declaration; And, On 9 December 2007, when the same security apparatus began a series of arrests of more than forty activists in the Damascus Declaration for Democratic change in various cities, and sentenced 12 of them of 30 months in prison.

Syrian Kurds, who constitute the largest ethnic minority (nearly 1.5 million Kurds), continued to be a target of suppression and discrimination. For decades, 300 thousand Syrian Kurds have been divested of their Syrian citizenship, prevented from expressing their Kurdish identity, particularly those related to the right to ownership, employment, travel, registering marriage contracts and birth certificates.

Syria under Bashar al-Asad is recognized as one of the world’s worst web and press oppressors, ranked 165th out of 175 countries in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index in 2010 and is on the list of “Enemies of the Internet” that the organization updates ever year, while Assad is regarded as one of the world’s 40 worst “Predators of press freedom.”