

## **Clampdown on Islamists Continues**

**Author:** [IWPR](#)

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A Syrian human rights group says the security services are increasing the repression of Islamic associations, and cite the deaths of two Muslim prisoners this month.

The Syrian Committee for Human Rights, SCHR, reported that two Muslim prisoners were killed after being tortured at security service detention centres in January.

One of them, Muhammad Aman al-Shawa, a maths teacher at a secondary school in the eastern town of Dayr al-Zawr, died after being tortured at a military interrogation centre, according to SCHR.

While Syria, a country ruled by the secular Baath party, bans all opposition groups, human rights activists contend that Islamic organisations bear the brunt of the repression – and they say it is becoming worse.

In November, SCHR published a statement by the Democratic Islamic Trend in Syria which said that security agencies had forced at least 12 individuals, including leading religious figures, to step down from posts in various Muslim associations, several of which have been dissolved.

Meanwhile, Syria's religious affairs ministry informed female teachers at mosques that they needed to obtain permission from the security services to teach or risk having their classes cancelled.

"The regime has destroyed civil society in the country, prevented cultural growth and tried to show the world that Islamists are a more unruly alternative to the regime, in the hope that it can keep them under its control," said a political analyst who preferred to stay anonymous.

"Nothing scares this government more than political Islam, because they know that it can attract and mobilise citizens much faster than secular democratic movements."

Muhanad al-Hasani, a lawyer with SCHR, said restrictions on Islamists in Syria had increased as a result of the so-called war against terror waged by former US president George Bush. The Syrian regime used the September 11 attacks as an excuse for further abuses against political Islamists, he said.

"We strongly condemn all kinds of terrorism, but I think that many of the forgotten victims of the war were not organised, violent people," said al-Hasani.

He cited the riot last July at the Saidnaya military prison in west Damascus, which houses many inmates convicted of Islamic extremist activity. The protest was put down using force.

At the time, activists said police killed and wounded dozens of unarmed detainees who were protesting against poor prison conditions, while the official news agency SANA said the trouble was caused by

“prisoners convicted of crimes of terrorism and extremism”.

SCHR and families who received calls from detained relatives, said the disturbances broke out after prison guards stamped on a Koran.

While little is known about the prison, human rights groups allege that detainees at Saidnaya have been treated badly over the years.

They estimate that it holds between 2,500 and 4,000 inmates, including Kurdish dissidents, democratic activists and members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood. They say the bulk of those detained over the last five years are Salafis, adherents of a fundamentalist trend in Sunni Islam whom the government regards as extremists.

While some news about the Saidnaya riot leaked out, Hasani said there many of the regime’s actions against Islamists were worse.

“In many cases, the families of victims refuse to come forward because they are afraid of the repercussions,” he said.

Another human rights activist who asked to remain anonymous said the problems facing such detainees were compounded by the fact that the international community often overlooks violations against Islamists.

Although he welcomed the news that President Barack Obama had ordered the closure of the controversial Guantanamo detention centre, where hundreds of people suspected of terror offences have been held without charge, he said that Islamists in Syria were still being targeted because of their religion.

“It’s wonderful that the US will close the Guantanamo prison, but that doesn’t mean an end to the problems facing political Islamists,” he said, adding that he believed at least 2,000 Islamists were currently in Syrian jails.

“In many cases, prisoners were arrested simply because of the way they pray or dress,” he said. “They are subjected to ill-treatment regardless of whether they are extremists or moderates.”

The human rights activist said that such repression was counter productive.

“All the regime is really doing is strengthening the extremists and increasing the chances of more terrorist attacks at home and around the world,” he said.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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