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Syria

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government imposes restrictions on this right. There is no official state religion; however, the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation.

The status of respect for religious freedom improved slightly during the period covered by this report in that the Government eased restrictions on public, state-sanctioned expressions of Islam. The Government continued to monitor the activities of all groups, including religious groups, and discourage proselytism, which it deems a threat to the relations among religious groups. The Government also considers the Jehovah's Witnesses a "politically motivated Zionist organization."

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups, some attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 71,498 square miles and a population of 18 million. Sunni Muslims represented approximately 74 percent of the population (approximately 12.6 million persons). Other Muslim groups, including Alawi, Ismailis, and Shi'a, together constituted an estimated 13 percent of the population (approximately 2.2 million persons). The Druze accounted for an estimated 3 percent of the population (approximately 500 thousand persons). Various Christian denominations made up the remaining 10 percent of the population (approximately 1.7 million persons). The great majority of Christians belonged to the Eastern groups that have existed in the country since the earliest days of Christianity. The main Eastern groups belonged to the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches, which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope, and the independent Nestorian Church. There was a small Yazidi population. There were approximately forty Jews. It was difficult to obtain precise population estimates for religious sub-groupings due to government sensitivity to sectarian demographics.

The largest Christian denomination was the Greek Orthodox Church, known in the country as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. The Syrian Orthodox Church is notable for its use of a Syriac liturgy. Most citizens of Armenian origin belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church, which uses an Armenian liturgy. The largest Uniate church in the country was the Greek Catholic Church. Other Uniate denominations included the Maronite Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, and the Chaldean Catholic Church, which derives from the Nestorian Church. Protestant Christian denominations included Baptist and Mennonite. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) was also present.

Sunni Muslims were present throughout the country. Christians tended to be urbanized, and most lived in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia, although significant numbers lived in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast. A majority of the Alawis lived in the Latakia governorate. A significant majority of the Druze population resided in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southeast, and most were located in the town of Suweida. The few remaining Jews were concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yazidis were found primarily in the northeast.

Foreign missionary groups were present but operated discreetly.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government discourages public proselytism and

carefully monitors groups it considers to practice militant Islam. There is no official state religion; however, the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation.

All religions and orders must register with the Government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all religious and nonreligious group meetings, except for worship. The registration process can be complicated and lengthy, but the Government usually allows groups to operate informally while awaiting the Government's response.

Recognized religious groups, including all governmentally-recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities, receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes and personal property taxes on official vehicles.

There is a de facto separation of religion and the state. The Government generally refrains from involvement in strictly religious matters and religious groups tend not to participate in internal political affairs. During the reporting period, the Government increased its support for the practice and study of government-sanctioned, moderate forms of Islam.

During the reporting period, the Government allowed a greater use of religious language in public spaces, including the placement of banners bearing religious slogans at the site of prominent public landmarks during religious holidays and during the controversy over the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in European newspapers.

During the reporting period the Government sometimes encouraged negative--even violent--expressions of Islamic religious sentiment, at least in part to curry favor with the Syrian Sunni majority. The clearest example of this occurred on February 4, 2006, when the Government allowed Muslim groups to demonstrate publicly against the publication of the cartoons, and later failed to control a mob of several thousand Muslim protesters that attacked and set fire to the building housing the Danish, Swedish, and Chilean embassies, and later set fire to the Norwegian Embassy.

In April 2006, MP and moderate Muslim cleric Mohammed Habash addressed the officers at the Higher Military Academy, an event described by press sources as the first such invitation since the 1963 rise of the Ba'ath Party to power. In May 2006, the state-owned al-Thawra newspaper began a new section called "Religion and Life," which focused exclusively on Islamic views and fatwas. Syrian state radio also began broadcasting the dawn and afternoon Muslim prayers, in addition to its traditional broadcast of noon prayers.

In April 2006, President Bashar al-Asad signed a decree permitting the establishment of a Shari'a (Islamic Law) faculty at Aleppo University. In the same month, the Government also announced a decision, the first of its kind, to license three private Islamic banks. In November 2005, Muslim groups successfully lobbied government ministries to clamp down on the activities of two secular nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In the first case, the NGO distributed a book that challenged the practice of Muslim women wearing the hijab (headscarf). In the second case, another NGO attempted to conduct research on the use of Shari'a as the basis for many personal status laws applicable to all citizens, regardless of religion.

The Government selects moderate Muslims for religious leadership positions and is intolerant of and suppresses extremist forms of Islam. Two moderate Islamists were elected in the March 2003 elections and serve as independent members of parliament. In July 2005, the Government appointed Sheikh Ahmed Baderedin Hassoun, the Grand Mufti of Aleppo, as the new Grand Mufti of Damascus. Sheikh Hassoun is known for his encouragement of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Since being appointed to his new role, Sheikh Hassoun has called on Muslims to stand up to Islamic fundamentalism and has urged leaders of the various religious groups to engage in regular dialogues for mutual understanding.

The Government generally does not prohibit links by its citizens with coreligionists in other countries or with an international hierarchy; however, it prohibits contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel. Western Christmas, Orthodox and Western Easter, as well as four Muslim religious holidays (Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, the Islamic New Year, and the birth of the Prophet Muhammad) are official national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 1964, the Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses and branded it a "politically motivated Zionist organization." The Government bans Witnesses from employment in the civil service, receiving religious literature by post, and traveling abroad. They are also prohibited from holding worship services; however, individual members of Jehovah's Witnesses continued to practice their faith privately.

In 1963, the Government banned membership in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and later made affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death under the auspices of Law 49 of 1980.

Proselytism is not prohibited by civil law; however, the Government discouraged such activity which it deems a threat to the relations among religious groups. Foreign missionaries were present but operated discreetly. In the past, some proselytizers were prosecuted for "posing a threat to the relations among religious groups." Most charges of this kind

carried sentences of imprisonment from five years to life, although often such sentences were reduced to one or two years. There were no reported cases of any prosecution on this charge during the last four years.

The security services were constantly alert for any possible political threat to the State, and all groups, religious and nonreligious, were subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. The Government considered militant Islam in particular a threat to the regime and followed closely the practice of its adherents. The Government has allowed many mosques to be built; however, it monitored and controlled sermons and often closed mosques between prayers.

The Government primarily cited tense relations with Israel as the reason for barring Jewish citizens from employment in the civil service, serving in the armed forces, and for exempting them from military service obligations. Jews were the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards noted their religion. They must obtain the permission of the security services before traveling abroad. Jews also faced extra scrutiny from the Government when applying for licenses, deeds, or other government papers. The Jewish community is prohibited from sending historical Torahs abroad under a law against exporting any of the country's historical and cultural treasures. This created a serious problem for the dwindling Jewish community concerned for the preservation of its religious texts.

Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind; however, in the case of President Asad's Alawi Muslim group, religion can be a factor in determining career opportunities. For example, Alawis held dominant positions in the security services and military that were disproportionate to their percentage of the population.

In keeping with the Government's secular policy, the military did not have a chaplain corps, members of the military did not have direct access to religious or spiritual support, and soldiers were expected not to express their faith overtly during work hours. For example, Muslims were discouraged from praying while on duty. Religious minorities, with the exception of Jews, were represented among the senior officer corps.

Religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws on marriage and divorce.

For Muslims, personal status law on divorce is based on Shari'a, and some of its provisions as interpreted discriminate against women. The legal standard for men to be granted a divorce is much lower than that for women. For example, husbands may claim adultery as grounds for divorce, but wives face more difficulty in presenting the same case. If a woman requests a divorce from her husband, she may not be entitled to child support, alimony, and the return of her dowry in some instances.

All citizens are subject to the Shari'a-based personal status laws regulating child custody, inheritance, and adoption. In the case of divorce, a woman loses the right to custody of her sons when they reach the age of thirteen and her daughters when they reach the age of fifteen, regardless of religion. Women can also lose custody before this age if they remarry, work outside the home, or move outside of the city or country.

Inheritance for all citizens is also based on Shari'a. Accordingly, women usually are granted half of the inheritance share of male heirs; however, Shari'a mandates that male heirs provide financial support to the female relatives who inherit less. For example, a brother would inherit his and his unmarried sister's share from their parents' estate, and he is obligated to provide for the sister's well-being with that inheritance. If the brother fails to do so, she has the right to sue. Polygyny is legal but is practiced only by a minority of Muslim men.

All schools officially were government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice some schools were run by Christian and Druze minorities. There was mandatory religious instruction in schools for all religious groups, with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religious instruction was provided on Islam and Christianity only, and courses were divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Groups that participated in Islamic courses include Sunni, Shi'a, Alawi, Ismaili, Yazidi, and Druze. In the past, Jews had a separate primary school that offered religious instruction on Judaism and other traditional subjects; however, the school closed in 2004 due to the dwindling size of the Jewish community. Although Arabic was the official language in public schools, the Government permitted the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), and Chaldean in some schools, on the basis that these were "liturgical languages." There was no mandatory religious study at the university level.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports that the Government used torture against alleged Islamists held in detention. For example, family members of forty-five accused Islamists from the villages of Qatana, al-Otaiba, and al-Tal reported to human rights organizations during the year that their relatives had been tortured at the time of their arrests in 2004.

During the reporting period, human rights organizations documented the arrest of at least seventy persons for alleged ties to Islamist groups.

On February 7, 2006, Tartous-based journalist Adel Mahfouz was arrested by Syrian authorities after publishing an article encouraging dialogue between Muslims and the cartoon artists who created caricatures of the Prophet

Muhammad for the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten. He was released on bail March 12, and at the end of the reporting period no criminal court date had been set for him.

The Government continued to hold an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists as political detainees and prisoners. Their arrests and, in some cases, convictions, were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability. Human rights groups estimated that at least several hundred alleged Islamists were detained in prisons, security service detention centers, or other secret detention facilities.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Anti-Semitism

During the reporting period, there were no reports of incidents of harassment and property damage against Jews in Damascus perpetrated by individuals not associated with the Government. In 2004 and early 2005, there were reports of such harassment and there was evidence that local police and other government officials did not respond aggressively to these incidents.

Government officials occasionally used radio and television programming, news articles, and other mass media to condone anti-Semitic material. Anti-Israel material was widespread, some of which carried anti-Semitic overtones. For example, in January 2006, the government-owned al-Thawra newspaper published an article suggesting that the Government of Israel had genetically engineered the avian flu virus in order to damage "genes carried only by Arabs" and thus "to realize the Zionist goal of harming the Arabs."

On November 8, 2005, government-owned Syrian TV broadcast an interview with the deputy minister of Religious Endowments (Awqaf) in which he stated that Syria serves as "the last line of defense" against "Zionist plots which aim to put on the throne of the Middle East the descendants of ... those whom the Koran called the descendants of apes and pigs."

On November 24, 2005, former National Director of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, participated in a mass solidarity protest in Damascus, and his speech was aired on Syrian national television. He praised President Bashar al-Asad, declaring, "It is not just the West Bank of Palestine...that [is] occupied by Zionists, but Washington, D.C., and New York, and London."

Tishrin editorialist, Izz-al-Din al-Darwish, wrote in a July 31, 2005, editorial that "Syria is targeted by an intensive media campaign managed and financed by Zionist circles." Tishrin also regularly used anti-Semitic caricatures to represent Israel in editorial cartoons.

In January 2005, a new edition of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was published by the Syrian publishing company Dar al-Awail, which credits the Ministry of Information with approving the text. In 2003, an independent production company created and filmed an anti-Semitic program inside the country. Its theme centered on the alleged conspiracy of the "Elders of Zion" to orchestrate both world wars and manipulate world markets to create Israel. The program was not aired in the country but was shown elsewhere.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

A November 3, 2005, presidential decree granted amnesty to 190 political prisoners, coinciding with the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Most freed prisoners were Islamists and had been long-term detainees.

In February 2005, the president ordered the release of fifty-five political prisoners who had spent up to twenty years in jail. Most freed prisoners were being held for, or had been convicted of, belonging to an Islamist group.

The late Grand Mufti's son Salah Kufaro and his Abu Nur Islamic Institute continued to engage in a wide variety of activities promoting Christian-Muslim understanding. In May 2005, the Council of Middle East Churches visited Kufaro to discuss Christian-Muslim understanding and future prospects. In November 2004, Muslim and Christian leaders participated in a conference on the subject, part of which was held at the Abu Nur Institute.

In 2005 and 2006, an American rabbi visited the country three times. During his May 2005 visit, he spoke with both Christian and Muslim religious leaders about the value of religion in building a tolerant and caring society. In May 2006, at the invitation of the Grand Mufti, he delivered a speech at an Aleppo mosque to a group of over three thousand Muslims.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups mainly attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation.

In July 2005, sectarian strife broke out in the cities of Misyaf and Qadmous in clashes between members of the Alawite and Ismaili sects. In Misyaf, rioting broke out after a dispute between Alawite and Ismaili bus drivers. In Qadmous, a group of Alawites looted and destroyed shops in a predominantly Ismaili area.

There was little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities.

Societal conventions, and religious and theological proscriptions, made conversions relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversions. In many cases, societal pressure forced those who undertook such conversions to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government has limited contact with the Government. The charge d'affaires and other embassy officials met with religious leaders and adherents of almost all religious groups at the national, regional, and local levels to convey to the public U.S. support for freedom of religion.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71432.htm)