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Syria

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government imposes restrictions on this right. While there is no official state religion, the Constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. The Constitution provides for freedom of faith and religious practice, provided that the religious rites do not disturb the public order.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to monitor the activities of all groups, including religious groups, and discouraged proselytism, which it deemed a threat to relations among religious groups. The Government also continued to discriminate against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

There were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups, some attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 71,498 square miles and a population of 19 million. Sunnis represent 74 percent of the population and are present throughout the country. Other Muslim groups, including Alawi, Ismailis, and Shi'a, together constitute 13 percent of the population. The Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Various Christian denominations comprise the remaining 10 percent.

The majority of Christians belong to the Eastern groups that have existed in the country since the earliest days of Christianity. The main Eastern groups belong to the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope), or the independent Nestorian Church. There is also a small Yezidi population, and there are approximately 40 Jews. It is difficult to obtain precise population estimates for religious sub-groups due to government sensitivity to sectarian demographics.

The largest Christian denomination is the Greek Orthodox Church, known in the country as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. Most citizens of Armenian descent belong to the Armenian (Apostolic) Church, which uses an Armenian liturgy. The largest Uniate church in the country is the Greek Catholic Church. Other Uniate denominations include the Maronite Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, and the Chaldean Catholic Church, which derives from the Nestorian Church. Protestant Christian denominations include Baptists and Mennonites. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) is also present.

Most Christians live in the urban centers in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Lattakia, although significant numbers live in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast. A majority of Alawis live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Lattakia governorate. A significant majority of the Druze population resides in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southeast, and most are located in the southern governorate of Suweida. The few remaining Jews are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yezidis are found primarily in the northeast.

Foreign missionary groups are present but must operate discreetly.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, Jehovah's Witnesses are banned, and any activities by the group must be conducted without attracting the Government's attention. 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. While there is no civil law prohibiting proselytism, the Government discourages it and occasionally prosecutes missionaries for "posing a threat to the relations among religious groups" when they have engaged in such activities. Most charges of this kind carried sentences of imprisonment from 5 years to life, although often such sentences were reduced to 1 or 2 years.

Membership in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is illegal, as is membership in any "Salafist" organization, a designation in Syrian parlance that denotes Saudi-inspired fundamentalism. The Government and the State Security Court have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes a Salafist or why it is illegal. Affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death, although in practice the sentence is typically commuted to 12 years imprisonment.

All religions and religious 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 its response.

Recognized religious groups, including all government-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 state in that the Government generally refrains from involvement in strictly religious matters and religious groups tend not to participate in internal political affairs. However, during the reporting period, the Government increased its support for the practice and study of government-sanctioned, moderate forms of Islam, and Syrian state radio also began broadcasting the dawn and afternoon Muslim prayers, in addition to its traditional broadcast of noon prayers. Syrian state television also broadcasts recitations from the Qur'an in the morning.

The Government permitted the 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. However, unlike the previous reporting period, there were no examples of prominent religious figures addressing government functions.

Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind; however, religion can be a factor in determining career opportunities. For example, Alawis hold dominant positions in the security services and military that are disproportionate to their percentage of the population. On the other hand, because their religion is banned, Jehovah's Witnesses are discriminated against in the area of employment.

The April 2007 parliamentary elections for the Peoples Assembly saw an increase in the number of Islamic clerics elected to the Parliament from one in 2003 to three.

During the reporting period, the Government continued to promote Islamic banking. In early 2007 two Islamic banks were allowed to conduct Initial Public Offerings: The Cham Islamic Bank and the Syrian International Islamic Bank. In addition, at the Second Islamic Banking Conference held on March 13, 2007, Central Bank Governor Adib Maleh recommended that the Ministry of Islamic Trusts encourage Syrians to invest in Islamic banking and pay the zakat (religious tax) through Islamic banks. The Government also licensed the first Islamic insurance company, Al Aqila, in March 2007.

In February 2007 the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs issued a decision to dissolve a women's nongovernmental organization (NGO) known as Social Initiative. There were scattered reports in local and regional media that a number of conservative Muslim clerics pressured the Government to close the NGO because the clerics took exception to a questionnaire the NGO distributed to women asking their opinions on the personal status law.

The Government is intolerant of, and suppresses, extremist forms of Islam. Accordingly, it selects for religious leadership positions moderate Muslims who have no intention of altering the secular nature of the Government. Sheikh Ahmed Baderedin Hassoun, the Grand Mufti of Syria, continued to call 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.

All schools are officially government-run and non-sectarian, although in practice some schools are run by the Christian and Druze communities. There is mandatory religious instruction in schools for all religious groups, with government-approved teachers and curricula. Religious instruction is provided on Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Groups that participate in Islamic courses include Sunni, Shi'a, Alawi, Ismaili, Yezidi, and Druze. Although Arabic is 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 are "liturgical languages." There is no mandatory religious study at the university level.

Religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws for matters dealing with personal status. However, at the time of this report, the Government had not yet passed legislation pertaining to personal status issues for Orthodox Christians.

A new Civil Law for Catholics went into effect on July 5, 2006. It contains strict rules on the order of inheritance with regard to the relatives of the deceased, as well as on the jurisdiction of Christian courts. Additionally, there are laws that establish the legal marriage age and prohibit some instances of mixed marriage for Catholics. The law gives the bishop of a diocese and the Christian courts expanded authority to determine the validity of an adoption. The new law

also clarifies parental rights and inheritance rules between adopting parents and the adopted child. The Catholic leadership generally received the law positively.

The personal status law on divorce for Muslims in Syria is based on Shari'a religious law, and some of its provisions are interpreted in a manner that discriminates against women.

Syrian law specifically provides for reduced or commuted sentences in "honor crimes," which involve violent assaults by a direct male relative against a female. Section 548 of the Syrian penal code stipulates that a man can be absolved of any killing if he witnesses a direct female relative in the act of adultery. Moreover, a man's sentence for murder will be greatly reduced if he sees a direct female relative in a "suspicious situation" with a member of the opposite sex who is not a relative.

Under Syria's interpretation of Shari'a, the legal standard for men to be granted a divorce is much lower than that for women. Husbands may also claim adultery as grounds for divorce, while wives often face a higher legal standard when presenting the same case. A man can only be found guilty of adultery if the act takes place inside the home. If a wife requests a divorce from her husband, she may be denied alimony and the return of her dowry in some instances.

In the event of divorce, a woman loses the right to custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13, and her daughters when they reach the age of 15, 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. In such cases the custody of the children reverts to the maternal grandmother until the age of 13 and 15 respectively. After that, custody reverts back to the father until the children reach the age of majority.

Inheritance for all citizens except Catholics is based on Shari'a. Accordingly, married women usually are granted half the inheritance share male heirs receive. In all communities, however, male heirs must provide financial support to unmarried 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. Polygamy is legal for Muslim men but is practiced only by a minority of them.

The Government generally does not prohibit links between its citizens and co-religionists in other countries or between its citizens and the international hierarchies that govern some religious groups; however, it prohibits contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

The following holy days are national holidays: Western Christmas, Orthodox and Western Easter, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, the Islamic New Year, and the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In January 2007, the Government licensed the so-called Quabasis to hold their female-only Islamic study groups inside of mosques. Until then, they were held in private homes. Some regard the licensing as a cynical attempt by the security services to make it easier to monitor the Quabasis rather than to help facilitate their activities. However, Quabasis groups are still allowed to meet in private residences.

Proselytism is not prohibited by civil law; however, the Government discourages it as a potential threat to the relations among religious groups. Nevertheless, foreign missionaries were present, operating discreetly. There were no reported cases of anyone being prosecuted for posing a threat to the relations among religious groups during the period covered by this report. Instead, there were several reports that the Government gave the Shi'a favorable treatment and allowed Shi'a missionaries to construct mosques and convert Sunnis to Shiites.

All groups, religious and nonreligious, are subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. The Government particularly considers militant Islam a threat to the regime and closely follows the practice of its adherents. While the Government allows many mosques to be built, it monitors and controls sermons and often closes mosques between prayers.

In Damascus, the Government is building a road through the old city to a major Shi'a mosque. To complete the road, the Government plans to tear down several predominantly Sunni residential complexes in the old city. The country's Sunni clerics and communities have criticized these plans.

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

The Government canceled an Islamic religious program that had been broadcast just before the major weekly prayers were shown on government-run television. On April 20, 2007, the son of the late Grand Mufti, Sheikh Salah Khuftaro,

in a speech at the Abu Nur Islamic Center, denounced the Information Minister for this decision.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Both European diplomats and human rights organizations characterized the level of repression against alleged Islamists as about the same as in previous reporting periods, although some religious leaders insisted they faced increased repression at the hands of the Government.

During the reporting period, human rights organizations documented the arrest of at least 30 persons for alleged ties to Islamist groups. The Government rarely furnished documentation on the number of detained persons. Human rights groups reported on Syrians who were arrested or detained for alleged ties to Islamist groups in previous years but whose detention has only recently been made public.

The Supreme State Security Court sentenced at least 80 alleged Islamists to lengthy prison sentences. Human rights groups and diplomats from European embassies estimated that at least hundreds of alleged Islamists remain detained in prisons, security service detention centers, or other secret detention facilities.

The Government continued to hold an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists as political detainees and prisoners. Many alleged Islamists not connected to the Muslim Brotherhood were charged and convicted for "membership in a Salafist organization." Arrests of alleged Islamists and, in some cases, convictions, were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability.

At the end of the reporting period there were unconfirmed reports that on May 14, 2007, journalist Adel Mahfoudh was sentenced to 6 months in prison. On February 7, 2006, Syrian authorities arrested him after he published 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, 2006, re-arrested on May 17, 2006, and re-released on bail in September 2006.

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 or property damage against Jews in Damascus. However, government-owned-and-controlled media printed anti-Semitic articles and editorial cartoons depicting demonic images of Jews, stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, and comparisons of Israeli leaders and Israel to Hitler and the Nazis throughout the year. These expressions occurred primarily in the government-owned-and-controlled daily newspaper Tishrin.

For instance, on February 4, 2007, Tishrin published an article accusing Jewish leaders of collusion with the Nazi party for the purposes of "inflating" the Holocaust. The article alleged that Jews wanted the Holocaust to justify immigration to "the Promised Land."

On January 28, 2007, Tishrin published an article attempting to draw similarities and connections between Zionists and Nazis, stating that both movements are racist and that the two cooperated to fulfill their racist objectives.

On July 16, 2006, Dr. Ghazi Hussein wrote in Tishrin that Zionist circles focus on the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust while excluding Gypsies and Poles. Spreading this concept reinforces the Zionist idea that Jews need a Jewish state with a strong army, and need, as well, to displace the Palestinian people and erase their identity. He also wrote that the Nazi Holocaust is being used to cover up the holocaust Israel is perpetrating against the Palestinian people.

On July 10, 2006, Tishrin published an article by Dr. Sayah Azzam, who wrote that Israel has used the Holocaust and charges of anti-Semitism to attract Jewish immigrants and to blackmail the West.

Also in July 2006, on Syrian television, Syrian Deputy Minister of Religious Endowment, Dr. Muhammad 'Abd Al-Sattar, proclaimed that Jews are cursed. The Qur'an, he explained, paints the people of Israel in a "sinister and dark way." He proceeded to use the national station to call Jews the "descendents of apes and pigs," claiming that "terms that are closer to animals than humans" are more fit to describe them.

The Government primarily cites tense relations with Israel as the reason for barring Jewish citizens from employment in the civil service or serving in the armed forces, and for exempting them from military service obligations. Jews are

the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards note their religion, and they must obtain the permission of the security services before traveling abroad.

Jews also face 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 poses a serious problem for the dwindling Jewish community concerned about the preservation of its ancient religious texts.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 24, 2007, Syrian Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Baderedin Hassoun called on Jews of Syrian origin to return to Syria, claiming that the property and synagogues of Jews who left Syria remained as they were and would be placed at the disposal of their original owners.

In March 2007, during a lecture at Damascus University, Syrian Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Baderedin Hassoun called for amending the laws that allow honor killings, which he said violate the Islamic spirit of the law.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups, mainly attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation.

In March 2007 there were reports of riots in Hassakeh Province between Christians and predominantly Muslim Kurds. There were reports of three deaths. It was unclear whether there was any religious basis to the conflict.

No official statistics were kept on honor crimes, but there were scattered reports of them in the local media. Most prominent was the case of Zahra Ezzo. On January 31, 2007, Ezzo was murdered by her brother after being kidnapped and forced to run away by a friend of the family. The incidence of honor crimes is believed to be considerably higher in rural areas.

Social conventions and religious and theological proscriptions made conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversion. In many cases, societal pressure forced such converts 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; however, 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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