

Syria (50)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Syria**

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SYRIA

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, it imposes restrictions in some areas.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among religions in society contribute to the generally free practice of religion. However, there are periodic reports of friction between religious faiths. The Government monitors the activities of all groups, including religious groups, discourages aggressive proselytizing, and has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses as a politically-motivated Zionist organization.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, it imposes restrictions in some areas. The only advantage given to a particular religion by the Constitution is the requirement that the President be a Muslim. There is no state religion, although the majority of the population is Sunni Muslim.

All religions and orders must register with the Government, which monitors fund raising and requires permits for all meetings by religious (and non-religious) groups, except for worship. Recognized religious groups receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes and personal property taxes on official vehicles. There is a strict de facto separation of church and state. Religious groups tend to avoid any involvement in internal political affairs. The Government, in turn, generally refrains from becoming involved in strictly religious issues. However, the Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses as a politically-motivated Zionist organization in 1964.

Religious Demography

While there is no official state religion, Sunni Muslims represent about 74 percent of the population. Other orders, including Druze, Alawi, Ismailis, Shi'a, and Yazidis, constitute an estimated 16 percent of the population. A variety of Christian denominations make up the remaining 10 percent of the population. The great 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 autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope, and the independent Nestorian Church. There also are believed to be less than 100 Jews and a small number of Yazidis.

The largest Christian denomination is the Greek Orthodox Church, known in Syria 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 Syrians of Armenian origin 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. The Government also permits the presence, both officially and unofficially, of other Christian denominations, including Baptist, Mennonite, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon).

Sunni Muslims are found throughout the country. Christians tend to be urbanized and most live in Damascus and Aleppo, although significant numbers live in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast. A majority of the Alawis live in the Latakia governorate. A significant majority of the Druze population resides in the rugged Jabal Al-Arab region in the southeast. The few remaining Jews are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yazidis are found primarily in the northeast.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government considers militant Islam a threat to the regime and follows closely the practice of its adherents. The Government has allowed many mosques to be built; however, sermons are monitored and controlled and mosques are closed between prayers.

Although the law does not prohibit proselytizing, the Government discourages such activity in practice, particularly when such activity is deemed a threat to the generally good relations among religious groups (see Section II). Foreign missionary groups are present but operate discreetly.

Officially, all schools are government run and nonsectarian, although some schools are run in practice by Christian and Jewish minorities. There is mandatory religious instruction in schools, with government-approved teachers and curricula. Religion courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Jews have a separate primary school, which offers religious instruction on Judaism, in

addition to traditional subjects. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the Government permits the teaching of Armenian, Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic) and Chaldean in some schools on the basis that these are "liturgical languages."

Religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws on marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

The Government generally avoids intervention in religious affairs, including direct support for programs promoting interfaith understanding. Nevertheless, government policies tend to support the study and practice of moderate forms of Islam.

Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind. However, in the case of Alawis, religion can be a contributing factor in determining career opportunities. For example, members of the President's Alawi sect hold a predominant position in the security services and military, well out of proportion to their percentage of the population, which is estimated to be 12 percent.

For primarily political rather than religious reasons, Jews generally are barred from government employment and do not have military service obligations. Jews also are the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

The security services constantly are alert to any possible political threat to the State and all groups, religious and non-religious, are subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services.

Although Jehovah's Witnesses have continued to practice their faith privately despite the official ban, the Government arrested several members of Jehovah's Witnesses as they gathered for religious meetings in 1997.

There were credible reports of large-scale arrests of Syrian and Palestinian Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Liberation Party in late 1999 and early 2000. Some of the Islamist prisoners reportedly were tortured in detention. A number of Islamist prisoners also were reportedly released during the period covered by this report, but some remain in custody. These arrests were motivated primarily by political reasons as the Government continues to view militant Islamists as potential threats to the stability of the regime.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious communities generally are amicable, and there is little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities. However, there are periodic reports of friction between religious faiths, which may be related to deteriorating economic conditions and internal political issues. To date, these reports appear isolated.

Although no law prohibits religious denominations from proselytizing, the Government is sensitive to complaints by religious groups of aggressive proselytizing by other groups and has intervened when such activities threatened the relations among religions. Societal conventions make conversions relatively rare, especially in the case of Muslim-to-Christian conversions. In many cases, societal pressure forces those who undertake such conversions to relocate within the country or to depart Syria in order to practice their new religion openly.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials meet routinely with religious leaders and adherents of almost all denominations at the national, regional, and local levels. Embassy officials remain sensitive to any change in the degree of religious freedom in the country.

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