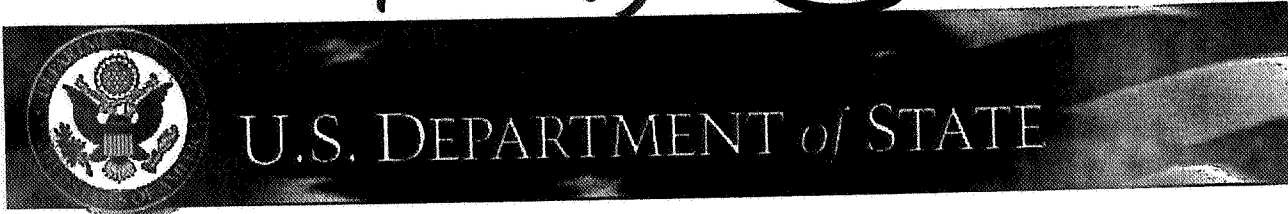


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Syria

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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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. The Government monitors the activities of all groups, including religious groups, discourages proselytizing, particularly when it is deemed a threat to the relations among religious groups, and has banned Jehovah's Witnesses as a "politically motivated Zionist organization."

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional reports of friction between religious faiths.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 71,498 square miles, and its population is approximately 17 million. Sunni Muslims represent approximately 74 percent of the population (approximately 12.6 million persons). Other Muslim groups, including Druze, Alawi, Ismailis, Shi'a, and Yazidis, constitute an estimated 16 percent of the population (approximately 2.7 million persons). A variety of Christian denominations make up the remaining 10 percent of the population (approximately 1.7 million persons). 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 approximately 85 Jews. It is difficult to obtain precise population estimates for various religious denominations 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. 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 (Mormons).

Sunni Muslims are present 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.

Foreign missionary groups are present but operate discreetly.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, it discourages public proselytizing and carefully monitors groups it considers to practice militant Islam. There is no official state religion; however, the Constitution requires that the President be a

Muslim.

All religions and orders must register with the Government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all meetings by religious (and non-religious) groups, 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 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. Nevertheless, government policies tend to support the study and practice of moderate forms of Islam. For example, the Government selects moderate Muslims for religious leadership positions, is intolerant of and suppresses extremist forms of Islam, and accepted the election in 2003 of a devout, yet moderate Muslim to the Parliament.

The Government generally does not prohibit links by its citizens with coreligionists in other countries or with a supranational hierarchy. In 2001 Pope John Paul II visited the country and conducted a public mass in Damascus, which representatives of all of the country's Orthodox and Uniate Christian denominations attended. The Government also allowed the Pope to tour the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, which was the first time in history that a Pontiff visited a mosque. At a ceremony welcoming the Pope to the country, President Bashar al-Asad gave a speech that was denounced widely as anti-Semitic (see Section IV).

All schools officially 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. In the past, Jews had a separate primary school which offered religious instruction on Judaism and other traditional subjects. However, it recently was closed due to the dwindling size of the Jewish community. 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."

Both Orthodox and Western Easter and three Muslim religious holidays (Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, and the Prophet Mohammed's birthday) are recognized as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 1964 the Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses as a "politically motivated Zionist organization." However, members of Jehovah's Witnesses have continued to practice their faith privately despite the official ban.

Although the law does not prohibit proselytizing, in practice the Government discourages such activity, particularly when it is deemed a threat to the relations among religious groups. Foreign missionaries are present, but operate discreetly.

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. The Government considers militant Islam in particular a threat to the regime and follows closely the practice of its adherents. The Government has allowed many mosques to be built; however, it monitors and controls sermons and closes mosques between prayers.

The Government primarily cites tense relations with Israel as the reason for barring Jews from government employment and for exempting them from military service obligations. Jews also are the only religious minority group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

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

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

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

inheritance.

For Muslims, personal status law on divorce is based on Shari'a (Islamic law) and some of its provisions as interpreted discriminate against 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 in some instances. In addition under the law a woman loses the right to custody of her sons when they reach age 9 and her daughters at age 12. Inheritance for Muslims also is based on Shari'a. Accordingly Muslim 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 who inherits an unmarried sister's share from their parents' estate is obligated to provide for the sister's well-being. If the brother fails to do so, she has the right to sue. Polygyny is legal but is practiced only by a small minority of Muslim men.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Presidential amnesties issued in November 2000 and December 2001 reportedly freed hundreds of oppositionist political prisoners, including many members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The 1999 arrests were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability. There is no current estimate available of the number of Islamists who may remain in custody.

In 2001 there was a credible report that Syrian intelligence officials in Lebanon arrested three Syrian Druze men who had converted to Christianity, possibly on suspicion of being Jehovah's Witnesses. They reportedly were transferred to prison in Syria, held for 2 months, and then released after signing papers stating that they would cease attending their church and cease contact with their pastor.

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious communities generally are amicable, and there is little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities. The press, which the Government tightly controls, generally is careful to avoid making anti-Semitic remarks in their anti-Israeli articles; however, during the period covered by this report, on one occasion the press published a book review of the Arabic translation of David Duke's *Awakening* that could be construed as anti-Semitic. There were occasional reports of friction between religious faiths, which may be related to deteriorating economic conditions and internal political issues. Specifically, there were reports of minor incidents of harassment and property damage against Jews in Damascus. These incidents are believed to be in reaction to Israeli actions against Palestinians.

During hostilities in Iraq, the Grand Mufti criticized U.S. actions and called for Muslims to use all available methods (including martyrdom) to defeat the "invaders." Government officials reportedly did not support his statement and there were no reports that public officials made similar statements.

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 leave the country in order to practice their new religion openly.

Section IV. 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. In meetings between embassy staff and Government officials, and during high level visits, U.S. employees regularly emphasize the importance of human rights, including freedom of religion. In 2001 the State Department spokesman criticized as unacceptable and regrettable President Asad's speech during the Pope's visit, in which he characterized Jews as the betrayers of Christ and the Prophet Mohammed (see Section II).

Embassy officials remained sensitive to any change in the degree of religious freedom in the country.

