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Syria

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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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 continued to monitor the activities of all groups, including religious groups, and discourage proselytizing, particularly when it is deemed 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 religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious faiths, 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 its population is an estimated 18 million. Sunni Muslims represent approximately 74 percent of the population (approximately 12.6 million persons). Other Muslim groups, including Alawi, Ismailis, Shi'a, and Yazidis, together constitute an estimated 13 percent of the population (approximately 2.2 million persons). The Druze account for an estimated 3 percent of the population (approximately 500,000 persons). Various 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 the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches, which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope, and the independent Nestorian Church. There are approximately 80 Jews. It is difficult to obtain precise population estimates for 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 citizens 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. Protestant Christian denominations include Baptist and Mennonite. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) is also present.

Sunni Muslims are present throughout the country. Christians tend to be urbanized, and most live in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Lattakia, although significant numbers live in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast. A majority of the Alawis live in the 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 town of Suweida. The few remaining Jews are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yazidis are 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, 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 and specifies 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 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 practice and study of moderate forms of Islam. For example, the Government selects moderate Muslims for religious leadership positions and is intolerant of and suppresses extremist forms of Islam. The Government encouraged moderate Islamic voices in Parliament by accepting two devout yet moderate Islamists as independents to the Parliament in the March 2003 elections. 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 interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. Since being appointed to his new role, Sheikh Hassoun has called on members of Islamic sects to stand up to Islamic fundamentalism and has urged leaders of the various faiths to engage in regular dialogues for mutual understanding.

With the exception of contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel, the Government generally does not prohibit links by its citizens with coreligionists in other countries or with an international hierarchy.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 1964, the Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses and branded it a "politically motivated Zionist organization" in an attempt to discredit it; however, individual members of Jehovah's Witnesses continued to practice their faith privately.

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 were present but operated discreetly. Proselytizing is not illegal; however, those who proselytize have been prosecuted in the past for "posing a threat to the relations among religious groups." Most charges of this kind have carried sentences of 5 years to life imprisonment, although often such sentences were reduced to 1 or 2 years. There were no reported cases in the last 3 years any prosecution on this charge.

The security services constantly are alert for any possible political threat to the State, and all groups, religious and nonreligious, are subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. The Government considers 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 government employment 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 issue 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, 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. Jewish citizens were forbidden from serving in the Government and armed services and were excluded from mandatory military conscription.

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 Islamic Law (Shari'a), 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 the case 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. 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 will 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 small 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 recently closed 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

The Government continued to hold an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists as political prisoners. Their arrests were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability. Human rights groups estimate the number of those still in custody to be at least several hundred.

During the reporting period, there were two presidential amnesties which released approximately 125 Muslim Brothers and other Islamists from prison.

In 2003, a Presidential amnesty connected to the end of the Eid al-Adha holiday reportedly freed more than 130 oppositionist political prisoners, including many members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect to Religious Freedom

The late Grand Mufti's son Salah Kuftaro and his Abu Nur Islamic Institute continued to engage in a wide variety of activities promoting Christian-Muslim understanding. On May 12, the Council of Middle East Churches visited Kuftaro 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, an American Jewish rabbi visited Syria twice. During his last visit in May, he spoke with both Christian and Muslim religious leaders about the value of religion in building a tolerant and caring society.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious faiths mainly attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation. There was little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities.

The press, which the Government tightly controlled, generally was careful to avoid publishing anti-Semitic remarks in their anti-Israel articles; however, there was evidence of anti-Semitic articles in previous years. 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. 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 2004 and early 2005 there were reports of incidents of harassment and property damage against Jews in Damascus perpetrated by individuals not associated with the Government. There was evidence that local police and other SARG officials did not respond aggressively to these incidents.

In 2003, the usually moderate (now deceased) Grand Mufti issued a statement urging Muslims to use all available methods (including martyrdom) to defeat the US/UK/Zionist "aggression." He declared it was compulsory for every Muslim, female and male, to resist invaders, and that all those close to Iraq should defend it and the Iraqi people. Government officials reportedly did not support his statement.

Although no law prohibits religious denominations from proselytizing, the Government was sensitive to complaints by citizens of aggressive proselytizing by citizens or noncitizens and has intervened when it determined that such activities threatened to provoke sectarian conflict. Societal conventions 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.

There was growing concern regarding a rise in Islamic fundamentalism that could be attributed to a number of political, economic, and societal factors, including the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the lure of religious jihad in Iraq.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The 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, U.S. officials regularly emphasize the importance of freedom of religion.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51610.htm)