

Syria (50)



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108

International Religious Freedom Report

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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 aggressive proselytizing, 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 periodic 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 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 (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 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 official state religion, although the majority of the population is Sunni 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. 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, including direct support for programs promoting interfaith understanding. Nevertheless, government policies tend to support the study and practice of moderate forms of Islam.

The Government generally does not prohibit links by its citizens with coreligionists in other countries or with a supranational hierarchy. In May 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. 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."

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.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

Although the law does not prohibit proselytizing, the Government discourages such activity in practice, particularly when it is deemed a threat to the relations among religious groups.

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, sermons are monitored and controlled and mosques are closed between prayers.

The Government primarily cites political rather than religious reasons 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 the President's Alawi Muslim group, religion can be a contributing factor in determining career opportunities. For example, Alawis hold a predominant position in the security services and military, well out of proportion to their percentage of the population.

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

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. These arrests were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability. In November 1999, the Government declared an amnesty for 600 political prisoners and detainees and a general pardon for some nonpolitical prisoners. There were credible reports that several hundred Islamists were among those political prisoners who benefited from the amnesty. Presidential amnesties issued in November 2000 and December 2001 reportedly freed hundreds of oppositionist political prisoners, including many members of the Muslim Brotherhood, although it is believed that some remain in custody.

There was a credible report that three Syrian Druze men who had converted to Christianity were arrested in March 2001 by Syrian intelligence officials in Lebanon, possibly on suspicion of membership in 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 Syrian press, which the Government tightly controls, occasionally publishes anti-Semitic articles that contribute to antagonism towards Jews. There were periodic 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. On October 12, 2000, a group of Palestinians threw bricks, stones, and Molotov cocktails at a synagogue in Damascus, apparently in reaction to the Israeli Government's use of force against Palestinians in the occupied territories. No one was injured in the attack; however, the synagogue was damaged slightly and closed for approximately 1 month. The Government took immediate steps to ensure that the Jewish community would be protected from further attacks.

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 (see Section II). 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 May 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).

The Embassy funded two programs to promote religious freedom and tolerance during the period covered by this report. Embassy officials remained sensitive to any change in the degree of religious freedom in the country.

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