

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Syria

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SYRIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The only advantage given to a particular religion by the Constitution is the requirement that the President be a Muslim.

All religions and sects must register with the Government, which monitors fundraising and requires permits for all meetings by religious (and nonreligious) groups, except for worship. Recognized religious groups receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes and personal property taxes on official vehicles.

While there is no official state religion, Sunni Muslims represent about 74 percent of the population. Other orders, including Druze, Alawis, Ismailis, Shi'a, and Yazidis, constitute an estimated 16 percent of the population. A variety of Christian denominations make up the remaining 10 percent. The great majority of Christians belong to Eastern groups that have existed in Syria 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 are also believed to be less than 100 Jews.

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 Syria 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 Syrian Government also permits the presence, both officially and unofficially, of other Christian denominations, including Baptists, Mennonites, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons).

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.

The security services are constantly alert to any possible political threat to the state and all groups, religious and nonreligious, are subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. Consequently, 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 is reluctant to involve itself in strictly religious issues.

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

Foreign missionary groups are present but operate discreetly. The Government banned Jehovah's Witnesses as a politically motivated Zionist organization in 1964. Although Jehovah's Witnesses have continued to practice their faith privately, the Government arrested several Jehovah's Witnesses as they gathered for religious meetings in 1997.

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.

The few remaining Jews generally are barred from government employment and do not have military service obligations. Jews are the only minority group whose passports and identity cards note their religion.

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 curriculums. Religion courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Jews have a separate primary school, which offers religious instruction in 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.

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. 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 are generally amicable, and there is little evidence of societal discrimination or violence against religious minorities.

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 Hafiz Al-Asad's Alawi order hold a predominant position in the security services and military, well out of proportion to their percentage of the population, which is estimated at 12 percent. For primarily political rather than religious reasons, Jews generally are barred from government employment (also see Section I).

Although no law prohibits religious denominations from proselytizing, the Government is sensitive to complaints by religious groups of aggressive proselytizing by other groups (also see Section I) and has intervened when such activities threatened the state of 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 U.S. Embassy officials meet routinely with religious leaders and adherents of almost all denominations at the national, regional, and local levels.

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