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2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Syria

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, although the government imposed restrictions on this right. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for, and protection of, the right to religious freedom. The constitution provides for freedom of faith and religious practice so long as religious rites do not disturb the public order. Although the government generally enforced legal and policy protections of religious freedom for most Syrians, including the Christian minority, it continued to prosecute individuals for membership in faith communities it deemed extreme. The Syrian government outlaws groups it claims are “Muslim extremist groups” and also outlaws Jehovah’s Witnesses. The government continued to monitor the activities of all religious groups and to discourage proselytizing, deemed a threat to relations among and within different faiths.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Societal pressure sometimes caused Muslim converts to Christianity to leave their place of residence. There were several reports of harassment of Christians throughout the year, mostly in the context of ongoing political unrest. Following other pro-democracy movements throughout the region, Syrian protesters demonstrated against the Asad regime en masse throughout the year. While the protest movement began in response to widespread regime abuses, the regime contextualized the protests within a sectarian framework, maintaining that protesters were associated with “extreme Islamist factions.” At times, popular perception among the protesters conflated the regime’s brutality and killing of over 5,000 civilians with alleged Alawite violence against Sunni Muslims, leading to an increase of tension, violence, and killing between largely Alawite and Sunni communities. While the majority of those killed throughout the Syrian unrest were either Alawite or Sunni, Christians and Druze were also victims.

U.S. government officials consulted with religious leaders and communities despite their reduced movement due to political unrest.

Section I. Religious Demography

Sunnis constitute 74 percent of the population and are present throughout the country. Other Muslim groups, including Alawites, Ismailis, and Shia, together constitute 13 percent. The Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Various Christian groups constitute the remaining 10 percent, although there are estimates that the Christian population, mostly due to migration, may have dropped to 8 percent. Migration increased throughout the year due to ongoing violence, unrest, and economic hardship.

The majority of Christians adhere to Eastern Orthodoxy. The main eastern groups belong to the autonomous Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize the Roman Catholic Pope), or the independent Nestorian Church. There is also a Yezidi population of approximately 80,000, but the government does not recognize the Yezidi as belonging to a faith distinct from Islam. There are approximately 100 Jews in the country. The government conducts a census every 10 years, the most recent in 2004. The census did not include information on religious and ethnic demographics. Obtaining precise population estimates for religious groups was difficult due to government sensitivity to risks of sectarian strife.

Most Christians live in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, although significant numbers live in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast section of the country. Fewer Iraqi Christians entered Syria than in previous years due to ongoing unrest and violence in the country. The majority of Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, but they have significant presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, and the capital, Damascus. Many of the Druze live in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southern governorate of Suweida, where they constitute the vast majority of the local population. The few remaining Jews are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yezidis are found primarily in the northeast and Aleppo.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, although the government imposes restrictions on this right, particularly against those groups it considers extremist in nature. Government policies and the judicial system allow many groups to worship freely, provided that religious rites “do not disturb the public order.” The government bans Jehovah’s Witnesses, and they must conduct their activities without attracting its attention. Citizens have the legal right to sue the government when they believe it has violated their rights. During the year, there were no known lawsuits against the government over specifically religious issues.

Membership in any “Salafist” organization, a designation generally denoting conservative Sunni fundamentalism, is illegal. The government and the State Security Court have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes a Salafist activity or explained why it is illegal. According to Law 49, affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death, although in practice the sentence was typically commuted to 12 years in prison. However, throughout the year the law was not systematically implemented.

There is no official state religion, although the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. The government selected for religious leadership positions those Muslims who commit to preserve the secular nature of the state. The grand mufti of the country, Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, continued to call on Muslims to stand up to Islamic fundamentalism and urged leaders of the various religious groups to engage in regular dialogue for mutual understanding. The grand mufti was a controversial figure throughout the unrest; he publicly allied his comments and positions with the regime’s. On October 2, armed gunmen killed the mufti’s son, Saria Hassoun. The regime has not identified those responsible.

Religious minorities, with the exception of Jews, were represented among the senior officer corps. However, Christians often complain about growing limitations on their influence and positions in the government. In keeping with the government’s policy of secularism, there are no chaplains of any faith in the military. In the past, military personnel were expected to refrain from expressing overtly their faith during work hours.

For issues of personal status, the government requires its citizens to be affiliated nominally with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Religious affiliation is documented on the birth certificate and is required on legal documentation when marrying or traveling for a religious pilgrimage. Recognized religious institutions and clergy, including all government-recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian organizations, receive free utilities and are exempt from real estate taxes on religious buildings and personal property taxes on their official vehicles.

The government does not require the designation of religion on a passport or national identity card.

The government restricts full freedom in religious matters, including proselytizing and conversion. While there is no civil law prohibiting proselytizing, the government discourages it and occasionally expelled or prosecuted missionaries for “posing a threat to the relations among religious groups.” Most charges of this kind carry sentences of imprisonment from five years to life, although such sentences are often reduced to one or two years. The government does not recognize the religious status of Muslims who convert to other religions, but Christian converts to Islam are

accorded official recognition. In the event of a conversion to Christianity, the government still regards the individual convert as Muslim and still subject to Sharia (Islamic law). A Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man, but a Christian woman can marry a Muslim man. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in a Muslim cemetery unless she converts to Islam. If a person wants to convert from Christianity to Islam, the law states that the presiding Muslim cleric must inform the prospective convert's diocese.

All religions and religious 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 approval.

During the year, the government continued its support for radio and television programming related to the practice and study of government-sanctioned forms of Islam.

Members of religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws concerning marriage and divorce. The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on Islamic law, and government-appointed religious judges interpreted some of its provisions in a manner that discriminated against women. In the case of interreligious disputes, Islamic law takes precedence.

Inheritance is based on Islamic law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, women are usually granted half the share of inheritance that male heirs receive. When a Christian woman marries a Muslim, she is not entitled to inheritance.

The government generally does not prohibit links between its citizens and coreligionists in other countries or between its citizens and the international hierarchies that govern some religious groups. However, it prohibits contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

There is no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media. However, the penal code prohibits "causing tension between religious communities," a provision the government uses to prosecute groups it deems harmful to society, mostly those it views as Salafist.

The government permits the use of religious language in public, including the placement of banners bearing religious slogans at prominent public landmarks during religious holidays. The display of nativity scenes and other symbols associated with Christmas is common.

The government allows foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in the country under the auspices of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches and without officially registering. Many of these NGOs work directly with the Iraqi refugee populations in cooperation with the various churches in Syria.

The law does not permit conscientious objection to military service. Historically, both Christian and Muslim religious leaders are exempted from military service, although Muslim religious leaders must pay a levy to be exempted.

All public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice the Christian and Druze communities operate some schools. There is mandatory religious instruction in

public schools for all religious groups, with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religious instruction is provided on Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Groups participating in Islamic courses include only Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Ismaili, Yezidi, and Druze. 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 premise that they are “liturgical languages.” There is no mandatory religious study at the university level.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Orthodox and Western Easter, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, and Western Christmas.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees.

Violence or repression against those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood was common practice for the regime. Those accused of cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi, or extremist movements were often targeted, arrested, abused, and even killed throughout the year. The government rarely furnished documentation on the number arrested; however, observers believe that tens of thousands of Syrians were detained. Almost none of the detained was provided fair due process. The regime referred to all anti-government protesters as “armed gangs” affiliated with extremist movements. The UN estimated that over 5,000 civilians were killed in Syria during the year.

Opposition activists claimed that the regime targeted Christians, Kurds, and other minorities. On May 12, activists claimed a government sniper targeted and killed a Christian, Maher Nakroor, in the central city of Homs. While the causes of his targeting were unknown, activists stated that regime security forces shot indiscriminately throughout the city.

On May 6, Syrian police in Damascus arrested cleric and head of the Islamic Civilization Society Mouaz al-Khatib.

In late November, Italian Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall’Oglio, founder of the monastic community at Deir Mar Musa al-Habachi, near Nabak, was permitted to remain in Syria after being ordered to depart reportedly due to his comments about the need for the government to respect universal human rights.

The government aggressively prosecuted persons for their alleged membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist movements. These prosecutions were primarily based on the perceived political threat the movements represented to the country’s secular system. Human rights groups claimed that many of the accused were simply followers of a particular preacher or mosque rather than participants in any extremist groups.

All groups, religious and nonreligious, were subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. The government particularly considered militant Islam a threat to the regime and closely monitored those individuals it considered to be religious militants. While the government

allowed mosques to be built, it monitored and controlled sermons and often closed mosques between prayers.

Government policy claimed to disavow sectarianism of any kind, but religion could be a factor in determining some career opportunities. The minority Alawite sect, of which President Asad and his family are members, held an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers. The status of Alawites became an explosive issue throughout the year as anti-government protesters focused on issues of corruption and inequality, actions they associated with the regime's favoritism for its own religious sect. Alawites held dominant positions in the military and other security services disproportionate to their numbers. Almost immediately following the outbreak of anti-government protests, the regime began a widespread marketing campaign against "fitna," or sectarian strife. Observers noted the majority of anti-government protests carried no religious or sectarian theme. However, opposition figures accused the authorities of systematically using sectarian fear as a strategy to counter anti-government demonstrations. The regime asserted that it was fighting "armed groups" determined to cause sectarian strife in Syria. As the death toll increased and regime abuses worsened, reports of Sunni revenge, sectarian killings, and violence against Alawites increased. There were credible reports of ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods in Homs.

Some Christians complained about regime attempts to connect the minority community to political support of the regime. The regime sponsored and facilitated pro-government demonstrations in the Christian areas of Damascus. Opposition members often highlighted these demonstrations as evidence of the regime's attempts to stoke sectarianism in Syria to justify the regime's crackdown. In addition, several Christian and Alawite anti-regime activists were targeted by security forces because they undermined the regime's narrative claiming it was fighting "Sunni extremists."

Media coverage and government rhetoric was consistently anti-Israeli. Additionally, the media disseminated anti-Semitic material through radio and television programming, news articles, cartoons, and other mass media. Both the opposition forces and the government used anti-Semitic messaging to advance their political messages.

While the government allowed foreign Christian faith-based NGOs to operate in the country under the auspices of one of the historically established churches but without officially registering, foreign Islamic faith-based NGOs needed to register and receive approval to operate from the Ministry of Religious Endowments. Security forces regularly questioned these charities on their sources of income and monitored their expenditures.

Since 2008 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor has prohibited religious leaders from serving as the directors of boards for Islamic charities. Traditionally, clerics headed nearly all Islamic charities in the country. The government's decision closely followed a 2008 terrorist attack against a military building in Damascus, allegedly by militants associated with Fatah al-Islam.

On April 6, the government repealed a 2010 decision that removed from their positions over 1,000 school teachers who wore the niqab (a veil that exposes only the eyes).

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 10, President Asad reportedly approved the renovation of 11 synagogues across the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

There were reports of tensions between religious groups, exacerbated by economic and political competition, cultural rivalries, and regime rhetoric and violence. Youth at the University of Damascus complained that religious discrimination impeded their ability to find employment in a competitive market.

Social conventions and religious proscriptions made conversion relatively rare, especially Muslim-to-Christian conversion, which is technically illegal. In many cases societal pressure forced such converts to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly.

Some members of the Christian community perceived employment discrimination in the private sector to be a growing problem.

Some Christians stated they believed that societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling and that this belief was a major factor for the recent surge of immigration of Syrian Christians out of the country.

In an October article, Syrian writer Dr. Osama Al-Malouhi invoked the anti-Semitic idea of blood libel saying the Jews “are taking pleasure in watching Syrian blood being spilled” because they can then use that blood to make their Passover matzoh. Ghazi al-Dada, a columnist in the government-owned newspaper *Tishreen*, wrote an op-ed alluding to the old Tsarist forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in which he praised the Syrian people for unveiling what he called “the international Zionist conspiracy” behind the Syrian unrest.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government maintains strong relationships with various Syrian religious communities. Government outreach includes religious communities in Syria, the United States, and throughout the world.

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