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Syria

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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 continues to monitor the activities of all groups, including religious groups, discourage proselytizing, particularly when it is deemed a threat to the relations among religious groups, and ban the members of 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 minor tensions between religious faiths mainly 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 a total area of approximately 71,498 square miles, and its population is approximately 18 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 are 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 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. 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 and in the Wadi al-Nasara. 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 nonreligious) 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 March 2003 of two devout yet moderate Islamists as independents to the Parliament. Their election demonstrates the Government's desire to encourage moderate Islamic voices in the Parliament.

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

Orthodox and Western Easter, as well as 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 and branded it a "politically motivated Zionist organization" in an attempt to discredit it; however, individual 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. Proselytizing is not officially illegal; however, those who proselytize can be prosecuted for "posing a threat to the relations among religious groups." Most charges of this kind carry sentences of 5 years to life imprisonment, although often such sentences are reduced to 1 or 2 years depending on the case. There were no reported cases in the last 3 years of the prosecution of an individual or group on this charge.

The security services constantly are 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. 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 often closes mosques between prayers.

The Government primarily cites tense relations with Israel as the reason for barring Jewish citizens 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. Jewish citizens must obtain the permission of the security services before traveling abroad and must submit a list of possessions to ensure their return to the country. Jewish persons also face extra scrutiny from the Government when applying for licenses, deeds, or other government papers. The Jewish community is prohibited from sending historical Torahs abroad on the grounds that they are a part of the country's cultural heritage. There is a law against exporting any of the country's historical and cultural treasures, and the Government

applied this law to the Jewish community. This creates 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 contributing factor in determining career opportunities. For example, Alawis hold predominant positions 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 expected not 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. Jewish citizens are forbidden from serving in the Government and armed services and are 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 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 October 2003, the Government changed the age at which a woman loses the right to custody of her sons from age 9 to age 13 and her daughters from age 12 to age 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 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.

All schools officially are government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice some schools are run by Christian and Druze minorities. There is mandatory religious instruction in schools for all religious groups, with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religion courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. There are classes only for Islamic and Christian instruction; other groups such as Druze, Alawi, Ismailis, Shi'a, and Yazidis participate in the Islamic courses. In the past, Jews had a separate primary school that offered religious instruction on Judaism and other traditional subjects; however, the school 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." There is no mandatory religious study at the university level.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Political prisoners held by the Government include an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Their arrests were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability. An unknown number of Islamists may remain in custody.

A Presidential amnesty issued in February 2003, 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 country's Grand Mufti Ahmed Kufaro and his Abu Nur Mosque continued to engage in a wide variety of activities promoting Christian-Muslim understanding.

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. 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 publishing anti-Semitic remarks in their anti-Israeli articles; however, there were reports of anti-Semitic articles in previous years. During the period covered by this report, a Syrian production company created an anti-Semitic program and filmed it inside the country. The theme of this program centered on the alleged conspiracy of the "Elders of Zion" to orchestrate both world wars and manipulate world markets to create Israel. The show was not aired in the country but was shown elsewhere. There were occasional reports of friction between religious faiths, which may be related to deteriorating economic conditions and internal political issues. Specifically, in 2003 there were reports of minor incidents of harassment and property damage against Jews in Damascus perpetrated by individuals not associated with the Government. According to local sources, these incidents were in reaction to Israeli actions against Palestinians.

In March 2003, the usually moderate 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. During the period covered by this report, there were no similar statements made by the Grand Mufti.

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 Muslim-to-Christian conversions. In many cases, societal pressure forces those who undertake such conversions to relocate within the country or leave the country to practice their new religion openly.

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 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 also during high-level visits, U.S. officials regularly emphasize the importance of freedom of religion.

U.S. Embassy officials continued to remain sensitive to any change in the degree of religious freedom in the country.

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