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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Syria

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom; however, the government imposed restrictions on this right. While there is no official state religion, the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. The constitution provides for freedom of faith and religious practice so long as religious rites do not disturb the public order; however, the government restricted full freedom of practice on some religious matters, including proselytizing.

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 the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist groups, and other faith communities that it deemed to be extreme. The Syrian government outlaws not only Muslim extremist groups, but also Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition the government continued to monitor the activities of all organizations, including religious groups, and to discourage proselytizing, which it deemed a threat to relations among and within different faiths. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were occasional reports of tensions among religious groups, some of which were attributable to economic rivalries but exacerbated by religious differences. Muslim converts to Christianity were sometimes forced to leave their place of residence due to societal pressure.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with civil society, religious leaders, and adherents of religious groups as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. However, the U.S. government had limited contact with the government.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 71,498 square miles and a population of 21 million. 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.

The minority Alawite sect holds an elevated political status disproportionate to its numbers because President Asad and his family are Alawites and ensure that other Alawites occupy key government positions.

The majority of Christians adhere to the Eastern Orthodox 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), 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 40 Jews in the country. The government conducts a census every 10 years, the most recent of which was in 2004. The census did not include information on religious and ethnic demographics. It was difficult to obtain precise population estimates for religious groups due to government sensitivity to sectarian strife.

The largest Christian group is the Greek Orthodox Church, known in the country as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. Most citizens of Armenian descent 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 groups include the Maronite Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, and the Chaldean Catholic Church, which derives from the Nestorian Church, as well as the Armenian Catholic Church. Protestant Christian denominations include Anglicans, Baptists, and Mennonites. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) is also present with a small congregation.

Most Christians lived in urban centers in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, although significant numbers lived in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast section of the country. During the reporting period, thousands of Iraqi Christians came to Syria to escape targeted violence in Iraq. The majority of Alawites lived in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, but they had significant presence in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, and the capital, Damascus. Many of the Druze lived in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southern governorate of Suweida, where they constituted the vast majority of the local population. The few remaining Jews were concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yezidis were found primarily in the northeast and Aleppo.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom; however, 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 reporting period, 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 (SSC) have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes a Salafist activity or

explained why it is illegal. Affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is punishable by death, although in practice the sentence was typically commuted to 12 years in prison. The Syrian Independent Democratic Islamic Current movement attempted to play a conciliatory role between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood during the reporting period.

The government selected for religious leadership positions Muslims who commit not to altering the secular nature of the state. The grand mufti of the country 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.

Religious minorities, with the exception of Jews, were represented among the senior officer corps. In keeping with the government's policy of secularity, there are no chaplains of any faith in the military. In the past military personnel were expected to refrain from expressing their faith overtly 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, received free utilities and were 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 restricted full freedom in religious matters, including proselytizing and conversion. The government does not recognize the religious status of Muslims who convert to other religions; however, Christian converts to Islam were accorded official recognition. In the event of a conversion to Christianity, the government still regarded 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 married a Muslim man, she was not allowed to be buried in a Muslim cemetery unless she converted 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.

There is no official state religion; however, the constitution requires that the president be Muslim and stipulates that Islamic jurisprudence is a principal source of legislation. While there is no civil law prohibiting proselytizing, the government discouraged it and occasionally expelled or prosecuted missionaries for "posing a threat to the relations among religious groups." Most charges of this kind carried sentences of imprisonment from five years to life, although such sentences were often reduced to one or two years. The government did not renew visas of some foreigners affiliated with Protestant churches due to alleged government and Orthodox concerns about proselytizing.

All religions and religious orders must register with the government, which monitored fundraising and required permits for all religious and nonreligious group meetings except for worship. The registration process can be complicated and lengthy, but the government usually allowed groups to operate informally while awaiting approval.

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

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

On September 26 President Asad amended articles of the personal status law to give Orthodox Christians the right to inherit and write wills in accordance with their faith. Prior to this action, only the Catholics had such a right. The change in the personal status law negatively affected Catholic adoption rights, making the process much more difficult.

Inheritance is based on Islamic law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, women were usually granted half the share of inheritance that male heirs received. When a Christian woman married a Muslim, she was 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 prohibited contact between the Jewish community and Jews in Israel.

Government policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind, but religion can be a factor in determining some career opportunities. For example, Alawites hold dominant positions in the military and other security services disproportionate to their numbers.

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.

The government permitted the use of religious language in public, including the placement of banners bearing religious slogans at prominent public landmarks during religious holidays.

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 used to prosecute groups it deemed harmful to society, mostly those viewed as Salafist.

The government permitted 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 was common.

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

Conscientious objection to military service was not permitted under the law. Historically, both Christian and Muslim religious leaders were exempted from military service, although Muslim religious leaders must pay a levy to be exempted.

All public schools were officially government-run and nonsectarian, although in practice some schools were operated by the Christian and Druze communities. There was mandatory religious instruction in public schools for all religious groups, with government-approved teachers and curriculums. Religious instruction was provided on Islam and Christianity only, and courses are divided into separate classes for Muslim and Christian students. Groups that participated in Islamic courses included Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Ismaili, Yezidi, and Druze. 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 premise that they are "liturgical languages." There was no mandatory religious study at the university level.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally enforced legal and policy protections of religious freedom selectively. 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 represent 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.

Syrian media coverage and government rhetoric is consistently anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist and published or allowed the distribution of anti-Semitic material through radio and television programming, news articles, cartoons, and other mass media. Anti-Israel material, often referring to "the Zionist entity" and "Zionist enemy," was widespread in the media, occasionally carrying anti-Semitic overtones such as news reports that the Israelis had dispatched teams to Haiti after the earthquake to harvest organs and body parts.

While the government allows 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 must 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, nearly all Islamic charities in the country were headed by clerics. The government's decision closely followed a 2008 terrorist attack against a military building in Damascus, allegedly by militants associated with Fatah al-Islam.

In the previous reporting period, the Ministry of Education removed more than 1,000 women wearing the niqab (a veil that exposes only the eyes) from their positions as school teachers in secondary schools and transferred them to administrative positions. In July the Ministry of Higher Education banned the niqab for female students and professors in all public and private universities.

In September the government closed at least eight house churches in the north of the country, including Latakia, Tartous, Homs, and Wadi Al-Nasara, citing the homes as unlicensed places of worship.

On October 22 the Minister of Higher Education fired seven university professors from the Sharia School in Damascus University for their alleged radical Islamic ideas.

On June 9, 2010, a Syrian delegate to the UN Human Rights Council claimed that Jewish authorities in Israel taught hatred of Arabs to small children. Alluding to blood libel, she alleged that children on buses in Israel were taught to sing a song as they went to school containing the words, "With my teeth I will rip your flesh. With my mouth I will suck your blood."

Abuses of Religious Freedom

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

European diplomats and human rights organizations noted the government increased repressive actions against Muslims alleged to have ties to the Muslim Brotherhood or

other Islamic organizations with political or violent agendas.

During the reporting period, human rights organizations documented the arrests of dozens of persons for alleged ties to political Islamic groups. In all cases the government accused the detainees of belonging to groups that advocated violence. The government rarely furnished documentation on the number of detained persons. Human rights groups reported on citizens who were arrested or detained for alleged ties to such groups in previous years but whose detention was only recently made public.

On October 11 Jehovah's Witnesses reported that Nader Nseir, a Syrian Jehovah's Witness, was released on bail but faced unknown charges. On July 9 Amnesty International reported that he had been held in detention since May 7, after being summoned to the Political Security branch in Latakia and pressured to inform on fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. The general counsel for Jehovah's Witnesses reported that he was tortured and experienced other ill-treatment.

In August Sheikh Salah Kuftaro, a prominent religious figure who spoke against extremism and supported interfaith dialogue, was released from prison after charges of operating an institution without permission, operating an institution without an accounting system, exploiting "sisterly" relations with another foundation, exploiting the foundation's finances for personal benefit, and attempting to bribe government and state security officials were dropped for lack of evidence. Kuftaro was arrested in June 2009, and his case was transferred a month later to the Damascus criminal court.

On October 10, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, eight alleged Islamists were sentenced to terms ranging from three to five years in jail. Three of the defendants appeared before a judge in the SSSC. All men were charged with "belonging to a secret organization which wants to change the economic and social structure of the state in an illegal manner."

In January 2009 according to Jehovah's Witnesses reporting, government authorities beat a Jehovah's Witnesses elder and demanded he sign a pledge that he would cease attending religious meetings, reading Jehovah's Witnesses' publications, and "sharing his faith with others."

Many persons were charged, convicted, and imprisoned for "membership in a Salafist organization" and for spreading "Wahabist/Takfiri" ideology.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On September 26 the personal status law was amended giving orthodox Christians greater autonomy over civil law issues, such as marriage, death, and inheritance (see legal framework section).

On October 24 and 25, the Ministry of Awqaf (religious affairs) hosted a conference on the role of religious leaders in "controlling religious discourse and the nation's unity" with the stated intent of enhancing respect among clerics from different Islamic sects.

On December 15 the Ministry of Awqaf hosted an interfaith dialogue conference entitled "Enhancing Brotherhood and Coexistence; Casting Violence and Extremism; and Evading the Strife."

During the reporting period, the grand mufti made public statements welcoming tolerance toward different sects of Islam and toward Christians and Jews.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

There were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups, exacerbated by economic competition and cultural rivalries. Youth at the University of Damascus complained religious discrimination impeded its 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 expressed concern that the growing number of evangelical Christians could upset the balance between faiths achieved by the state and with the Muslim majority. Some Christians stated that 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.

During Ramadan (August to September) television programs highlighted religious dynamics in the country. One controversial series by prominent film director Najdat Anzour, *Ma Malakat Aymanokom (What Your Right Hand Possesses)*, addressed complex issues like extremism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The chargé d'affaires and other embassy officials met and expanded contacts with religious leaders and adherents of almost all religious groups at the national, regional, and local levels to convey to the public U.S. support for freedom of religion.
