



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2010 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [Near East and North Africa](#) » [Syria](#)

## Syria

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the government imposes 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, provided that religious rites do not disturb the public order; however, the government restricted full freedom of choice on religious matters.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. The government continued to prosecute persons aggressively for their alleged membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist movements and continued to outlaw Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition the government continued to monitor the activities of all groups, including religious groups, and discouraged proselytizing, which it deemed a threat to relations among religious groups. The government reportedly tolerated Shi'a representatives, paying Sunnis to convert.

There were occasional reports of minor tensions among religious groups, some of which were attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation. 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 Shi'a, 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.

The majority of Christians adhere to the eastern 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 100,000, but the government does not recognize the Yezidi as belonging to a faith that is distinct from Islam. There are approximately 100 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, and there is no evidence any census specifically asked people to identify their religious affiliation. 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.

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. The majority of Alawites lived in the mountainous areas of the coastal Latakia governorate, but they had significant presence in the city of Latakia, the city of Tartous and the capital city of Damascus. Many of the Druze lived in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southern governorate of Suweida where the Druze 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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the government imposes restrictions on this right. 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.

The government restricted full freedom of choice in religious matters. 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 Shari'a (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 wanted to convert from Christianity to Islam, the law stated 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 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.

There were numerous arrests and convictions of individuals for promulgating "Wahabist" and "Takfiri" ideologies. Furthermore, there were several reports that the government gave Shi'a favorable treatment and allowed Shi'a missionaries to construct mosques and convert Sunnis. Anecdotal reports claimed Shi'a missionaries, allegedly backed by

Iranian interests, provided financial incentives to individuals converting from Sunni to Shi'a Islam. These conversions were reportedly followed by Iranian-sponsored religious training trips to Tehran. The target audience for these conversion efforts was generally young, disenfranchised men from rural areas. The government did not consider this missionary activity to be proselytizing because the country makes no legal distinction between Islamic sects.

The government selected for religious leadership positions Muslims who have no intention of altering the secular nature of the government. 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.

Membership in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was illegal, as was membership in any "Salafist" organization, a designation in local parlance denoting Saudi-inspired fundamentalism. 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. Affiliation with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was punishable by death, although in practice the sentence was typically commuted to 12 years in prison. Hamas is a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, but the government permitted the group to maintain a political presence in the country as one of several exiled Palestinian factions.

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.

For issues of personal status, the government required its citizens to be affiliated nominally with Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Religious affiliation was documented on the birth certificate and was required on legal documentation when getting married or traveling for 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.

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. State radio continued to broadcast the dawn, noon, and afternoon Islamic prayers. State television also broadcast recitations from the Qur'an in the morning.

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 inter-religious disputes, Islamic law takes precedence.

The civil law for Catholics provided special provisions for Catholics involving inheritance rights, the jurisdiction of Christian courts, the legal marriage age, the legality of mixed marriages for Catholics, and adoption. Orthodox Christians were subject to the personal status law for Muslims, except for marriage and divorce.

Inheritance is based on Islamic law for all citizens except Catholics. 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 an inheritance. In all communities, however, male heirs must provide financial support to unmarried female relatives who inherited less. For example, a brother would inherit his and his unmarried sister's share from their parents' estate, and he would be obligated to provide for the sister's well-being with that inheritance. If the brother failed to do so, she would have the right to sue.

Polygamy is legal for Muslim men, but few practice it. In addition there is a caveat in the Personal Status law for Muslims stipulating that polygamy is illegal for Druze, who are otherwise covered by the personal status law for Muslims.

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 disavows sectarianism of any kind; however, religion can be a factor in determining career opportunities. For example, Alawites hold dominant positions in the military and other security services disproportionate to their numbers. By contrast Jehovah's Witnesses were often discriminated against when seeking employment because their religion was banned.

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.

There is no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media; however, the Syrian penal code prohibits "causing tension between religious communities," provisions the government used to prosecute groups it deemed harmful to society, mostly those viewed as Salafists. There were many recent instances in which persons were prosecuted in the Supreme State Security Court for possessing books or compact disks containing what the government terms "Salafist" teachings.

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 government continued to promote Islamic banking. Several banks received preliminary approval or government licenses to set up and operate Islamic banks in the country.

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.

Religious minorities, with the exception of Jews, were represented among the senior officer corps. In keeping with the government's secular policy, members of the military do not have direct access to religious or spiritual support. In the past military personnel were expected to refrain from expressing their faith overtly during work hours. Recently, however, there have been reports that Muslims were now being permitted to pray while on duty.

Conscientious objection to military service was not permitted under the law. Historically, both Christian and Muslim religious leaders were exempted from military service. Legislation passed in 2008 stipulated that religious leaders must pay the government a levy to be exempted from military service; however, Christian religious leaders did not have to pay the levy because of the responsibilities of their role in the Christian church.

All public schools were officially government-run and non-sectarian, 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, Shi'a, 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.

The government does not require the designation of religion on a passport or national identity card. The government required religion to be listed on a civic register certificate that is required for marriage registration and traveling on the Islamic pilgrimages of Hajj and Umra to Saudi Arabia.

## Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policies and the judicial system allow many groups to worship freely; however, 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. Human rights groups claimed that many of the accused were simply followers of a particular preacher or mosque. In addition the government required Jews to receive government permission to travel; applied extra scrutiny to their licenses, property, and other government papers; and excluded them from employment in the civil service and armed forces.

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.

While the government allows foreign, Christian faith-based NGOs to operate in the country 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 September 2008 terrorist attack against a military building in Damascus, allegedly by militants associated with Fatah al-Islam.

The Jewish community was prohibited from sending historical Torahs abroad under a law against exporting any of the country's historical and cultural treasures. This injunction posed a serious problem for the dwindling Jewish community concerned about the preservation of its ancient religious texts.

The government occasionally 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, some of which carried anti-Semitic overtones.

In May 2010 Tishreen Chief Editor Samirah al-Masalimah wrote that Israel's unwillingness to engage in the peace process stemmed from a lack of political will that has existed from the time Israel was "a distorted fetus."

In April 2010 Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Bouthaina Shaaban wrote in Tishreen that Americans and "people of the region" were paying the price for "racist militants and extremists in the U.S. administration and Israel" who continually "thirst for Arab blood."

A March 2010 editorial in privately owned Al-Watan linked the Talmud to an Israeli intention to render Jerusalem purely Jewish. In November 2009 a Tishreen story characterized the "Zionist mentality" as "dominated by racism, brutality, and barbarism."

During the reporting period, the government took steps to restrict the activities of persons or institutions for ostensibly religious reasons. For example, in May 2010 the Political Security Directorate briefly detained and eventually deported one American citizen and two Swedish citizens for distributing Bibles in Aleppo. Security agents also confiscated all religious materials from their apartment.

In February 2010 the Ministry of Agriculture revoked a previous agreement granting the Monastery of Mar Musa el-Habashi rights to the government-owned land surrounding the monastery that was to serve as a "protected" environmental zone linked to the monastery's mission of creating an ecological and spiritual oasis. The monastery's founding father, Paolo dall'Oglio, stated in a press release that the ministry based its decision on his support for the "Abraham Path Initiative." Dall'Oglio described the initiative as "a cultural movement focused on sustainable development, intercultural and interreligious harmony building, and the virtue of hospitality," presumably turning Abraham's route from Turkey to Israel into a series of linked religious hospitality sites. Dall'Oglio added, however, that the project was opposed to the "vexatious measures characteristic of the Zionist actions against Arab populations and the religious contempt expressed by Jewish fundamentalism towards Christians and Muslims." Also known as Deir Mar Musa, the monastery attracts many tourists and religious pilgrims each year.

In September 2009 the Ministry of Religious Endowments instructed all Islamic religious institutes to cease accepting foreign students. Local contacts reported that any new foreign students who wished to study Islam in the country must attend a new educational institute administered by the Ministry of Religious Endowments. This decision, according to contacts, reflected the government's fear that centers of Islamic instruction provided scholarships to individuals affiliated with terrorist organizations.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

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 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 May 10, 2010, after several preliminary trial dates, the First Criminal Court in Damascus charged Imam Salah al-Din Kuftaro, the son of late Grand Mufti Ahmad Kuftaro, with embezzlement, operating an organization without appropriate permissions, exploiting relations with the Al-Ansar Charity, and attempting to bribe government officials. Kuftaro, however, has reportedly stated his prosecution stems from public statements he made regarding the dangers inherent in permitting Shi'as to pay Sunnis to convert and for suggesting the Iranian ambassador, at the time, was actively promoting these paid conversions at Tehran's direction. Kuftaro has been in Adra prison since government security forces detained him on June 29, 2009.

On February 10, 2010, Sheikh Abdulrahman Koki was sentenced to one year in prison for insulting the state and the president; however, the government released him six days after his conviction, following a presidential pardon. Political security forces had arrested Koki on October 22, 2009, upon his return to Syria from Qatar where, in the course of an appearance on an Al-Jazeera talk show, the sheikh criticized the sheikh of al-Azhar for banning the niqab (face veil) at al-Azhar University and advocated that First Lady Asma al-Asad should wear the niqab.

In June 2009 security services detained a Chinese Uighur imam and his family in Damascus for approximately three weeks before releasing them. The government did not state the reasons for the detention. NGOs maintained the imam had previously been imprisoned in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region on charges of "illegal religious activities." The government also attempted to prevent another Chinese Uighur Muslim family from leaving the country. Both families left the country in July 2009.

In February 2009 according to the Jehovah's Witnesses' 2009 country report on Syria, government authorities interrogated a Jehovah's Witness, asking that he sign a document forswearing participation in Jehovah's Witnesses' activities. The individual refused to sign the document, and security agents have repeatedly called him for questioning.

In February 2009 according to Jehovah's Witnesses' reporting, a Syrian Witness living in Lebanon returned to his home city of Latakia. Upon his crossing the Lebanese-Syrian border, security agents interrogated him about "everything he knows regarding Jehovah's Witnesses." The agents reportedly kept the individual's identification card, effectively preventing him from returning to his family and job in Lebanon. There were no confirmed developments in his situation as of the end of the reporting period.

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

In July 2008 Muslims, whom the government alleged to be terrorists and held at Sednaya prison, began a series of riots that continued into late December. Although dependable statistics were not available, many human rights activists and diplomats believe that more than 50 prisoners thought to have ties to al-Qa'ida were killed in the fighting. Witnesses in the area of the prison reported hearing the sound of gunfire coming from the prison on multiple occasions.

The Supreme State Security Court sentenced dozens of Muslims during the reporting period to lengthy prison sentences for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood. Human rights groups and diplomats from European embassies estimated there were thousands of alleged Islamic terrorists detained in prisons, security service detention centers, or other secret detention facilities.

The government continued to hold an unknown number of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other individuals associated with illegal political Islamic groups as political detainees and prisoners. Many prisoners not connected to the Muslim Brotherhood were charged and convicted for "membership in a Salafist organization" and for spreading "Wahabist/Takfiri" ideology. Arrests, and in some cases convictions, of citizens alleged to belong to illegal political Islamic groups were motivated primarily by the government's view of militant Muslims as potential threats to regime stability.

Human rights organizations reported that detainees and prisoners who were alleged to be members of illegal political Islamic groups were subjected to torture and other forms of mistreatment while in custody.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In May 2010 the Canadian embassy hosted an open forum discussion with Aryn B. Sajoo, a professor at Simon Fraser University, on closing the knowledge gap between the West and Muslims. The forum allowed for a free exchange on the West's perception of Muslims, Islam, and religious extremism.

In January 2010 the grand mufti met with Rabbi Marc Gopin and a group of graduate students from George Mason University as part of a workshop administered by the university's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution.

In July 2009 President Bashar al-Asad and First Lady Asma al-Asad held a reception honoring the Al-Farah Choir for advancing the country's development. The choir, which is composed of over 100 children, actively promoted interfaith dialogue. It toured the United States at the invitation of the Kennedy Center in February and March 2009.

Throughout the reporting period, the embassy of the United Kingdom (UK) partnered with the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) and local Muslim scholars on projects to counter Takfiri ideology, specifically in the context of interfaith outreach efforts in the UK. For example, the embassy and ministry coordinated on a project bringing British Muslim scholars and religious practitioners to the country to learn from, and debate with, Syrian scholars identified as credible voices in the UK. The embassy also initiated a program to translate key Syrian theological texts that counter Takfiri ideology and the use of violence into English and Urdu for a British Muslim audience.

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 Respect for Religious Freedom

There were occasional reports of minor tensions between religious groups, mainly attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation.

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.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government has limited contact with the government; however, the chargé d'affaires and other embassy officials met 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.

During the reporting period, the embassy identified one local citizen to participate in an exchange visit to the United States focusing on interfaith dialogue through the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program.

[Back to Top](#)