



Syria

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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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 restricts full freedom of choice on religious matters.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to prosecute persons aggressively for their alleged membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist movements and continued to outlaw the 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.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with civil society, religious leaders, and adherents of almost all religious groups as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 71,498 square miles and a population of 20 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.

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 30,000, and there are between 100 and 200 Jews. It is difficult to obtain precise population estimates for religious groups due to Government sensitivity to sectarian strife. 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.

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. Protestant Christian denominations include Baptists and Mennonites. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) is also present.

Most Christians live in urban centers in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Lattakia, although significant numbers live in the Hasaka governorate in the northeast. The majority of Alawites live in the mountainous areas of the coastal Lattakia governorate. Many of the Druze live in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southern governorate of Suweida where the Druze 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.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of faith and religious practice, provided that religious rites do not disturb the public order. Government policies and the judicial system allowed many groups to worship freely, although some restrictions were imposed. 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 restricts full freedom of choice in religious matters. The Government does not recognize the religious status of Muslims who convert to Christianity. The reverse is not true. In the event of a conversion to Christianity, the Government still regards 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 marries a Muslim man, however, she is not allowed to be buried in a cemetery for Muslims 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.

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 discourages it and occasionally prosecutes missionaries for "posing a threat to the relations among religious groups" when they engage in such activities. 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.

There were no reported cases of the Government prosecuting anyone for posing a threat to the relations among religious groups during the reporting period. Instead, 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, supposedly backed by Iranian interests, provided financial incentives to individuals converting from Sunni to Shi'a Islam. The Government does not consider this missionary activity as proselytizing because the country makes no legal distinction between Islamic sects.

The Government selects for religious leadership positions Muslims who have no intention of altering the secular nature of the Government. The Grand Mufti of Syria 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 is illegal, as is membership in any "Salafist" organization, a designation in local parlance denoting Saudi-inspired fundamentalism. The Government and the State Security

Courts 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 is typically commuted to 12 years in prison. Hamas is a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, but the Government supports its political representation in the country as one of several Palestinian factions.

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.

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 getting married or traveling for religious pilgrimage. Recognized religious groups, including all government-recognized Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities, receive free utilities and are 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 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 are subject to their respective religious laws concerning marriage and divorce. The personal status law on divorce for Muslims is based on Shari'a, and some of its provisions are interpreted by government-appointed religious judges in a manner that discriminates against women.

The Civil Law for Catholics provides 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. As of the end of the reporting period, the Government had not passed legislation on personal status for Orthodox Christians. Orthodox Christians, therefore, remained subject to the personal status law for Muslims, except for marriage and divorce.

Under the country's interpretation of Shari'a, the legal standard for Muslim men to obtain a divorce is much lower than that for Muslim women. Husbands may claim adultery as grounds for divorce, while wives often face a higher legal standard when presenting the same case. A man can be found guilty of adultery only if the act takes place inside the home. If a wife requests a divorce from her husband, she may be denied alimony and the return of her dowry in some instances.

In the event of divorce, under Shari'a, a woman loses the right to custody of her sons when they reach the age of 13, and her daughters when they reach the age of 15, regardless of religion. Women can also lose custody before their children reach this age if they remarry, work outside the home, or move outside of the city or country. In such cases, the custody of the children reverts to the maternal grandmother until the ages of 13 and 15, respectively. After that, custody reverts to the father until the children reach maturity at age 18.

Inheritance is based on Shari'a for all citizens except Catholics. Accordingly, married 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 an inheritance. In all communities, however, male heirs must provide financial support to unmarried female relatives who inherit 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 prohibits 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, because their religion is banned, Jehovah's Witnesses are discriminated against in employment.

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

There is no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media. However, articles 298 and 462 of the Syrian Penal Code prohibit "causing tension between religious communities," provisions the Government uses to prosecute groups it deems 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 allows foreign Christian faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to operate in the country under the auspices of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches. This permits the NGOs to operate without officially registering.

Religious minorities, with the exception of Jews, are represented among the senior officer corps. In keeping with the Government's secular policy, however, the military does not have a chaplain corps; members of the military do not have direct access to religious or spiritual support; and military personnel are expected to refrain from expressing their faith overtly during work hours. For example, Muslims are discouraged from praying while on duty.

Conscientious objection to military service is not permitted under the law. Historically, both Christian and Muslim religious leaders were exempted from military service. Legislation passed in 2008 stipulates that religious leaders must pay the Government a levy to be exempted from military service, but Christian religious leaders do not have to pay the levy.

All public schools are officially government-run and non-sectarian, although in practice some schools are operated by the Christian and Druze communities. 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 that participate in Islamic courses include Sunni, Shi'a, Alawite, Ismaili, Yezidi, and Druze. Although Arabic is 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 is 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 requires religion to be listed on a civic register certificate that is required for marriage registration and traveling on the Islamic pilgrimage of Umra to Saudi Arabia.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policies and the judicial system allowed many groups to worship freely. However, the Government aggressively prosecuted persons for their alleged membership in the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist movements. 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, are subject to surveillance and monitoring by government security services. The Government particularly considers militant Islam a threat to the regime and closely monitors those individuals it considers to be religious militants. While the Government allows mosques to be built, it monitors and controls sermons and often closes 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 question these charities on their sources of income and monitor their expenditures.

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 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 was widespread, some of which carried anti-Semitic overtones. During the reporting period, state media outlets such as *Teshreen*, *Al-Ba'th*, *Al-Thawra*, and the Syrian News website published anti-Semitic images alleging Jewish control of the United States and the world. The state-owned newspapers *Al-Thawra* and *Teshreen* published opinion pieces in April 2009 that employed particularly strong anti-Semitic language.

In October 2008, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor ruled religious leaders could no longer serve on the boards of Islamic charities. Traditionally, nearly all Islamic charities in the country were headed by clerics. The Government's decision followed close on the heels of a September 2008 terrorist attack against a military building in Damascus, allegedly by militants associated with Fatah al-Islam.

Also in October 2008, the Ministry of Religious Endowments instructed all Islamic religious institutes to cease accepting foreign students effective September 2009. Local contacts reported that any new foreign students who wished to study Islam in the country will have to 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 might have 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.

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.

According to human rights contacts, on June 29, 2009, Government security services arrested Islamic scholar and Imam Salah al-Din Kuftaro, the son of the late Grand Mufti Ahmad Kuftaro and brother of Imam Mahmud Kuftaro. He was transferred to the custody of the First Magistrate on charges of embezzlement, working without a license, and having relations with foreign entities without prior approval. At the end of the reporting period, he was in Adra prison awaiting trial.

Security services detained a Chinese Uighur imam and his family in Damascus for approximately three weeks during the reporting period before releasing them. The Government did not state the reasons for the detention. His reported study at a local Islamic institute may have prompted Government scrutiny. 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 eventually departed Syria in July.

In mid-May 2009, the Government closed the Center for Islamic Studies for four weeks and detained Islamic scholar and Imam Mahmud Kuftaro, brother of Salah al-Din Kuftaro, for 10 days. The Government did not provide a reason for the closure or the detention. Contacts believed, however, that the closure and detention were related the Government's attempts, through the offices of the Grand Mufti and the Ministry of Religious Endowments, to exert more control over Islamic institutions since the September 2008 terrorist attack attributed to Fatah al-Islam.

In July 2008, Muslims, whom the Government alleged to be terrorists held at Sednaya prison, began a series of riots that continued into late December. Though dependable statistics were not available, many human rights activists and diplomats believe that more than 50 prisoners thought to have ties to Al Qaida 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." 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, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 1-2, 2009, the British Embassy and the Ministry of Religious Endowments co-sponsored a conference entitled "The Message of Peace in Islam." Speakers included government ministers, academics, and senior Muslim and Christian religious leaders.

On May 3-5, 2009, the Al-Fatah Islamic Institute, in cooperation with the University of Alberta and the Ministry of Religious Endowments, sponsored "Islam and the West," a conference focused on interfaith dialogue.

The Al-Andalus Institute for Islamic Studies in Hama hosted an interfaith conference entitled "Religion and Respect: Learning from Each Other's Faith" on April 3-4, 2009, in Hama.

On January 21-23, 2009, the Canadian Embassy and local Syrian activists organized a three-day workshop on the role of women in promoting interfaith dialogue. The workshop featured three Canadian and two American women as facilitators. Three of the presenters were Jewish; they were joined by American Rabbi Marc Gopin via recorded message. Local Christian and Muslim clergy participated in opening the workshop.

The "Sham Spiritual Oasis" architecture exhibition opened to the public in Damascus September 7-21, 2008 at the Gallery Mustafa Ali and during November 15-30, 2008 in the visitor center of the Wadi Deir Mar Musa near Nebek. The exhibition featured proposals by international architects for an eco cultural way station that would provide a multifunctional space for persons of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to join one another for meditation and educational cooperation. The Government announced the winning design would be built at Deir Mar Musa on 14 hectares of land donated by the Government for that purpose. Wadi Deir Mar Musa and the European Union sponsored the competition.

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. According to reports, in September 2008, the United Kingdom granted asylum to a couple who had converted from Islam to evangelical Christianity. The couple, who had reportedly discussed their conversions with Muslims on Internet chat sites, consequently received threats and decided to leave Syria for their personal safety.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government has limited contact with the Syrian government; however, the Charge 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 five local citizens to participate in exchange visits to the United States focusing on interfaith dialogue through the State Department's International Visitor exchange program.