



## Syria

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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 the religious rites do not disturb the public order; however, problems persisted.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. 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 extensively prosecute persons 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 between religious groups, some of which were attributable to economic rivalries rather than religious affiliation.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with civil society 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 19 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. Druze account for three percent of the population. Various Christian groups comprise 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 small Yezidi population, and there are approximately 40 Jews. It is difficult to obtain precise population estimates for religious subgroups due to government sensitivity to sectarian demographics.

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. A significant majority of the Druze population resides

in the rugged Jabal al-Arab region in the southeast, and most are located in the southern governorate of Suweida. The few remaining Jews are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. Yezidis are found primarily in the northeast.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion. Government policies and the judicial system contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Jehovah's Witnesses are banned, however, and any activities by the group must be conducted without attracting the Government's attention.

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 engaged in such activities. Most charges of this kind carried sentences of imprisonment from five years to life, although often such sentences were reduced to one or two years.

There were no reported cases of anyone being prosecuted for posing a threat to the relations among religious groups during the period covered by this report. Instead, there were several reports that the Government gave the Shi'a favorable treatment and allowed Shi'a missionaries to construct mosques and convert Sunnis. The Government does not consider this as proselytizing because legally there is no distinction between Islamic sects. Both Sunnis and Shiites are considered Muslim in the eyes of the Government.

The Government selects moderate Muslims, who have no intention of altering the secular nature of the Government, for religious leadership positions. 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 that denotes Saudi-inspired fundamentalism. The Government and the State Security Court have not defined the exact parameters of what constitutes a Salafist or 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 of imprisonment.

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.

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 militant Islamists. While the Government allows mosques to be built, it monitors and controls sermons and often closes mosques between prayers.

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 and personal property taxes on their official vehicles.

There is de facto separation of religion and state in that the Government generally refrains from involvement in strictly religious matters, and religious groups tend not to participate in political affairs. During the reporting period, the Government increased its support for the practice and study of government-sanctioned, moderate forms of Islam on radio and television. State radio also continued to broadcast the dawn, noon, and afternoon Islamic prayers. State television also broadcast recitations from the Qur'an in the morning.

There is no specific law against the production and distribution of religious literature or other types of media. However, Articles 298 and 462 prohibit "causing tension between religious communities," which the Government uses to prosecute groups it deems harmful to society, mostly those composed of fundamentalist Muslims. 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.

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 that are disproportionate to their numbers. By contrast, because their religion is banned, Jehovah's Witnesses are discriminated against in employment.

During the reporting period, the Government continued to promote Islamic banking, granting licenses to five Islamic banks. The Cham Islamic Bank and the Syrian International Islamic Bank officially opened in August and September 2007, respectively.

The Government also licensed Islamic insurance companies. Al-Aqilah insurance company officially began operations in May 2008. In February 2008 investors announced the founding of the Syrian Islamic Insurance Company. In autumn 2007 the Government granted Noor Insurance Company a license.

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. Security forces regularly question these charities on their sources of income and monitor their expenditures. The same is not true for foreign Islamic faith-based NGOs, which must register and receive approval to operate from the Ministry of Religious Endowments.

All public schools are officially government-run and nonsectarian, 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.

Religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws concerning marriage and divorce. The personal status law on divorce for Muslims in the country is based on Shari'a (Islamic law), and some of its provisions are interpreted by government-appointed religious judges in a manner that discriminates against women.

The Civil Law for Catholics went into effect in July 2006. The law 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. The law gives the bishop of a diocese and Christian courts expanded authority to determine the validity of adoptions and clarifies parental rights and inheritance rules between parents and their adopted children. The Catholic leadership generally received the law positively as recognition of its religious autonomy.

At the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had not passed legislation on personal status for Orthodox Christians. Orthodox Christians, therefore, are subject to the personal status law for Muslims except for marriage and divorce.

It is illegal for Muslims to convert to Christianity. The reverse is not true. There are no reports of this law being enforced, despite sporadic cases of Muslims converting to Christianity. A Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man, but a Christian woman can marry a Muslim man. However, if a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she is not allowed to be buried in a cemetery for Muslims, next to her family, unless she converts to Islam. If one wants to convert from Christianity to Islam, the law states that the presiding Muslim cleric must

inform the prospective convert's diocese.

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 not to express 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. A new law passed in spring 2008 stipulated that religious leaders must now pay the Government a levy to be exempted from military service. After much protest from the Christian community, President Assad issued a decree in late April 2008 exempting Christian religious leaders from paying the levy.

Under the country's interpretation of Shari'a, the legal standard for Muslim men to be granted 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 only be found guilty of adultery 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, 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 back to the father until the children reach the age of maturity, which is 18.

Inheritance for all citizens except Catholics is based on Shari'a. Accordingly, married women usually are granted half the inheritance share 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 is practiced only by a minority. 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.

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

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

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, the Government extensively 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.

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.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

European diplomats and human rights organizations characterized the level of repression against alleged Islamists as about the same as in previous reporting periods, although some religious leaders reported they faced increased repression at the hands of the Government.

During the reporting period, human rights organizations documented the arrests of dozens of persons for alleged ties to Islamist 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 Islamist groups in previous years but whose detention has only recently been made public.

The Supreme State Security Court sentenced dozens of alleged Islamists during the reporting period to lengthy prison sentences. Human rights groups and diplomats from European embassies estimated that up to 3,000 alleged Islamists remain 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 Islamists as political detainees and prisoners. Many alleged Islamists not connected to the Muslim Brotherhood were charged and convicted for "membership in a Salafist organization." Arrests, and in some cases convictions, of alleged Islamists were motivated primarily by the Government's view of militant Islamists as potential threats to regime stability.

Human rights organizations reported that detainees and prisoners who are alleged Islamists 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

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

The Fifth Conference for Bridging Islamic Jurisprudence Schools was held on May 13-14, 2008. The conference addressed "Human Relations in Islam," and participants included both Shi'a and Sunni scholars and researchers from Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Qatar, Oman, Jordan, and Iraq.

On May 11, 2008, the Grand Mufti participated in a seminar held by the Roman Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo entitled, "Heavenly Laws: Source of Spiritual and Humanitarian Enrichment."

There were a number of interfaith and ecumenical movements that promoted respect and tolerance among religious groups during the year. On January 13, 2008, the Islamic Fatah Institute, in cooperation with the Hartford Seminary, organized a forum entitled, "Acquaintance of Civilizations and Messages in the Shadow of One Human Family," which was attended by Muslim and Christian scholars from within the country and abroad. As a result of the forum, the Hartford Seminary and the Islamic Fatah Institute committed to the exchange of students and lectures between the two institutions.

**During the reporting period, the Syrian Grand Mufti** made public statements welcoming tolerance toward different sects of Islam and toward Christians and Jews.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

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

Social conventions and religious and theological 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 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.

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